

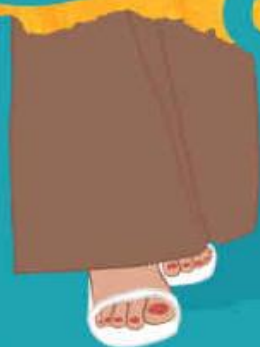
NOT ON



THE



Agenda ◦



CHLOE PETERSON

Not On The Agenda

CHLOE PETERSON

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Chapter One

A Knight in Shining... Gucci?

Frankie

“So, what do you do for fun?”

I glanced up from the rim of my glass, the wine practically untouched and growing warm. With a swallowed sigh, I forced my lips into a polite smile. The other patrons in the upscale restaurant all wore wide grins, the kind that came with good food and good company.

“This and that,” I said, hoping my disappointment wouldn’t color my voice. Truthfully, I’d been excited about this date after Nikkie had pestered me to give it a go.

But now...

“I don’t really have much time outside of work for fun,” I admitted with a huffed laugh. I looked back down at my wine glass and then up at my date again.

She was gorgeous; Nikkie hadn’t lied about that. Her crystal blue eyes were in striking contrast to her round, rosy cheeks, and sparkled with intrigue. Her lips pulled into a knowing grin that rubbed me the wrong way, but she *was* pretty.

“Then I bet I could help you find something fun to do,” she suggested, a golden brow arched suggestively.

And there it was, the reason I wanted to run for the hills.

“I bet you could.” I chuckled, the sound thin and exasperated even to my ears. But she took it as an invitation, leaning forward, the tips of her fingers drawing featherlight circles on the back of my hand. “But there are just some kinds of fun I’m not really interested in.”

“Oh?” She smirked, like she knew she could convince me to try anything she wanted. “And what kinds of fun would that be?”

“The kinds that teenagers are interested in,” I hedged, hoping she’d take the hint. “I don’t really do the whole *fling* thing. It’s a waste of time.”

“Then what are you looking for?”

“Just,” I paused, chewing on the inside of my cheek. I felt silly for even saying it. “Something long-term, something that’s more than just a physical thing.”

“But flings can turn into long-term relationships,” she countered, her piercing eyes searching my face. “You just have to give them a chance.”

Maybe she was right. Maybe I’d been looking so hard for something that would immediately be long-term that I ignored all the other possibilities. Maybe she had a point.

“Is your place close by?” she asked, her tongue peeking out and wetting her bottom lip. I squashed the urge to grimace and

shook my head. So much for taking a chance...

“I live on the other side of town.” A lie. I lived ten minutes away but *she* didn’t need to know. “And I have a pretty early morning anyway.”

“That’s okay,” Brianne cooed, her voice turning soft, and I might have been interested, but, “The bathroom will do.”

If she hadn’t suggested we fuck in the restaurant bathroom...

A startled chuckle slipped from my lips, more in disbelief than anything else, but she remained unfazed.

“The bathroom?” I parroted, quirking a brow. “That’s a new one.”

“Never done it before?” she guessed, her face lighting up in sudden intrigue. I cringed. *Hard*. “Then I get to pop your proverbial public sex cherry.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said, holding up a hand to stop her, but mostly to pull away from her lingering fingertips. “I’m not really into that.”

“How do you know if you’ve never even given it a try?” she pressed, still wearing that smirk that made me want to throw up. “I promise it’ll be fun, trust me.”

“What’ll be fun?” a new voice asked from behind me, and I blinked. A possessive hand slipped over my shoulder, light but obvious.

I turned to look up at the stranger, choking on air because *Christ*, she was gorgeous.

She smiled down at me, the curve of her lips sensual but somehow still kind. “It’s been *ages* since I last saw you! You absolutely have to let me treat you to dinner so we can catch up!”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach, my pulse quickening, and I was a little slow as I replied, “Of course.”

The stranger squeezed my shoulder gently and turned her cat-like eyes to Brianne, who looked thoroughly put out at the interruption.

“You’ll forgive me if I steal my beautiful friend, won’t you?” she asked, her voice venomously sweet.

Brianne just shrugged and got to her feet. “See you around,” she said as she left, and I prayed I wouldn’t see her again.

Heat climbed into my cheeks and I dropped my face into my hands.

“Thank you,” I said earnestly, my voice a little muffled by my palms.

The hand on my shoulder disappeared and my head shot up, worried that she’d just left. But she simply walked around the table and sat in Brianne’s vacated seat, all lithe grace and sensual power. I swallowed around the small lump in my throat.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, her words smoother than honey. “I don’t mean to presume, but you looked like you

hoped the ground would swallow you whole. I couldn't stand by and watch.”

A giggle bubbled up my throat, a little hysterical, because what kind of situation had I just found myself in?

“I owe you,” I said, reaching for my wine and taking a steadying sip. “After the number of disappointing dates I’ve been on, you’d think I would’ve learned my lesson by now.”

“Ah, so it *was* a date,” she mused, her shrewd green eyes flashing, and her lip curled in satisfaction. I shifted in my seat, too aware of the coiling warmth in my lower abdomen. “I’m glad I intervened then.”

“Why?” I blurted, surprising myself with the question. But I didn’t take it back. Not when her gaze drifted to my mouth and up, slowly. Her golden skin glowed under the restaurant’s low light, her dark curls pulled into a low ponytail at the nape of her neck.

She considered me for a moment, the smile on her face growing with each passing second. As I stared she took a deep breath, the diamonds dangling from her ears twinkling along with her eyes, and, fuck, I was breathless.

“I don’t believe that beautiful women should ever be subjected to a bad date,” she said simply, as if she was talking about the weather. I hung on her every word. “Even if it’s just for five seconds.”

My cheeks burned at her obvious compliment and I ducked my head, hiding from those eyes that saw so much.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, and there was no judgment, no sneer in her words. Just sincerity. And maybe something a little more.

“Sorry, “ I said, forcing my eyes to meet hers. “I’m not used to it.”

“Do people not compliment you?” she asked, genuinely curious, I realized. There was nothing else there, no sly suggestive tone that hoped to drag me to bed the second I gave in.

And something about that eased the tension coiling along my spine. It felt...

Safe.

“If they do, I don’t usually believe them,” I said honestly, one of my hands tugging at the ends of my hair.

“Well, you should,” she declared, thumping her fist down on the table. Her brows knitted together seriously, but her eyes sparkled with mirth. God, she was beautiful.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“My name?” She smirked, and it was nothing like Brienne’s. “What if I want to remain a mysterious woman who swooped in and rescued you from a dismal date?”

I laughed, for real, the sound throaty. “How else can I thank you for rescuing me?”

“You can simply sit there and talk to me.” She shrugged, waving over a waiter. “I’d say that’s all the reward for

rescuing you that I need.”

The waiter jogged over, his eyes growing wide in familiarity, staring at the woman opposite me with something like reverence.

“Miss J-” he began, but she stopped him.

“I’ll have whatever my lovely companion is having,” she said with a warm smile. “I’m on a bit of a tight schedule, unfortunately.”

“Right away!”

“Thank you, Dennis!” she called after him, chuckling softly as he dashed to the kitchen.

I leaned forward, resting my chin in the palm of my hand. “Are you a regular here?”

“Something like that.” She chuckled. The waiter reappeared with a bottle of red wine and a glass. “You’re a gem, Dennis.”

“Any time, Miss J-, uh, miss.”

He vanished back into the kitchen but my eyes were trained on the woman in front of me, swirling the dark red wine in her glass.

“You are full of mysteries,” I noted, wistful.

“On the contrary,” she said, lifting her glass to mine for a toast. “I am simply a woman of exquisite taste. What else would you need to know?”

“I’m quite honestly dying to know everything,” I confessed, a blush creeping across my cheeks.

“As am I,” she agreed. She rolled up the sleeves of her white jacket, her eyes never leaving mine. “Like why you were entertaining your friend.”

“Hardly a friend,” I said with pursed lips. “But I was hoping she’d surprise me, turn out to be someone I could connect with.”

“I’m guessing you were disappointed?”

“Once again,” I said ruefully, lifting my glass in salute before drinking. “Why is it so much easier to get laid than to find a real relationship?”

I didn’t know why I was asking this beautiful stranger, or why her answer suddenly meant so much to me.

“People prefer the rush of something fleeting,” she said pensively. “A quick fuck is exactly that and nothing more. It’s easy, it’s fun, and no one gets hurt.”

“Well, people suck,” I mumbled unhappily. “The least they could do is be upfront about that instead of trying to coerce those of us who care about happily ever after into their beds.”

She threw her head back, her laugh melodious. I wanted to hear it again.

“Some of us don’t want to coerce people into our beds.” She smiled. “We simply ask, and respect the answer.”

“If only there were more of you out there.”

“Oh, darling,” she said softly. “There’s no one out there quite like me.”

I opened my mouth to ask her name again but her phone buzzed and she sighed.

“I have to run,” she said with a frown. My stomach sank a little. “But if you ever need a good date, let me know.”

She got to her feet, her dark curls kissing the apples of her cheeks.

“Wait, I don’t even know your name-”

“Hayden,” she said softly. She waited for a moment, and I realized a beat late that she was waiting for my name.

“Frankie,” I said, a little breathless.

“You’re a pleasure, Frankie,” Hayden said, her gaze dropping to my mouth again. “Make sure the next date treats you right.”

And she was gone in a swirl of expensive perfumes and red bottomed heels.

I sat there, bewildered by how my night had unfolded. Her parting words lingered, a secret caress on my skin as I called the waiter.

“Could I have the check, please?”

“Oh, the woman who was here has taken care of it,” he said with a polite smile. I blinked and he left.

Who the hell was she?

Hayden.

I went home, my feet barely touching the ground as I floated up the steps to my third-floor apartment. Hayden had

taken a disastrous night and made it so much more.

Effervescent.

Like she was.

With her bright smiles and carefree laughs.

Vaguely, I heard my phone ring as I fought with the ancient lock on the door. I shoved my door open and fished my phone out.

“Dad?” I answered, frowning in concern. It was late, far too late for them to be awake at all.

“Frankie, I’m sorry it’s so late,” he said, his voice strained like he was out of breath. My spine stiffened and my heart fell three stories. “It’s your mother, she’s had a heart attack.”

Chapter Two

It's Just Business

Hayden

“You’re distracted, mi amore.”

I hummed, not turning to look at Vinny. We both lay in bed, the early morning sun glimmering through the curtains and warming our skin. I rested my head in the cradle of my arms, my stomach pressed into the silk. The tips of his fingers traced over my shoulder blades in lazy circles, the silk sheets warm beneath our bodies.

“Just thinking,” I murmured, my gaze fixed on the smattering of clouds beyond my bedroom windows.

There was a rustle and the weight on the bed shifted behind me, and Vinny groaned as he lay on top of me. I chuckled as he got comfy, burying his face in the crook of my shoulder.

“You do that a lot,” he said, pressing his lips to the curve between my neck and shoulder. A soft laugh slipped through my nose, a vacant smile pulling on my mouth.

“It’s why I’ve gone absolutely insane,” I told him, tilting my head to give him more access. He moaned, his teeth gently

scraping my skin.

“I can help,” he offered, his hands massaging the knots on my lower back. “If you want a distraction, there are many ways I can steal away your problems.”

“You,” I chuckled, gently pushing him away, “are a tease, and I have to get ready for work.”

He pouted at me and I kissed him. Just once, a small peck on his full lips.

“Very well.” He sighed wistfully, stretching his arms over his head. The sheet slipped further down his torso, stopping just below the delicious dips of his V-line. “I suppose I have a shoot to get ready for anyway. Even though it’s in three hours, and I’ll be *so* bored until then.”

I slipped into the shower, the conversation already forgotten as my thoughts turned to the pretty redhead from last night.

Frankie.

I sighed as the boiling spray of the shower hit my back. I couldn’t stop myself from stepping in when I noticed her, sitting across the table from someone she obviously didn’t want to be around.

It was probably stupid. Definitely stupid.

Especially because now she dominated my thoughts. Her hazel eyes, the dip of her cupid’s bow, the freckles strewn across her nose and cheeks like the stars in the sky. And her laugh... the memory pulled at the corners of my lips.

Shit, I was a little too invested.

I tried to shake her face from my mind and went about my morning routine, only distantly aware that Vinny pouted from his spot on the bed.

“If you frown like that,” I sighed, patting the moisturizer into my skin, “you’ll get all wrinkly before you reach thirty.”

“Me?” He laughed, his white teeth stark against his golden tan. “I’m immune to that. Age wouldn’t dare touch me. I’m too charming.”

“You certainly are.” I chuckled, turning to him. He held out my silver hair clip, the diamonds sparkling in the light of the morning sun. I took it from his fingers but he slipped his other hand around my bare thigh.

“Are you sure I can’t tempt you back into bed?” he murmured devilishly, his lips grazing the skin on my hip. “Even for just ten minutes?”

I twirled my curls into the clip and sighed. I dragged my fingers through his thick, dark curls, still mussed from sleep. And our, uh, *morning* activities.

“As tempting as you are, I really have to get going,” I said, watching as his eyes slipped shut under my touch. “Will you be over tonight?”

“Hm, I don’t know,” he sighed, his eyes still closed. “There’s a new club opening and I was invited by the owner. I’ll call you?”

With a slight twinge in my chest that I squashed immediately, I patted the top of his head.

“Sure,” I said, waving him off as he disappeared into the bathroom.

I probably wouldn’t see him again until he called. Or I caved and called him.

I tried not to think too long about it, grabbing my purse and leaving for work.

“Miss. Jones, the legal team is waiting on your approval for the new acquisition-”

“Just tell them I’ve gone to brunch,” I told my assistant, the panic in her voice painfully obvious even over the phone. “They made us wait a good two weeks, they can wait a few more hours.”

I walked up the steps and nodded in greeting to the staff. They waved me in, bright smiles on their faces as they led me to my table. The girls were already there, the sounds of their laughter echoing along the hallway that led out into the courtyard.

The clear sky stretched endlessly above us, just a few clouds dotting the bright blue. Thankfully, our table hid in the shade of the restaurant, cool and breezy.

“Call me if anything is set on fire,” I said, hanging up before she could argue again.

“A fire already?” Alex asked, flashing me a grin.

“You should know my life is always full of surprises.” I winked, falling into the open seat beside Cameron. “It’s never a Tuesday if someone doesn’t set the sprinklers off.”

“You know, that was *one time* and I paid for the damages,” Taylor complained, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

I chuckled at the memory of poor Taylor in all her despair under the sprinklers in my building.

“No one told you to light up in the lobby,” Reid interjected, a sly smile on her angled face.

“You’re both the worst,” Taylor whined, but mischief tugged at her lips.

I laughed as Reid apologized, looking around the table before my eyes landed on Cameron.

“Where’s my lovely Elliot?” I frowned, catching the twinkle in Cam’s eye before she ducked her head.

“She’s working,” Cam said, trying and failing to hide the grin on her lips. “She told me to say hi, and she promises to join us again.”

“The life of a big-shot software programmer sounds hellishly busy,” I lamented. Elliot had become very dear to me in a short amount of time, doubly since she managed to make my best friend truly happy again.

Frankie’s face flitted across the front of my mind and I quickly cleared my throat and turned away.

“She’s doing really well,” Cam said, stirring the cream of her cappuccino. “But that’s to be expected, after all. She was my assistant.”

“God bless her for it,” I chuckled. “You didn’t make it easy.”

“That reminds me!” We turned to Alex, who dove into the latest bit of gossip in her circle.

I tried to follow along but fell behind, thoughts of Frankie’s shy smile enough to unravel my focus.

There was a gentle nudge at my elbow, and I turned my attention to Cameron. She lifted her brows in question, but I played dumb.

“What?” I mouthed to her, watching the tick of annoyance in her left eye.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You seem,” she paused, looking for the right word, “out of it.”

“You and Vinny are both mother hens.” I chuckled quietly, looking back at Alex. But she’d gone silent, her attention on me. Taylor’s and Reid’s as well. “What?”

“Cam is right,” Alex said, her expression mirroring Cameron’s. “You’re not as loud as you usually are.”

“Uh, ouch?”

“You know what I mean,” Alex said, and I did. But I didn’t have any words for what I felt. I was just... off.

“It’s just this business deal that has me a little frazzled,” I lied, reaching for the glass of iced water in front of me. “Derek and his sharks are on my back about signing off but I’m a little hesitant. There’s a lot riding on this contract and I don’t want anything to slip through the cracks.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Cameron said, eyeing me closely. “Is everything okay with Vincent?”

A laugh slipped through my teeth.

“Vinny is fine,” I said flippantly. “He’s just fun; strictly casual.”

“We tell you this all the time, but Hayden, you’re really not this kind of person.” Taylor frowned. “Messing around with some guy who’s twenty years younger than you? Is it really making you happy?”

“Jesus, guys, you really want to get deep this early in the morning?” I chuckled, forcing some mirth into my voice. “I haven’t even thought about drinking yet but you’re obviously a few shots ahead of me.”

“We’re not kidding,” Reid said quietly, her hand squeezing my forearm supportively. But I didn’t want to hear it. Not again.

“Look, I’m just hung up on this deal, okay?” I insisted, heat sitting in my throat. I hated lying to my friends, but I’d already

heard their opinions on my dating life. I didn't want to think about it. "I could really use a distraction right now."

There was a beat of silence around the table before Cameron spoke. "You only need a distraction when you've been spooked, Hayden."

And, God damn it, she was right. As usual.

"Fine!" I conceded, my heart squeezing painfully. "Fine, okay? I- ugh, I met someone last night."

"And?" Cameron pushed, her eyes hopeful.

"She was funny and beautiful and nothing," I said. "She was in a tight spot and I helped her out of it. But it's nothing more than that."

"Hayden," Cameron deadpanned, "it obviously is a lot more than that. What's her name?"

"Frankie."

"Does Frankie not have a last name?" Taylor pressed.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure she does, but I didn't ask." I scowled. "It's not like I'm going to see her again."

"But you want to."

I glared at Cameron, at her knowing grin and the familiarity twinkling in her dark eyes.

"Yes, Cameron, I want to see her again," I admitted, my chest aching at the confession. "But I'm not going to, and even if I did, it would mean nothing. I don't do serious relationships. I am strictly casual."

“She could be casual, too,” Reid pointed out and I scoffed, just a little salty.

“No, she can’t.” I sighed. “She’s looking for a long-term, serious relationship. She’s looking for an end game. And that’s not me.”

“But it could be you,” Alex cut in, flipping her long hair over her shoulder. “She’s special enough to have left you off-balance; who’s to say she won’t be the love you’re looking for?”

“I say,” I snapped. “I don’t want any part of that bullshit. I don’t have time for it. With the company expanding and all the traveling I do, I can’t maintain it.”

“There’s a big difference between not being able to maintain it, and choosing not to,” Reid countered, her words careful, measured.

“God, can we all just accept that I’m happy with my casual dating life and move on?” I said, forcing a laugh to hide the discomfort threatening to drown me. “I still have a full day of work ahead of me, I don’t have the emotional capacity for a full-scale friend-tervention.”

“Are you happy?”

I blinked at Cameron’s question, my brows pulling together.

“What?”

“Are you happy, Hayden?” she asked again. “We only ask because we love you. And you should know that you’re allowed to be happy, for real.”

“Cam, I hope you know that I am too sober for this.” I groaned, exasperated and endlessly tired. “I just wanted a nice, fun brunch date with my favorite people. I don’t want to have my decisions hauled over the coals.”

“We’re not hauling you or your decisions over the coals,” Cameron stated calmly. Her hand rubbed soothing circles on my back and I wanted to shrink away from the comfort that she offered. “We just want you to be happy.”

“But you know that I’m only interested in casual dating,” I pushed. “I’m not looking for love, or companionship or whatever. I’m fine, really.”

“Sweetheart, not every potential love interest is gonna turn out like Nat did.”

The knife in my gut twisted, icy and slow.

And I had nothing to say to that.

Chapter Three

A Comedy Written by the Universe

Frankie

“Are you sure you’re okay to run things alone?”

“Dad, stop worrying about me, okay?” I huffed, speed walking down the sidewalk and dodging the passers-by who didn’t see me. “I’ve run the store plenty of times, I promise it’ll be fine. Just focus on yourselves, please?”

His exhausted sigh pressed at the ache in my chest. He’d been at the hospital since Mom went in, and I knew he’d done very little to take care of himself in that time.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked, fishing my set of keys out of my purse.

“I’ll eat once the doctor’s done his rounds,” he said gruffly. “I just want an update on your mom’s tests and then I’ll eat.”

“I mean actual food,” I interjected. “Not that crap in the cafeteria. You know what? I’ll come by during lunch visiting hours. Then we can grab something to eat. How’s that sound?”

“Ah, little dove,” he murmured, the smile audible in his words. “You don’t have to worry about your old man. I can

take care of myself. But I won't say no to a visit; I know your mom would like that, too."

"It's settled then," I said, that ache in my chest easing up at the thought of seeing them later. I pushed the door and stepped into the air-conditioned store, letting out a sigh of relief. "I'll see you a little later."

"Can't wait – oh, be nice to the new owner, okay?"

"I'm the *niciest* person, Dad," I scoffed, hearing the warning in his voice. "I promise I'll play nice."

"Atta girl," he said, and hung up.

I tucked my phone back into my pocket and walked to the back of the store.

Not much had changed in the twenty-plus years since my parents opened the store.

The produce aisle was still bursting with fresh fruits and vegetables, bought each day from a family friend whose garden farm had turned into his own acre-sized plot. The little bakery hid behind a corner, the smell of freshly baked bread wafting through the aisles.

I reached the back of the store, my stomach grumbling, and walked into the staff room.

"Frankie!

Vanessa was on me in a second, startling me with a massive bear hug that almost splintered my bones.

“Morning, Vanessa,” I mumbled, the air squeezed out of my lungs.

She set me down and grabbed my shoulders, her dark eyes brimming with concern. “How’re you doin’?” she asked, the colorful beads in her hair falling forward as she looked down at me. “How’s Mom and Dad?”

“Mom is stable,” I explained, stuffing my purse and jacket inside my locker. “Dad is... well, you know him. He hasn’t eaten and I’d bet he hasn’t slept either.”

Vanessa’s frown deepened.

“I heard about the sale,” she said, her shoulders drooping a little. “What are they gonna do once she’s discharged?”

“After it happened,” I told her, taking a seat on the nearby sofa, “they sold their shares to pay for Mom’s medical treatment. And the company that’s been circling us for years now bought them up in an instant. So we’re officially under new management.”

“What happens if...”

Vanessa trailed off but I knew what she meant.

“If the money runs out?” I finished for her. She nodded and I sighed, anxiety bubbling in my gut. “They’ll find jobs elsewhere. Dad said he’d go back into the workforce so Mom wouldn’t have to, but she’s stubborn.”

“And the store?”

“We’ll be at the mercy of whoever walks through that door today.” I sighed, the full weight of it nearly crushing me. “Once everyone gets here, I want us all in the front of the store. We need to greet the new boss, but I want to present a united front. Whatever happens today, it’s us against management.”

“You sound like we’re preparing for war.” Vanessa chuckled. “For all you know, the new boss is a lovely person who shares your parents’ goals.”

“Or they’re a rich megalomaniac who wants to change the store into some quick-mart variation, and I won’t let that happen,” I countered.

Vanessa shrugged, grabbing her name tag and pinning it to the front of her shirt. “They might surprise you,” she offered. “But in the meantime, how about I make us some coffee before the store opens?”

“You always were my favorite,” I said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes and waved me off, motioning for me to follow her.

“Morning, Frankie!”

I glanced up and spotted a few of the other employees, pulling on their aprons with wide smiles.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Vanessa grumbled, her hands on her hips. I hid a chuckle as Blanca and Dean scrambled to greet her as well. “Whatever, coffee?”

We all huddled around Vanessa's coffee station, the scent of brewed coffee waking us up.

"Cappuccino for Frankie," Vanessa said after a few minutes, handing me my drink. "And lattes for Dean and Blanca."

"Thanks, Vee," I said appreciatively, taking a sip of my coffee. I'd need all the caffeine my body could take to get through the day.

"So, what's the news on your mom, Frankie?"

I set my cup down and turned to the twins who wore matching expressions of worry.

"She's stable for now," I told them. "Thanks for asking. But there's something else I need to talk to you about. Everyone, preferably, when they get in."

"Sure," Blanca said. "We'll finish setting up and then meet you here?"

I nodded and they sped off, identical down to the cadence of their steps.

"You're really expecting the worst, huh?"

I looked back at Vanessa, who studied me with a calculating look.

"Can you blame me?" I asked with a half-shrug. "I practically grew up here. You guys are my family and I don't want anyone to come here and mess all of that up."

Vanessa smiled wistfully, her eyes a little glassy. "You know, I still remember the first day I met you," she said.

“Oh God, no, please,” I whined, burying my face in my hands as her smile widened.

“Oh, yes,” she chuckled, leaning forward on the counter, her fingers laced. “I remember the day little Frankie came barreling through the door like a miniature hurricane. You were wearing this tiny yellow dress with rainbow tights.”

“Yeah, I’ve always been gay, I *get it*.” I giggled, a little mortified that she remembered that much detail.

“Not that,” Vanessa scolded, lightly smacking my arm with the back of her hand. “You were this tiny little thing and you looked so frail, like the wind could snap you in half. But you were fiery; I remember hoping my kids would be half as brave as you were. Or still are.”

“Hey, Miah and Bee are the toughest kids I’ve ever met,” I pointed out. And it was true, Vanessa’s daughters could overthrow the government if they wanted to.

Lucky for the government, they’re more interested in coloring books for now.

“Thanks to Auntie Frankie,” Vanessa countered. She looked up and her eyes brightened. “Joe! Do you remember how Frankie used to run circles around us when this place first opened?”

Joe, the caretaker of the store, ran knotted fingers through his graying hair. “Do I ever.” He chuckled. “She came in swingin’, told us all that she was gonna run the joint someday.”

“Well, it hasn’t exactly worked out that way,” I said, our reality leaving a sour tang in my mouth. I looked around, making sure everyone was there. “Could you guys gather round, please? I have to talk to you.”

Vanessa gave my shoulder a reassuring pat that only left me feeling a little more scattered. Joe, Blanca, Dean, and Vanessa stood around, their gazes fixed on me.

I took a deep breath and tried to squeeze the tremble out of my hands.

“So, you’ve all heard that my mom suffered a STEMI, and she’s currently in hospital receiving treatment for her cardiac event,” I said, my eyes traveling from one person’s worried face to the next. “The treatment is very expensive, so my parents decided to sell their shares to afford it.”

“There’s a new owner?” Dean piped up, ignoring his sister’s hush.

“Yeah, there is a new owner,” I explained. “The company that bought their shares has been trying to buy us out for a while, and they finally succeeded.”

“What’s gonna happen to us then?” Blanca asked.

“Nothing, I hope,” I said honestly. I didn’t want to lie and give them a false sense of hope. It’d make the worst case scenario that much worse. “But in the meantime, we can try our best to keep the store going like we always have.”

“Are we going to meet the new owner?” Joe grouched, sitting on one of the stools in front of the counter.

I pressed my lips into a thin line before I answered. “They’re supposed to be coming to the store today.” I sighed, checking my watch. “Any minute now, actually.”

There was a long beat of silence before Blanca asked the one question I’d been dreading. “Are you okay, Frankie?”

I looked at her, frowning a little, and shrugged, hoping the anxiety didn’t scrawl itself across my face.

“This place is my home, too,” I admitted. “I’m a little scared that it’ll change, but I’ll be here ‘til the very end. You guys are my family; I can’t imagine not coming to work here with you.”

“Yeah, and no richy rich boss is gonna change that!” Dean declared, holding his fist above his head.

Vanessa swatted the back of his head. “You’re gonna respect the boss, Dean,” she warned, and I smiled, my chest warming up a little. “We don’t know what they’re like but we’re gonna give ‘em a proper welcome, all right?”

“They’re signing our paychecks now,” Joe added, his face set in a deep frown.

“Oh, shit,” Dean muttered before immediately perking up. “Then we’ll be super nice.”

I chuckled, the fear of losing them nestling in my lungs and making it a little difficult to breathe.

“To their face,” I murmured conspiratorially. “While they’re not here, we can trash talk them as much as we want. I bet

they won't even be interested in the store. They probably just bought it to satisfy a whim or something."

Vanesaa clucked her tongue at me, but grinned. "Just another jewel in their belt," she said, shaking her head in disappointment. "Wait until they find out that our expertise is what keeps the store open and running."

"Exactly!" I said, high-fiving Vanessa. "Whoever comes through that door, they won't know what hit 'em."

"Uh, is that them?" Blanca asked, her head craned to see out the window near the front. She squinted her eyes. "Whoa, she's hot."

"The new owner is a woman?" Vanessa said, her lip curling in satisfaction. "Thank God, I couldn't deal if it was a man."

"Okay, everyone," I stage-whispered. "Big smiles, like you mean it."

I walked between them and stood at the front, making sure to place myself between them and the new owner.

"You too, Frankie," Vanessa whispered back, and I plastered a placid smile on my face.

"Is this believable?" I joked, turning my wide and slightly psychotic smile to the team, who erupted into hushed giggles. The door opened and the little bell jingled, announcing someone's arrival.

"Oh, this is *perfect*."

My spine locked up before I could turn around, my mind screaming familiarity because I knew that voice.

But it couldn't be.

Surely not...

I turned to face the front of the store, my heart falling into the Earth beneath my feet as Hayden, *Hayden*, stepped inside and took her expensive sunglasses off.

Chapter Four

Rocky Beginnings

Hayden

I stared at the bewildered woman in front of me, not daring to think back on my confident words to my friends.

Because that was indeed Frankie standing in front of me, her hazel eyes the size of saucers. And the universe had a wicked sense of humor, apparently.

Her hands shoved deep inside the pockets of her distressed dungarees, buttoned only on one side over a ditsy floral T-shirt. Without meaning to, my gaze drifted down the length of her body, taking in the colorful patches sewn here and there, ending on her lilac hi-tops.

So different from the effortlessly put-together attire she'd worn the other night.

“Well,” I said, forcing my voice to steady as I met her hard gaze, “isn't this a surprise.”

God, I could see more of her freckles without the ambient lighting of the restaurant.

“A surprise, yeah,” she parroted a little robotically. The tall woman behind her gave Frankie a light shove, seemingly breaking whatever spell she was under. She cleared her throat and forced a hand out toward me. “Frankie Ivey.”

“Ivey?” I frowned, glancing back at the signage out front. “Then this store was...?”

“My parents owned the store,” she said, and I took her hand. Something dormant fluttered in my chest at the sensation of her skin on mine and I quickly pulled away, trying not to look guilty.

“Ah, that makes sense,” I commented, hating myself for the awkward edge in my words. “I take it you’re the store manager?”

Frankie nodded, glancing away. The tall woman behind her cleared her throat conspicuously, drawing the eyes of her coworkers.

“Oh, this is Vanessa,” Frankie said, gesturing to the tall woman. “She handles the café and deli. Her baking skills are untouchable.”

Vanessa smiled widely at me, leaning past Frankie to shake my hand. Her grip was firm, a warning almost, but she held my gaze.

“Pleasure to meet you,” she said, drawing back and folding her arms across her chest.

“Likewise,” I said, studying the set of her jaw and the square of her shoulders. The power behind management, I

guessed. It wouldn't surprise me if she'd been working there longer than Frankie had.

Perhaps from the beginning, helping to mold Frankie into the manager she needed to be.

"My name is Hayden Jones," I announced, sensing that I was being held up on a pedestal for them to inspect.

Judgment sat hot on my tongue, and I turned my gaze back to Frankie.

"This is Joe," Frankie said, gesturing to the aging man standing beside her. "He's the caretaker and ensures that the store runs logistically."

Joe lifted a hand in acknowledgment and I nodded, looking toward the last two employees.

"The twins," Frankie said. "Blanca and Dean. They specialize in food allergies and nutrition, to help customers who aren't sure what to eat."

The gears in my head spun with possibilities at that. "Do you offer nutrition guides or eating plans using their specialties?" I asked, my focus zeroing in on the tiny dent between Frankie's brows. Definitely *not* at the way her teeth tugged on her bottom lip.

Focus, Hayden.

"It was something we wanted to venture into," she explained, fidgeting with the beaded bracelet at her left wrist. "But we didn't have the resources to expand into it."

“Hmm.” I frowned, brows furrowed in thought. “Something to look into.”

Frankie pursed her lips and looked like she wanted to press the matter, but Vanessa tapped her on the shoulder.

“Why don’t you give Hayden a tour?” she suggested, her colorful beads clicking together melodically as she leaned forward.

Frankie’s eyes widened a little but she quickly composed herself, turning back to me with a bland smile. “Sure,” she said, holding out an arm toward the rest of the store. “Shall we?”

I forced my lips into a grin that matched hers and followed after her, watching her copper curls bounce, so at odds with the war raging inside me.

On one hand, there was the Hayden who had crashed her date, hopefully giving her a better night than the one she was heading toward. The confident, bubbly Hayden, comfortable with throwing around her smiles and compliments.

On the other hand, there was the business mogul with billion-dollar companies riding on her shoulders.

And the underlying, simmering warmth in my lower gut.

Because Frankie was somehow even more beautiful in the light of day.

“I’m honestly surprised that you were the one who bought my parents’ store,” Frankie admitted, her voice softer than it had been.

“I can’t say I’m not surprised to see you here,” I confessed, keeping my eyes on the store around us. “Of all the things I expected, seeing your face didn’t even make the list.”

The store was quaint, overflowing with leafy potted plants hanging from the ceiling, little handwritten signs navigating the aisles and products throughout the store. It had a distinctly homey sense to it, something loved and practically lived in.

I couldn’t deny the scent of fresh coffee and bread had me wishing I’d eaten breakfast before leaving.

Plus, there was Frankie, in her cute, comfy dungarees and tee, her ratty sneakers, and freckles that splashed across her cheeks and nose.

“You’ve had your eye on the store for a long time,” Frankie noted, slipping her hands into her pockets again.

My brow quirked in interest. “I have,” I answered. “I knew it was a family-run business that specializes in food for people with food allergies. I was intrigued that a small business put so much into one basket instead of doing the whole seven-eleven convenience store route. And I know that your customer base is large and very loyal. I want to grow that.”

“Grow that?” She frowned. “How so?”

I hummed, taking in the produce aisle. “There are many communities that could benefit from a local store like this one that caters to their dietary needs,” I explained. Turning back to face her, the corner of my mouth kicked into a grin, and I

couldn't help myself. "But here I am wondering how the hell I ran into you again."

Frankie giggled softly, lifting one of her shoulders in a cute half-shrug. "I guess it's cosmic," she mused.

"Cosmic?" I repeated, the word heavy on my tongue.

Her eyes glittered, rich hazel turning almost molten gold. "I'd like to think I'm just *so* magnetic that you couldn't stay away."

Wrong, I thought. *This is business*. I cleared my throat, trying to tear my focus away from her dimpled cheeks.

"Anyway," I said, wrenching my gaze away. I put entirely too much energy into studying the nearby vegetables. "Tell me about the store; the history, the patronage, all of it."

Frankie blinked in surprise, no doubt at the sudden ice crystallizing my words, but I had to stay focused.

"Well," she began, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, "my parents noticed there was a huge gap in the community where people with specific dietary requirements, allergies in particular, slipped through. So they started talking to those people, asking them what they needed, what their difficulties were, and how my parents might be able to fix it. And this is the result."

"And what exactly is catered to here?"

"Every kind of medically recognized allergy, dietary preferences like vegan, gluten-free, vegetarian, pescetarian. Our suppliers are all local," she said, leading me down the

refrigerated aisle. The fridges were stocked with obscure brands that were rare in larger supermarkets, but most of the products were bagged in-store. Each one bore the small wreath of the store's logo. "Most of them were approached years ago when the store was in its earlier stages. We've been as loyal to them as they are to us."

"Impressive, there's definitely an opportunity to--"

"Frankie!"

We spun around at the urgency in Blanca's voice, spotting her looking thoroughly frazzled at the end of the aisle.

"What's going on?" Frankie asked, her voice calm.

Blanca pulled a face, glancing at me and then back to Frankie. "Our veggie delivery isn't gonna happen this week."

"Why the hell not?" Frankie asked, a deep frown marring her features.

"Our supplier is out," Blanca pouted, the distress clear in her voice. "He wasn't super coherent, but from what I gathered, his wife is ill and he can't make the delivery."

"That's awful," Frankie said. "Is she okay? Does he need any help?"

"What about the delivery?" I cut in, my brows rising expectantly. "What happens to stock that needs to be replenished?"

Frankie turned to me, a brow lifted in confusion. "Darryl is one of our oldest friends who helped us out on more than one

occasion,” she said. “It’s our duty to help him out. Besides, his wife took care of me when I was a kid.”

“There’s a definitive line between family ties and business,” I countered.

Frankie’s brows knitted as she stared at me, her expression turning defiant. “Darryl has his own business to run,” she said slowly, as if waiting for me to snap. “And he’s always been good to us.”

“Is that what you’ll tell customers who are looking to buy the products he was supposed to deliver today?”

I was vaguely aware of Blanca slowly backing away, but I was wholly intent on the fire burning in Frankie’s narrowed eyes.

“Our customers are just as loyal, Hayden,” she ground out, and I hated how my name sounded on her tongue: edged, sharp. “There is still plenty left in the cold room that we can use if we somehow run out before Darryl delivers on his next run.”

“That’s not good enough,” I spat, trying and failing to ease the tension from my voice. I didn’t like being this way, but business was business. The flush in her cheeks did nothing to cool my less-than-professional thoughts. “It’s a missed delivery today, and next week it’s another, and then what? Are you really willing to hang the department on the whim of others?”

“What would you have me do then?”

“Definitely get more than one supplier on contract, for a start.”

“Oh, and that’ll just make everything better, I suppose,” she scoffed. “We built the store on the foundation of community and trust, only to have you come in and turn it into a watered down version of the local Walmart.”

“Do you really not see how it would benefit you?” I asked in disbelief, the ire in my words burning my throat. “This is a business; not a charity.”

“Is that what it looks like to you?” she sneered and, God, I wish it would stop. I wish she’d stop looking at my mouth. I wish I’d stop staring at hers. I didn’t want to argue, least of all on my first day here.

Least of all with Frankie.

“There are things that need tweaking,” I said calmly. “Processes that need refining, and suppliers that have contractual obligations to deliver stock when promised.”

“I can’t believe this,” Frankie breathed, her words twisting into a huff of laughter. “I thought that maybe, just maybe, it wouldn’t be so bad having you own the store. That maybe my parents didn’t make a huge mistake. I was clearly wrong.”

She turned on her heel, flipping the length of her burnished curls over her shoulder and storming off.

“Frankie, this needs to be resolved,” I called after her, ignoring the burning ache in my gut.

“It *is* resolved,” she called back, not bothering to stop or turn around. “You’re the only one who has a problem with the solution.”

I stared after her, my heart in my throat, wondering what the fuck just happened.

Chapter Five

Cooling Off

Frankie

I seethed as I stomped to the back of the store, ignoring the concerned gazes from Joe and Dean.

I needed to walk away, clear my head before I said something I'd regret.

"Woah, hold up there," Vanessa murmured as she looped her arm around my elbow, wheeling me around and to a stop. "What's goin' on?"

My breath left me in a frustrated exhale and I glared at a spot just past Vanessa's shoulder. "Nothing," I muttered, my teeth gritted. "I just need to go some place I won't get myself fired."

"Hey, now," Vanessa said, cutting off my escape. "We can't have you this bugged out, Frankie, talk to me."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, resisting the urge to look over my shoulder to see if Hayden might have followed me.

I wanted to talk to Vanessa, but every argument that sat poised on my tongue was more childish than the last. I wasn't behaving the way a manager should. I shook my head, eyes darting every which way.

"I just," I paused, the words bubbling up and disappearing at once. I was frustrated, flustered, and I needed air. "I can't do this right now."

I walked away and Vanessa respected my need for space. I was silently grateful for that, for the fact that she didn't hound me or pressure me into talking.

It was one of many reasons she and I got along so easily.

That, and she practically helped raise me.

I ducked through the small gap between the café and the deli, marked for staff only, and paced in the short hallway.

I dragged in a deep breath, the air chilled in my lungs. Irrational, that's what I was being.

But a part of me couldn't stand by while Hayden turned the store, my parents' dream, on its head.

No matter how hot she was.

Fuck, I needed to stay on topic. But the memory of our first meeting crept in every time I tried to push it back. The sharp, crafted edge of her jaw, the sleek slope of her nose, and those keen eyes.

Eyes that both terrified me and intrigued me. Eyes I wouldn't mind having on me.

I shook my head and cursed under my breath.

Was I seeing things? It would explain a lot.

Because my brain was struggling to consolidate the Hayden I'd met a few nights ago and the Hayden who waited in the produce aisle just outside the door.

The Hayden I'd met that night, the one who had saved me from an awful date, with her sophisticated grace and charm, the sharp smiles that promised so much more...

That was the Hayden I'd been secretly daydreaming about.

Not that I'd ever admit it.

The one who stood out there, the one in a tailored navy suit that probably cost more than the store's annual turnover, that was someone I'd never met.

"Stupid," I scoffed to myself. I berated myself for having the tiniest sliver of hope when Hayden had walked in and introduced herself as the new owner. I'd hoped, foolishly, that maybe my parents' store wouldn't be picked apart and changed.

I was an idiot.

My palms prickled with the need to do something, and I walked further along the hallway and shoved the heavy door to the cold room open.

Icy air hit my warm cheeks and I could have sighed in relief. I slipped inside, shutting the door behind me.

I grabbed my abandoned clipboard from the day before, reading through the current stock data. Walking along the stocked shelves I tried as hard as I could to shove the thoughts of Hayden's darkened gaze out of my head. But doing stock reminded me of that stupid quarrel, how something in my chest fluttered when Hayden's voice turned serious and cold. The way she held herself, like she was the most confident person in the room, was something I envied and reluctantly had to admit I found stupidly attractive.

"Focus, Frankie," I grunted, tossing the clipboard aside and grabbing my hair into some semblance of a ponytail. Stray curls fell into my face and I blew at them, too frustrated to have anything else piss me off.

But I couldn't.

Hayden's lingering glances tugged on the edge of my attention, begging for me to overthink, to turn each look over in my head. What I hated even more was how easily my body responded to each glance. How easily she made me want to cave. I was genuinely attracted, so embarrassingly into her that I struggled to split my feelings from my logic.

With a muted snarl, I snatched up the clipboard and counted the heads of lettuce for the nth time.

I rounded the very last set of shelves, ready to start counting the dairy-free milk cartons when the sound of the door being shoved open made me jump.

"Vee?" I called, hoping it wasn't Blanca or Dean. I circled back and peeked around the shelf.

“Sorry to disappoint.”

My fingers turned numb as Hayden closed the door behind her.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped, hating the bite in my words. But it was better than the pathetic alternative.

God forbid I actually swooned.

“We need to hash things out,” Hayden said simply, her gaze flicking from my face to the clipboard in my hands. “What are you doing?”

I clenched my jaw and waved the clipboard as if that were an answer. “Stock take.”

“In the middle of the month?” she questioned, the side of her mouth curling into a smirk. She was hot and she knew it.

I wanted to melt into the cabbages behind me.

“I wanted something to do before I said something stupid,” I admitted, the softer side of me angling for control. “I’m a lot better at using my hands than a cool head.”

Hayden’s hum was edged; loaded. I glanced at her and immediately regretted it.

Her tawny hair shone under the harsh fluorescents, making the subtle gold jewelry at her ears, neck and fingertips all the richer. Her keen eyes watched me too closely, the soft curve of her mouth far too tempting.

“And, are you feeling any better?”

Her words hid another question, the intonation creeping just below the surface. *Are you ready to be professional?*

I swallowed the acidic retort on my tongue and forced a smile.

“Unfortunately, no,” I quipped, holding my clipboard up pointedly. “Seems I need a little more time among the shelves.”

I turned my back, making a show of counting the carrots that I’d already counted.

Hayden’s quiet chuckle slithered down my spine.

“Frankie.” She sighed, but I didn’t turn. I kept my gaze fixed on the clipboard, the numbers blurring together. And as she spoke, her tone got softer and quieter. “If there is anything about me worth noting, it’s that business is the most important part of my life.”

I huffed, still pretending to be heavily invested in adding up numbers I could no longer focus on.

A single, well-manicured finger hooked over the top of the clipboard, and it slipped out of my hands.

My head snapped up, ready to argue, but every word on my tongue died.

Hayden stood in front of me, her head bent lower so her eyes met mine, a cold smirk on her face.

The air in my lungs shriveled up, leaving my parted lips in a silent gasp.

“And even though I acquire new stores and restaurants every week,” she continued, her bright eyes pinning me to the spot, “this store has far too much potential to leave unchecked. So, whatever you have to say to me, say it.”

I drew in a shaky breath, her words slowly creeping up on me, each word gasoline tossed onto a fire that threatened to consume me whole.

“I have *plenty* to say to you,” I whispered, the ire in my voice smothering me. “This store has been my entire life, and I refuse to back down just because you waltzed in here with all your money. That might be how the world works for you, but not in here.”

Hayden straightened up, a sharp brow arched. “Is that right?” she murmured. “My money has no power?”

“Not a *lick*.” I sneered.

“But that money bought the store,” she mused, drawing away and inspecting the shelves behind me. “And that sale makes me the majority shareholder, and the owner. And that means that what I say *goes*.”

My tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth, defiance twisting at my mouth. My heart galloped wildly in my chest, electricity crackling along my skin, the heat in my gut in stark contrast to the warmth staining my cheeks.

“Then what is it you say?” I demanded, refusing to let her or her money have her way. If I was going to go down; I’d go down swinging.

“I say that we have some issues to work on,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. The movement pushed her breasts up, drawing my gaze again.

“You’re not going to replace me?”

She chuckled again, the pink tip of her tongue poking out between her lips.

“Why would I do that?” she asked sincerely, and half a million possibilities ran sprints in my head.

Did she find me attractive? Did she not care if I was around or not? Maybe she believed she could bend me to her will.

Maybe-

“You already know how the store runs and the other employees obviously adore you,” she finished, and each possibility shattered around my feet. “You’re my little asset.”

My face flooded with heat, no doubt redder than my hair, and I curled my hands into fists at my sides.

“I’m not your little *anything*, Hayden,” I ground out, taking a step forward. I wasn’t scared, and I would not be intimidated into being an obedient little puppet.

I would protect my parents’ dream if it cost me everything.

Hayden stared at me, her eyes roving the length of my body, calculating. “You’re right,” she agreed, and it shook me to the core, enough that I backed into the shelves behind me when she stepped forward. “But you are my employee, and I hope you remember that.”

Her words washed over me, her breath fanning over my lips with a hint of peppermint. My lungs fought for air and I couldn't keep my gaze from dropping to the grin pulling at her lips.

“What is with this split personality?” I breathed, unable to keep the question from spilling out.

Hayden's eyes turned to stone. “Whatever happened before, Frankie,” she said quietly, “has nothing to do with our working relationship. We have duties to this store and to each other, but no further. We could be friends outside of work, but that's it. Do you understand?”

“Don't flatter yourself,” I murmured, my lip curled in disbelief. “I don't have that kind of interest in you.”

“Good,” she said, but the space between us shrank, her mouth a breath from mine. The tang of mint curled along my tongue, and the air grew thin.

Gravity wavered for a heartbeat, and I swore that if I moved less than an inch, her lips would meet mine, and, *God*, I wanted to lean into it.

I wanted her to steal the brittle air rattling in my lungs, I wanted the peppermint to dance on my tongue, I wanted-

“Then we're in agreement,” she said, shattering the moment as those possibilities had shattered. She stood to her full height and walked away.

The door swung shut as she left. My chest heaved, and I stared at the closed door.

“What the fuck?”

Chapter Six

Totally Not Hung Up

Hayden

“Thank *God*, you’re here.” I groaned, swinging my purse onto the sofa and collapsing into it.

Cameron’s audible sigh cut through my thoughts but it was as common as our disagreements. I lifted my head to look at her.

“Are you pissy because Elliot’s away on business?” I asked, feeling just a little salty myself.

Cameron rolled her eyes but didn’t look away from her computer, her fingers rushing across the keyboard.

I sat back up, pouting slightly. “I need a friend, Cam,” I whined, knowing I was laying it on thick. But Cam was my closest friend.

And I really needed to vent.

“Business has been tough,” I complained, dancing along the edge of the real issue. “I can’t get a wink of sleep anymore, it’s driving me crazy.”

“How terrible,” Cameron murmured, the clacking of the keyboard filling the silence that followed.

“How long is Elliot away for?”

Cameron dragged in a long breath and exhaled it with a sigh. “Three weeks in total,” she said, and the rhythmic sounds of her typing paused. “So, she’s only gone for another week.”

“Still,” I sighed, settling back into the sofa, “that’s a long time for such a new relationship.”

“Hayden, say what it is you came here to say and leave your dismal view on commitment at the door.”

“Sheesh, Cam, I didn’t think you’d be this frustrated without Elliot.” I chuckled, but I knew that Cam was taking it hard. Elliot had become the one person she knew she could trust with everything. “But she’ll be back soon, and you can cry and fuck to your heart’s content.”

“Hayden.” Cameron groaned, the sound tugging at the corner of my lips. “Is there a point to you being here?”

“I missed my best friend.” I shrugged, the unease from earlier settling back in. “And this new acquisition isn’t going the way I hoped.”

“What do you mean?” Cameron asked, turning away from her computer at last. “I thought this one was the one you’d been so excited about? The food allergy store, right?”

“They don’t sell food allergies,” I scoffed, but continued anyway, “But yeah, that’s the one. I’ve been after it for years. There are so few stores like it, stores that actively cater to

people with food allergies of all kinds. Even built their entire business model around it.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“The problem.” I groaned, the memory of Frankie’s face shoving itself to the forefront of my mind, her cheeks bright red with anger. And maybe something else. “The problem is that I didn’t know the previous owners are Frankie’s parents.”

“Frankie?” Cameron frowned. But then her entire face lit up with recognition and a hint of triumph. “As in the Frankie you saved from a bad date? The Frankie you swore up and down you’d never see again?”

I tried to ignore the amusement curling around every single word. “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

Cameron threw her head back and let out a full-bellied laugh. “Are you kidding? How many times have you found entertainment at the expense of my formerly sad love life? This is *gold*, wait until the girls hear about it!”

I glared at Cameron but her laughter was infectious, especially because she so rarely did it without Elliot by her side.

“I guess it is a little bit funny,” I conceded, embarrassment sitting high on my cheeks and darkening them. “But I could do without you telling the girls for now, please. I have enough to deal with now that you know.”

Cameron struggled to compose herself and dabbed at the corners of her eyes theatrically. “You still haven’t told me

what the issue is,” she pointed out. “So the store you bought was owned by her parents. So what?”

“So,” I began, sitting up on the sofa and turning my body to face Cameron, “her parents aren’t the problem. She is.”

“Go on.”

“She’s stubborn,” I said, my hands batting at the air around me. “And she’s being so difficult about the simplest stuff. On my first day there, one of the suppliers fell through and couldn’t deliver fresh stock. Simple fix, right? Get a newer, more reliable supplier. But she *refused* to listen to me and walked away when I was trying to find a solution that would benefit both of us. And then, in the cold room-”

“Woah, slow down, Hayden,” Cameron said, not unkindly. “You’re letting your emotions steer the train here. Take a breath and then continue.”

I did, knowing Cameron was right. She was the pinnacle of detachment in business. At least until Elliot came along. But she never allowed her personal feelings to interfere with business.

It was something I admired very much and wanted to emulate in my own life.

“Thanks,” I murmured. “So, afterward, I found her doing stock take in the cold room. But it was the middle of the week so I knew something was up, and we argued. I didn’t realize we were getting so close and, fuck, Cam, I wanted to kiss her. It was such a wild, irrational urge that it almost took control.”

Cameron nodded in silence, her lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't tease me, didn't berate me.

I loved her for it, because my own mind was awash with guilt and regret.

"I know you don't want to hear this," she began, and I groaned. "But she might be the right person to help you get over what your ex did to you. If you'd just give it a chance."

"I don't get what you and the girls see in her," I argued, brows knitting together in confusion. "Like I get it; she's pretty and works in the same industry as I do, but why are you so hellbent on the idea that she's the one?"

Cameron looked at me for a long moment, her gaze softening infinitesimally.

"You talk about her like she is," Cameron said. "You've known her for little more than a week, and she's got you venting in my office. Don't you think that means something?"

I shifted, discomfort twisting in my chest because a part of me thought that maybe Cameron was right. Maybe Frankie could be something more.

But the rest of me curled up, hauling up walls to protect against that very idea.

I was a businesswoman. I had no time for relationships.

Nor did I have any interest in them.

"I wonder when you'll get tired of hearing me say this; I'm not like you, or the others. I don't want the picket fence and

the happily ever after. I can give myself those things.”

“Hayden, it’s not about money or materialistic crap,” Cameron said, exasperation thick on her tongue. “You’ve already got everything you could possibly want, and you’re ambitious and terrifyingly intelligent. But you have wounds that won’t heal because you won’t let them. I learned the hard way. I wish you’d see that some people want to be around you because you’re *you*.”

“Cam, I learned the hard way that words and smiles don’t mean anything where money is concerned,” I said evenly, trying my best to keep my voice steady. The urge to fidget or get up and leave rubbed me raw but I remained seated. “I get what Frankie might look like to you, but I can’t let my emotions guide my business decisions. I’m not like you.”

“You don’t have to be like me.” Cameron chuckled drily. “You can just be Hayden. Why won’t you give this woman a chance? She could surprise you.”

“Because I’m not interested in giving her a chance, Cam.”

“I think you are,” Cameron countered with a pointed look. “And I think that’s what’s scaring you the most. Part of you wants to let go and be a little irresponsible.”

“If there is a part,” I cut in, “it’s minuscule and not worth the hassle or the heartache. I won’t be seen as some pathetic, lovesick fool who got hurt again because she wasn’t smart enough to see the signs.”

“There *were* no signs when Nat did what she did,” Cameron pointed out, and my heart squeezed at the sound of her name. “No one thought she’d do what she did. But that’s an unfair assumption to nail onto someone you’ve just met.”

“That’s the problem, Cam! There were no signs. We all thought it was real and when it turned out to be a lie, I was the one left shattered. I will not go through that again.”

“So what are you going to do about this store, then?”

“Exactly what I intended to,” I said defensively. “I’ve already started rolling out changes and new processes. I’ve got meetings scheduled with investors and suppliers. Frankie won’t keep me from doing business as usual.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Cameron said.

“I don’t want to talk about this.” I sighed, the exhaustion clinging to my shoulders. “I just wanted to hang out with you so I could get this off my chest.”

“You’re always welcome to do that,” Cameron said. “But you’re my best friend, and I hate seeing you hurt yourself like this.”

“Just,” I paused, pressing my fingertips into my temples to ward off the impending headache. “Tell me your stupid, sappy stories, please? I need something that won’t make me want to tear my hair out.”

Cameron snorted and I glanced up at her. “You call them sappy like you weren’t cheering us on the whole time.”

“I was, because-” I cut myself off with a shake of my head. “Off topic. How’s the kitchen coming along?”

“Don’t remind me.” Cameron groaned. “The contractors have been in and out of the apartment and as much as I’ve begged Elliot to just move into the house, she’s adamant. She loves that apartment and I can’t bear to take it away from her. So I have at least seven giant, sweaty men traipsing around every single day.”

“Some would call that a dream come true,” I pointed out.

Cameron leveled an unimpressed glare at me. “And *some* of us prefer our homes without the odor.”

“Feisty, I miss this side of you.”

“I’ll kick you out,” she warned.

“You wouldn’t dare, you love me too much.”

Cameron blew a breath out of her nose. “I guess that’s true.”

“My, my, Elliot really has smoothed out all your rough edges,” I noted with no small amount of glee. “I’ll have to thank her personally when she gets back.”

“Please don’t give her any more ideas about my rough edges.” Cameron groaned. “She has enough ammunition without you adding to it.”

“Oh, this sounds like a Hayden and Elliot date,” I teased, grabbing my purse. “We’ve evidently got *lots* to talk about.”

I jumped up off the sofa, feeling a little lighter.

“Stay away from my girlfriend, Hayden!” Cameron called after me.

I turned and sent her a playful wink. “But she’s so much fun, Cam.”

Cameron’s sigh followed me out into the open office, where her new assistant sat typing away at her computer.

“Tell the boss lady that lunch is on me next time,” I whispered conspiratorially.

Her assistant nodded emphatically and sent me off with a wide, polite grin.

The elevator doors slid shut behind me and I pulled my phone out. I stared at the text from Vinny, my chest squeezing uncomfortably.

Without another thought, I typed out a quick reply and locked my phone, doing my best not to think about the text I’d just sent.

Hey V, can't do tonight. I'll call you when I'm free.

Chapter Seven

A Change Is As Good As A Holiday

Frankie

The scent of sterilized halls hit me with the force of a freight train as I walked through the sliding doors and into the cool lobby of the hospital. The front desk took up most of the space, with three receptionists fielding queries from patients and their families.

I hated hospitals.

The extreme cleanliness comforted the tiny germaphobe in me, but the chemicals stinging the air forced an unnatural sense of unease onto me. Too many sick people, ailments, and maladies floating in the air around me.

Worse, I thought, was the idea that people often took their final breaths in hospitals.

It sent a chill spider walking down my spine and I shoved it aside, plastering a smile on my face as I reached the front desk.

“Evening, how can I help you?”

I looked at the young man, his dark, shaggy hair pulled out of his face by a handful of colorful butterfly clips. His name tag said 'Steff' and where there should have been a blank, white space around his name, there was an explosion of color. Rainbows, little suns with sunglasses, and a tiny unicorn.

I wondered if he worked in the children's ward.

"Hi, I'm here to visit my mom," I said. "The name is Ivey, she's in ward nine on the third floor."

"You know your way around, I like it!" He clacked away on the mechanical keyboard, the sound a little jarring in the quiet lobby. "Here's your visitor's pass. Shout if you need anything else."

"Thanks," I mumbled, pulling the lanyard over my head and around my neck.

I made my way up to the third floor and spotted Dad sitting in one of the metal chairs just outside the ward. I jogged the rest of the way and the new beaded necklace (a gift from V's kids) jangled around my neck.

"Hi Dad," I said softly, making sure to keep my voice low so I didn't disturb any of the patients.

"Hey, poppet," he whisper-shouted. He got up, wincing when a few of his joints popped in protest, and pulled me into a tight hug. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," I told him, savoring the instant serotonin boost that only came from hugging my dad. "How are you? How's Mom doing?"

“As good as we can hope for,” he said, the lines around his mouth deepening with a frown.

I took the chance to really look at him, noting the rumpled blue shirt and plaid trousers that I faintly remembered him wearing to bed. His graying hair was unkempt, as if he’d spent hours raking his hands through it.

Worst of all, his cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken from lack of sleep.

“Dad,” I said reproachfully. The glimmer in his eye told me he knew exactly where I was going. “You need to take better care of yourself, please. Mom is well taken care of here, but she’d have a fit if she saw you looking this haggard.”

“You’re supposed to say nice things to your old man,” he grunted. “Not tell him how awful he looks.”

“No, you don’t look awful.” I chuckled, unable to help myself. I sat in the seat beside his and pulled him down next to me. “You just look like you’re in need of some serious rest and a huge meal. When was the last time you ate?”

“Last night,” he answered, pressing his lips into a thin line. “But it’s difficult to remember when your mom is here. At home, it’s easier because I like cooking for her. But here, she’s eating hospital food.”

He said the last two words with a grimace of disgust, and I rubbed his upper arm soothingly.

“I know,” I said. “But you have to make sure you’re healthy when Mom is discharged. Otherwise, who’s gonna cook for

her?”

He rolled his eyes and shrugged my hand off petulantly. “I hate when you’re right,” he grouched, and I smiled. “Enough about me. I’m a grown man and can take care of myself.”

I lifted disbelieving brows at that, but he ignored me and continued, “How are things at the store?”

That question punched a hole in my growing happiness.

“It’s, uh.” I stumbled, looking for the right words. I couldn’t lie, but I also didn’t want him to know that it wasn’t going too well. “It’s definitely an adjustment.”

“You met the new owner already?”

I nodded, trying not to think about Hayden for too long.

“Do you like her?”

I mentally tripped over his innocent question, reminding myself that Dad was asking out of concern for me.

And definitely not because I thought Hayden was hot.

“I don’t have anything against her personally,” I hedged, shifting in my seat.

“Ah, you don’t like her.”

“I didn’t say that,” I insisted, trying to keep the petulant tone out of my voice. “She’s difficult to work with.”

“What makes her so difficult to work with?”

“She wants to change everything, Dad,” I finally admitted. I hadn’t realized how much I needed a little bit of support, how

frazzled I'd become. "And it's *your* store, I don't care that you sold it. That's where I grew up and I don't want it to become this giant storefront that cares more about sales than it does about people."

"Do you really think that she's going to do that?" he asked, a small dent forming between his thick brows.

"I'm scared that she will," I confessed, my shoulders drooping. "I don't even know half of the changes she wants to implement. What if she lets the whole team go and replaces us with a bunch of money-hungry salespeople?"

"Then we would have served our community for many years, and done our best each and every day," he said consolingly. "I know how much the store means to you, but sometimes we have to let things go."

"That was the lousiest pep talk ever."

Dad threw his head and barked a short laugh, his hand on his belly. "Come on, you little grump." He chuckled, nodding at the open ward. "Let's go see your mom."

With a huff, I followed him into the ward, my eyes snapping to the bed at the very end of the large room near the window.

Mom turned to look at the door and her smile widened. She waved at us and I all but collapsed into her hug.

"I miss you," I murmured, pulling away to kiss her cheek.

"You and your dad are the same person," she tutted with a giggle. "Always worried about others when you should be taking care of yourselves."

I glanced at Dad, who stuck his tongue out at me from behind Mom. I rolled my eyes.

“How are *you* feeling?” I pressed, sitting on the edge of the bed beside her. She lay her hand atop mine with a smile. “What did the doctor say?”

“Oh, you know I’m hopeless when it comes to understanding their language.” She sighed. “He came in talking about tests for pulmonary disease and I just smiled and nodded.”

“Mom, I’m being serious!”

“So am I, sweetheart.” She chuckled. “But he seems happy with my recovery, so it’s all we can ask for right now.”

I frowned, my bottom lip jutting out.

“How is the store?” she asked, and my eyes flicked to Dad’s face and back to hers.

“It’s going,” I assured her. “What you need to focus on right now is recovery. Get as much rest as you can and let me handle everything else, okay? Someone needs to eat Dad’s cooking.”

“I miss it,” she grumbled. “The hospital food they have me eating tastes like unseasoned rubber.”

“Dad’s skills are one of a kind.”

Dad beamed at the both of us, the lines around his eyes crinkling with joy.

“Frankie,” Mom said, her voice serious. “There is one thing I’d like to ask you to do.”

“Sure, Mom, anything.”

“Please keep the heart of our store alive,” she asked—no, implored. “It will always be dear to us, and I want to know that it will always do what we intended: help people.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek but nodded anyway, hoping the lump in my throat would dissipate. “Of course, Mom,” I told her. “I’ll take care of it, I promise.”

When I left a little later, after threatening Dad about what would happen if he didn’t eat, the weight of my promise pressed down on my chest. Could I do what she asked? With Hayden’s fingers looming over us like a puppet master, I wondered if I was fighting a losing battle.

I hurried to the store the next morning, gratefully ducking into the coolness from the sweltering heat outside.

“Morning guys!” I called, jogging to the back of the store and into the staff room. I was a little late thanks to not one, but *two* accidents that had traffic in a standstill for over an hour.

I shrugged out of my light sweater and stuffed it inside my locker, before I pinned my badge in place.

Vanessa’s laughter echoed into the room as I walked out, and I found her and Joe leaning on the counter, their heads close together.

“Hey guys,” I greeted them, accepting the coffee that Vanessa offered me. “Thanks, Vee. What’s going on?”

“Dean is wearing his twin tee again,” Vanessa said, pointing at the silhouette hidden behind the frosted glass of a refrigerator door. I squinted my eyes and he stepped back, letting the door shut.

I choked on a laugh and quickly smothered my giggles.

He was indeed wearing a shirt that read “If found, return to Blanca” in large red letters emblazoned on the back. The shirt had been a gag gift from Joe a few years ago for Christmas. Blanca’s matching shirt read “I’m Blanca”, the twin to Dean’s.

It was no secret that Blanca was the level-headed, responsible one of the pair, and Dean just followed his sister. It warmed my heart, seeing this little slice of our family that was so dear to me. It was then that I noticed the brand new banner near the entrance.

“What is that?” I asked Vanessa, and Joe quickly made himself scarce.

Vanessa hummed in question before turning to see what I was looking at. “Oh, that?” She shrugged. “It’s the new nutrition program that Dean and Blanca are gonna be working on.”

“Since when are they working on a nutrition program?”

“It’s the same one we’ve been wanting to implement,” Vanessa explained, eyeing me closely to gauge my reaction.

“Hayden expanded the budget and now it’s been implemented.”

“No one thought to consult me about expanding the budget?” I scoffed. “That’s so unbelievably obnoxious, that she thought she could just do as she pleases because she has money.”

Vanessa smothered an obvious smile.

“What?” I demanded, suddenly self-conscious.

She shook her head. “Nothing. You just seem to have a *really* big crush on our new boss.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and flustered and guilty I hissed, “I do not have a crush on the new boss.” Glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one else could overhear I added, “I can’t believe you’d even say something like that.”

“You’re not exactly being inconspicuous, Frankie,” she said pointedly. “Out of everyone I know, you are the one person who is able to get along with just about anyone. What makes Hayden so different?”

“Uh, her insistence on changing my parents’ store?”

“That’s nowhere near enough to earn your ire,” Vanessa quipped. She toyed with the brand new beads in her braided hair, a little butterfly on the end of each braid. “You’re a sweetheart through and through, but Hayden pisses you off so easily. It could only mean one thing, and you and I know what that is.”

“You’re delusional,” I argued, but there was no venom in my words. I was too shaken by her observation, hating myself for being so stupidly transparent. I scrambled to change the subject. “Anyway, she can’t just throw in these changes without talking to me about them. I won’t stand for it.”

I spun on my heel and stormed to the back, snatching my phone and purse out of my locker.

“Where are you going?” Vanessa called after me.

“To give Hayden a piece of my mind.”

Chapter Eight

Locking Horns

Hayden

“Marina!” I called, frowning at the email I’d just opened.

There was a shuffle from just beyond my glass doors before Marina stuck her head inside. “Yes, Miss Jones?”

“Every single time,” I muttered under my breath. I cleared my throat and looked up at her. “It’s Hayden, Marina. You don’t have to be so formal with me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said earnestly. “It’s difficult because it’s such a habit.”

“We’ll make sure it becomes a non-habit soon enough.” I chuckled. “But that’s not what I called you in here for; could you pull up the records of our last European acquisition?”

“Of course,” she said, her dark curls bobbing with her nod. “Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“I want to see the health and safety regulations to compare them with our updated set.”

“Right away, Miss Jo- I, uh, I mean, Hayden.”

“Thank you,” I said, and she scurried out.

Marina was still new, still learning the where and what and who of H Corp, but she was doing spectacularly already.

I turned my attention back to my computer, reading through the email I’d opened.

“Derek, you asshole,” I muttered under my breath, scrolling through his latest legal proposal for the new restaurant that was set to open next year. “There’s nothing keeping the staff safe here.”

I continued my perusal, dragging my eyes through the exhausting jargon and wondering if Derek had forgotten that the staff was a priority as well.

My thoughts began to drift, slipping further away from the proposal in front of me and toward a small store across town.

Toward Frankie.

Our last argument was on my mind, the fire in her eyes and the edge in her voice. It was all so jarringly fresh that I stared at nothing, consumed by the memory of it.

Of her.

Frankie was someone I hadn’t expected.

Not just in business, but in general. Her fierce beliefs and love for her family and the store were so at odds with every other business I’d acquired. If anything, the previous owners had always been happy to hand over the responsibility of their businesses.

But Frankie seemed hellbent on fighting tooth and nail for the store.

That wasn't the issue, though.

The issue was the gnawing hold she seemed to have on me. Well, my thoughts, at least. Because no matter how hard I tried to focus on line after line of legalese crap, her face invaded my thoughts.

As stubborn as the woman herself.

With an annoyed huff, I minimized the window and checked my schedule.

I had some free time between the hour and lunch. I could stop by the store to check on the changes I'd asked the staff to implement. I told myself that it ended there, that I most definitely did *not* hope to see Frankie, yeah. Nothing more than that.

I was halfway out of my chair when there was a loud noise from the other side of my door, towards the entrance to the office itself. I frowned, wondering who the hell would be causing such a ruckus when my door flew open, revealing Frankie with a frantic Marina in tow.

"Miss, you can't just barge into the office, you need an appointment! Miss Jones, I'll call security-"

"That won't be necessary, thank you, Marina," I cut in calmly, lifting a hand.

Marina's frazzled brow smoothed out, replaced by confusion. "Miss Jo- uh, Hayden, do you know this woman?"

“Fortunately, yes,” I hummed, letting my gaze rake down the length of Frankie’s body and back up. Slowly, deliberately. “A pleasant surprise, so would you grab us some drinks, please?”

“Right away,” Marina said and quickly disappeared the way she came, no doubt sensing the tension layered in the room.

“Well,” I said, leaning back in my chair. I waved a hand at the open seat in front of my desk with a smirk. “Make yourself at home, Frankie. I’m sure we have a lot to discuss.”

“*We* are not going to discuss anything.” She seethed, her shoulders rising and falling with the force of her breaths. “I have something to say to you.”

“Before you do, and let me assure you I’m thoroughly intrigued by you coming all the way to my office just to yell at me,” I crooned, letting the charm I’d weaponized soften my words. “How did you get all the way up here without security dragging you kicking and screaming back to the lobby?”

She blinked at me, once, twice. “What do you mean?” she asked, confusion bright in her eyes.

“I mean that no one gets up here without an appointment and a rigorous pat down by security,” I explained, threading my fingers together. “So how did you get by?”

“I-it doesn’t matter,” she stammered, color staining her cheeks and giving her away. “It’s not like it was hard.”

“No, Frankie,” I countered, and her startled eyes met mine. I smirked and stood up, hands braced on the desk. “It matters.

Because as much as I'm enjoying you here, I need to make sure no one else gets up here the same way."

"I just walked past," she said irritably, and even though I knew she was lying, I let it go. But I noticed how her eyes drank me in, how they roved over the cut of my suit and the drop of my blouse. How she swallowed nervously.

"All right." I chuckled. "I can take a hint. How was your day?"

She opened her mouth to retort but shut it just as quickly, glaring at me. "I'm here to talk about what you're doing to the store and you ask how my day was?" she asked dispassionately, her freckles almost invisible under the dark red staining her cheeks.

"Yeah, that's usually how you talk to another human being," I explained, walking around my desk and toward her, each step calculated. I watched her catalog each one. "You barge into my office while I'm busy working and I ask how your day was. It's called reading a room."

"Reading a room would be seeing how mad I am and realizing how stupid that question is," she spat.

"I didn't say I was any good at it." I chuckled darkly, taking one final step closer. I stood in front of her, my nose inches from hers as I leaned down just a little. "Maybe you can help me tell the difference."

I heard the sharp little intake of breath that whooshed past her teeth and saw the flush in her cheeks darken.

So I *did* have an effect. Interesting. I'd worried that Frankie was immune to the persona I used to get my way. In business and... elsewhere.

She glared up at me and I pulled away, walking back to my desk and taking a seat.

"So much for professionalism," she muttered, more to herself than me but I heard it all the same.

I laughed aloud, and took her stance in. She wore utility pants, the many pockets stained with what looked like paint. I supposed it was artistic. Her sneakers were black, with painted sunflowers on them and her band tee was knotted at her waist, revealing a slip of skin.

She looked stunning anyway, though the depraved part of my brain whispered a different word: *delicious*.

"Okay, then to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Her hands curled into fists at her sides, her shoulders bunching up with anger. "You rolled out changes that I didn't even know were a possibility, let alone being implemented so soon," she ground out. "I walk into the store today and suddenly Dean and Blanca are working on the new nutrition program that I wasn't even consulted on."

"But you were aware that I'd taken a keen interest in that particular program, yes?" It took all of my experience in the corporate world to keep my expression relaxed and unfazed. Truth be told, I found Frankie's fury...

Sexy.

But that wouldn't help the matter at hand, and this was strictly business.

“And I told you that we struggled with resources,” she argued, turning to pace up and down in front of my desk. “Not just financially, but staff-wise as well. We need both Dean and Blanca working on the floor to help customers, and they can't do that when they're trying to craft detailed nutrition programs.”

“Fair,” I agreed, frowning in concession. “However, when I looked at your revenue for the last quarter, the turnover suggested that there was room to experiment with sales tactics as well as product offerings. We have room to improve, room to grow the store into something bigger and better.”

“The store is *perfect* the way it is,” she insisted. “Why are you so hellbent on turning the whole store upside down? Is it just for money?”

I sat back, my arms on the armrests, and took a deep breath. “First and foremost,” I began coolly, “you need to remember that the store is a business. A business survives on money alone. Any other factor or aspect only serves the end goal, which, unfortunately, is money. If you have an issue with me ensuring the store makes more money, then we're at an impasse. The store needs changes, and as the majority shareholder, Frankie, it's my job to ensure my assets benefit me.”

“I didn't come here for a business lesson,” she spat, spinning on her heel and pacing again. “I came here to explain

why you should leave the store as is.”

“Oh?”

That was a surprise.

“Yes,” she hissed. “But you dove into your lecture without thinking that *maybe* I already know a bit about business after being raised by entrepreneurs.”

As much as I wanted to fight back and scold her for snapping like that, I couldn’t. I was thoroughly enthralled by this fiery tornado ready to tear into me to protect her parents’ dream.

“I apologize,” I said, and I meant it. It jarred her a little, but she quickly recovered. “Go ahead and say what it is you want to say.”

She dragged in a lungful, hurling a “Don’t order me around” before turning on her heel again. I held my hands up in mock surrender, a grin already forming on my face.

“That store has been my family’s safe haven,” she stated, looking at me and quickly away. “*My* safe haven for as long as I can remember. I found out I had a severe allergy to dairy and pretty much any kind of nut when I was still a kid, so eating without dying was a challenge. My parents decided to open the store to help people like me, to give us a space where we could feel safe and know that the food we buy is free of allergens.”

I nodded as she spoke. She’d never told me about her allergies outright— and why would she— but I’d guessed as much. Looking into her parents’ history yielded nothing to

explain their decision to target an incredibly niche market over two decades ago.

“You can’t just swoop in and- and *change* that,” she said. “I get that you’re super rich and used to getting your way with your flashy charm or whatever, but this store *means* something. It means something to me, to our community.”

I waited for her to continue, her words hitting me like waves hitting rocks.

“And I’m the manager,” she declared, holding her head high and glaring me down. “You have to run these things by me.”

It was quiet for a beat before I spoke, getting to my feet and rounding my desk. I stood in front of her again, and she didn’t back down.

“You’re the manager?” I asked.

She nodded defiantly.

I nodded once and leaned forward, her eyes wide and locked on mine. “Then *act* like it.”

Chapter Nine

Not Quite Eye to Eye

Frankie

“Don’t you think you’re taking this just a little too far?”

I threw a glare over my shoulder at Joe, who idly thumbed through a vegan catalog. He’d been courting the idea of becoming vegan himself, but apparently the ‘call of bacon’ was too strong.

He was met with the same reaction every time.

Now, however, he alternated between the catalog and me.

I hauled myself onto the counter, grabbed the box of chalk and fished a brand new piece out. “Too far?” I asked, writing out the new daily specials painstakingly on the chalkboard.

“With all this?” he said, gesturing vaguely in my direction. “The management position.”

“I’m doing my job,” I told him, scrolling through my phone to check I had the right specials. “And I’m doing what Hayden told me to do.”

“You’ve always acted like the store manager,” Joe pointed out, and I stifled a sigh. “You’ve always done right by us, the customers, and the store. I don’t see why you need to go this far.”

‘This far’ referred to my, in Vanessa’s words, obsessive tendency to make everything in the store perfect as it was. Because it was already perfect in my eyes.

The store didn’t need any of Hayden’s changes to do what we’ve always done.

“I’m only making sure that our store shines bright the way it is right now,” I explained. “Aren’t you the one who’s always going on about ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’?”

“What Joe is trying to say with his very limited tact, hun,” Vanessa said, tying her apron behind her back, “is that sometimes, change is a good thing. We may be doing just fine, but who’s to say we won’t be even better once we add some of these changes?”

“Do you all feel that way?” I asked, turning around and jumping off the counter. I slipped my feet back into my sneakers and cleaned the countertop before turning around.

Blanca and Dean had gravitated toward our conversation and stood next to Joe, while Vanessa stood behind the counter, in front of me.

“We have a few reservations, as anyone would in this situation,” Vanessa admitted, and I agreed. Though I had more than just a few reservations. “We think it would be good for

the store and our customers if we tweaked a few things here and there—nothing too crazy! But a few improvements.”

“I know you must think I’m being childish about all of this.” I sighed, and even though Vanessa quickly shook her head, I shrugged. “I *do* want the store to do well, and I want to be able to help even more people. But I want to do it with my parents’ dream alive and well. I don’t want it to come from a bored billionaire with too much time on their hands.”

“I hardly think Hayden is bored or has too much time on her hands,” Vanessa muttered, quickly continuing before I could retort, “But that’s the thing; we can finally do all those things we wanted to do. We have the budget now.”

She was right. I *knew* she was right.

But I didn’t want the success of my parents’ dream to be attributed to money, or because it was backed by a massive company. Mom and Dad built this store themselves, with nothing but love and the support of our community. Wouldn’t a billion-dollar pay-off make it all seem... cheap?

I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere with that line of thought. I looked back at Vanessa, then at Joe, Dean, and Blanca.

“What are you guys worried about?”

They all looked at one another, their expressions a little uneasy.

“We’re a little worried that we might not have jobs by the end of all these new changes,” Vanessa said. My heart sank.

“While Dean and Blanca have skills that Hayden has put to use, Joe and I are, as they say, ‘old stock’.”

“The hell you are,” I snapped, anger prickling along my fingertips. “This store is nothing without you guys, and there’s no way I’d let her replace you.”

“Frankie, hun, if it’s what the boss wants,” Vanessa said with a shrug, leaving the rest of her sentence unsaid. We all knew what she meant anyway.

I didn’t get to argue the point.

“Good morning, fabulous team!”

I hated how my stomach flipped at the sound of her voice.

“Morning, Hayden,” Vanessa said, shooting me a warning glance.

I narrowed my eyes at her but obeyed anyway.

“I don’t want to disrupt your day,” Hayden said, walking toward the café area with long, graceful strides. I watched the way her silk, sleeveless blouse moved like water on her skin and caught myself before Vanessa made a comment. “I just wanted to go over a few things with Dean and Blanca, if that’s okay?”

She directed the question at me and I quirked a brow in disbelief.

“You’re the boss,” I said, turning away and hopping back onto the counter. I didn’t wait for her response and I didn’t

bother to turn around to see if Dean and Blanca had followed her.

I continued writing out the specials on the board, oblivious to the hushed whispers below me.

At least, I was until I felt a tug on the leg of my jeans.

I looked down to find Joe and Vanessa looking back up at me, wearing matching expressions of muted glee.

“No,” I said, hoping to draw the line before it was crossed. “I already know what the two of you are going to say and I don’t want to hear it.”

“But you make it so obvious, hun!” Vanessa teased.

I forced myself to focus on the chalkboard, carefully writing out the very last special. They both snickered quietly.

“There’s nothing to be made obvious, Vee.” I sighed. “Can’t you just yell at Joe for sneaking candy bars into work instead?”

“Joe’s been doing what now?”

“Thanks, kid,” Joe muttered grumpily. I glanced at him, offering a sympathetic glance before I hopped down again. I slipped my shoes back on and cleaned the counter while Vanessa chewed Joe out about how bad chocolate was for his teeth.

I managed to slip away while she harped on about the dangers of tobacco, choosing to walk around the store to make sure everything was ready to open.

Definitely not to spy on Dean and Blanca with Hayden, because that would be intrusive and unprofessional.

Finding them was easy enough. The three of them stood huddled around Blanca's nutrition desk, looking at something Hayden was showing them on her iPad.

"I was thinking that we could expand on your expertise to incorporate healthy lifestyle living," Hayden said, every inch of her the boss I could never be. "We might have to have both of you complete a course or two to become certified, but that's something we can easily plan out."

I leaned in close, a deep frown settling on my face as their conversation went on.

I'd always heard Blanca and Dean talk about growing their knowledge, and Blanca often talked about going back to school for it. She wanted to work in food research, to put her knowledge to use for people outside the customers at our store.

It stung that I hadn't been able to do that for her.

"And Dean," Hayden continued, oblivious to the guilt and shame that wracked me so thoroughly. "I remember that you mentioned personal training or fitness instruction. In the long run, it would take us about a year to have that finalized, but I wanted to ask if you'd be interested in it at all."

Dean bobbed his head in an enthusiastic nod. "It would be so great," he said, just a little starry-eyed. "It's been a dream of mine."

Another dream I hadn't been able to turn into reality. I chewed on the inside of my cheek, feeling inadequate.

"Perfect! Then I'll have HR do their thing and keep you guys posted, yeah?"

"Thanks, Hayden," they chorused in unison.

"Frankie," Hayden called, and I froze like a deer caught in headlights. "I know you're there. Come on out."

"I didn't want to interrupt," I hedged, casting about for a feeble defense. "You all seemed busy."

"Of course," she said, and I knew she didn't believe a word I'd said. "Should I even bother with pleasantries or are you going to talk to me like a human being?"

"God, you make being civil *so* difficult," I grunted, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes.

It wasn't necessarily her fault, but what else was I supposed to do when she breezed in here wearing sapphire silk and red bottomed heels? My less-than-civil behavior kept me from going insane just looking at her.

As if to prove my point, she tossed the length of her shimmering curls over her shoulder, exposing her collar bone.

It was an uphill battle to keep the groan from leaping off my lips.

"I want you to be honest with me," I said evenly, glaring at the ground between us. "And I'd rather not hear it here."

I turned and waited for her to follow me. We walked to the staff room in silence, but I prayed the ground would open up and swallow me whole when Vanessa winked at me from the barista area.

Once we were inside the staff room, I closed the door behind me and turned, ever so carefully, to Hayden.

She stood in the center of the room, dripping finery in head to toe silk and silver. Her wild hair had been pulled into a high ponytail, the bulk of her soft curls cascading down her back. I wondered, idly, traitorously, what it would feel like to sink my hands into her hair-

“What are your plans with the staff?” I demanded, shaking the vivid images from my mind.

“Plans?” she echoed, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not planning to cook and eat them, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I know you’re happy with Dean and Blanca,” I said, forging ahead and trying not to let myself fall into another pointless argument. “But what about Joe and Vanessa? You’ve shown zero interest in them; are you going to fire them if they don’t fit the mold?”

“What mold are you talking abo-”

“Your vision for the store,” I interrupted. “They’re family and they helped build this store. You can’t fire them, I will not let you.”

“*Let me?*” Hayden repeated, chuckling in a way that did little to assuage my fears. “Where did you get the idea that I’d

be firing them? And for not ‘fitting in’? That’s how low you think of me?”

My mouth hung open, the retorts dying in my throat and leaving me flapping my mouth like a fish out of water. “You- I don’t think *low* of you, but that’s-” I stammered, paused, tried and failed to string my thoughts into a coherent sentence. “So, you’re not going to get rid of them.”

With a hollow chuckle, Hayden set her purse on the table and leaned into it, bracing her hands behind her. “I’m not the monster you think I am,” she murmured. “But I can see why you’d think that way.”

“I don’t think you’re a monster,” I argued, not sure why I bothered, not sure it bugged me that Hayden’s smirk was tinged with a sadness I’d never experienced. Shame crawled along my shoulders, but I kept my head high.

“It’s business,” she said, standing up again and adjusting her clothes. She grabbed her purse and turned back to me. “I don’t have any plans to fire Vanessa or Joe, or you, for that matter. Nor will I do so in the future unless it’s my last resort. If that’s all, I have work to do.”

She didn’t wait for me to speak but disappeared through the door, leaving me standing there feeling like I’d just gone toe-to-toe with a grizzly bear.

And lost.

Chapter Ten

Forging Ahead

Hayden

“Excuse me, Hayden, you have a visitor.”

I glanced up at Marina in confusion.

“I don’t have any meetings scheduled this morning,” I told her, wondering if I’d missed an email or an important phone call.

“I hope I’m more than a little block in your schedule, amore.”

“Vinny?”

I tried to blink away the confusion and shock, looking past Marina to find him standing there. He waved with a bright white smile.

“It’s okay, Marina,” I said, a little detached. “You can let him in.”

“Thank you, *querida*,” he crooned, and Marina floated off, her cheeks bright red. “Ah, it’s been so long since I last saw you. I’ve been lonely.”

A part of me felt a little guilty that I'd left him hanging for so long, but then again, we were just casual. No need to feel guilty about a bit of fun.

“Did you really miss me that much?” I asked, falling into the role I played with him. It was easy, effortless, to let the weight of the world slip off my shoulders and fall into ignorant bliss for an hour or two.

He walked toward my desk, dark trousers showing off his long legs with each stride. He wore a crisp white shirt, the few buttons near the collar left unbuttoned.

“I miss you the minute we're apart,” he simpered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Little liar,” I teased, turning back to my computer. “You run off to your beautiful model friends the second I'm gone.”

He chuckled, lifting one shoulder in an elegant half-shrug. Jesus, everything he did was worthy of being on the cover of a magazine.

“What else am I to do when you leave for work, amore?” He pouted, perching himself on the edge of my desk, leaning over to toy with the ends of my curls. “Waste away until you come back to me?”

“You're a hopeless romantic, darling.” I tutted, going back to my emails. It was unsettling to have him in my office, with business and pleasure overlapping far too closely for my liking. “You need to find someone who can give you all the roses your pretty heart desires.”

“I’m worried that you’ve found that someone for yourself,” he mused, his fingers trailing over my shoulders.

“What do you mean?” I asked, swallowing the groan that threatened to slip out as his strong fingers kneaded the knots in my shoulders.

“What else?” he teased. “I haven’t seen you in forever, and when I surprise you at work you don’t scold me. You talk about me finding someone else.”

“How does that amount to me finding someone else?” I pressed and his soft laugh sent a shiver down my spine.

“I know models are supposed to be dumb, but I’m not. You haven’t denied it.”

“Denied what?”

“Amore!” he sighed, exasperation thick on his tongue, curling the edges of his accent. “You haven’t told me you don’t have someone else. I’d better prepare for a heartbreak, no?”

A rush of fear shot through me, paralyzing me in my chair for a heartbeat.

No, no, there was no one else.

I reached up and wound my fingers through his and brought his hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to his palm.

“Darling, I don’t have time for that,” I said, forcing my lips into a smile. Whether or not it fooled him, I didn’t care. “You’re still the only one I care to bed.”

“How flattering,” he said with an exaggerated eye roll.

I laughed and shooed him off my desk. “Let me get back to work,” I said, hoping the panic didn’t seep into my voice. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Perfect,” he gushed, swooping in and pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll bring dinner!”

And with that, he disappeared.

And I...

I needed air.

I strolled up and down the aisles at Ivey’s, my iPad in hand to make notes as they came to me.

It was livelier than usual, with a steady stream of customers milling about and chattering. Toward the front I heard Vanessa’s full-bellied laughter, and a smile tugged at my lips. Frankie had, as usual, disappeared the moment I set foot in the store.

I tried not to focus on the twinge of disappointment nestled in my chest, turning to the social media notes I’d compiled.

“Need a hand, boss?”

I turned to find Vanessa standing in the aisle, looking at me with a friendly smile.

“Actually, yeah,” I said, returning her smile. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she said, and she sounded genuine.

“I wanted to get to know you,” I began, flipping the cover on my iPad to give her my undivided attention.

She blinked in surprise. “Me?” She chuckled. “There’s not much here.”

“I doubt that,” I told her. The beads in her hair were different again, pretty ocean blues mixed with pastel pink. “Frankie trusts you the most, and I can see that you’d been the driving force behind management before Frankie stepped into the role. Perhaps even after.”

“Oh, uh, wow, I don’t really know what to say to that.”

“Tell me about the beads in your hair,” I said, hoping to steer the conversation to calmer waters.

“These?” she asked, pointing at the beads with a warm smile. I nodded. “My kids put them there. I taught them that the beads carried a special power to keep whoever wore them safe. I always put them in the kids’ hair before they leave for school.”

She winced slightly, and I wondered if there was more to the story of those beads.

“My babies were bullied about their hair, and asked me to cut all of it off,” she admitted, and my heart sank. I knew what that felt like. “I felt like my soul had been torn to shreds. So I came up with the beads to help them accept their natural hair.”

“Were they still bullied after that?” I asked, my chest aching at the idea of two young kids being bullied so much that

they'd resort to that.

“Oh, all the time,” she scoffed, clearing the emotion from her throat. “But now they know that their hair is special, and it keeps them safe.”

“That’s beautiful, Vanessa,” I said, hoping she could hear how sincere I was. “And brave, given the circumstances.”

“Kids are just misguided,” she said. “But Frankie says my kids are special. And I believe her. They chose me to be their mom, after all.”

“Frankie mentioned that you’d been here for as long as she could remember,” I mused, wondering how young she was when she started. “How did that happen?”

“The Ivey’s were old friends,” she explained. “We all met in high school and managed to stay in touch. When they opened the store I’d just graduated and had no job lined up, so it seemed like a sign. Cosmic, as Frankie puts it.”

That word shook me to my core, my thoughts spiraling for a moment before I hauled them back.

“That’s one way of describing it.”

“She was a wild kid, though.” Vanessa chuckled, the sound soft and brimming with nostalgia. The kind of sound that made me want to listen to her stories. I imagined she was the center of her children’s world. “Just this tiny tornado of energy and imagination. She had all of us wrapped around her finger before we even knew it. I was still young, barely into my twenties. She ran us ragged.”

Something in my gut unfurled, warm and pleasant, the kind of feeling I'd get from eating a hot meal on a cold day.

“She still seems like a tornado to me.” I chuckled. “Or maybe ‘firecracker’ is more appropriate.”

Vanessa laughed *hard*, long enough that I ended up chuckling along with her.

“You have no idea how accurate that is,” she eventually managed to say. “But it all comes from her heart, and she’s a really good person. Massive, bleeding heart, but it makes her all the more wonderful.”

That warmth spread throughout my chest and I scrambled for some kind of control. “I’m sure there were moments where you thought ‘I’m gonna jump out of the nearest window’ while you babysat?”

Vanessa leveled me with a look so serious I half imagined I’d offended her. But she just patted my shoulder, as if in consolation, and said, “Every damn day.”

I attempted a laugh, but Vanessa’s deadpan expression made it a hollow attempt. She excused herself to tend to a few customers, and I turned back to the aisle.

Several things happened all at once.

Frankie walked into the store, carrying a large box of produce, and locked eyes with me.

At the same time, three men stepped in front of me, wearing suits that were so painfully out of place I could have screamed.

The box that Frankie was carrying crashed to the floor; she'd walked into the doorframe leading to the cold room and dropped the stock.

I winced, but Joe was there, taking the box from her.

I glanced at the men. They were the first group of investors I'd invited to have a look at the store, but I hadn't *dreamed* they'd show up right at that second.

"Gentlemen," I said, seeing the angry flare in Frankie's eyes and hoping to put my crisis management skills to good use, "please make yourselves comfortable at Vanessa's station. She'll help you out with your drinks, and I'll join you in a moment."

I didn't wait for their response. I slipped past them and made a beeline for Frankie, who was already marching toward me. I reached her just as she made it to the aisle and hooked an arm around hers, spinning her around and dragging her to the staff room.

"What are you doing?" she commanded, flailing in my grip. "Let go."

"Save it for the staff room," I murmured, and to her credit, she did.

"Do you want to explain who the hell those men are?" she demanded. "And why the hell they're in the store right now?"

I took a deep, steadying breath. "I wanted to talk to you about it but there was no time," I explained. "They're potential investors who are interested in making the store a beneficiary."

“Not interested,” she grunted.

I stared at her, at a loss for what to say or even what to do.

“What?” she quipped.

I just stared at her. “You are so intriguing,” I admitted with a sigh.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

Her defenses were sky-high, and I knew there would be no swaying her.

At least not at that moment.

“I’m going to tell you a secret,” I murmured, watching as her gaze dropped to my mouth for a brief moment. “I know how to get what I want. Whether with money or charm, if I want it, it’s mine. But you...”

I scoffed, internally cursing whichever deity thought this shit was funny. “You’re the first person who won’t even *think* about hearing me out. It’s fascinating. And I fucking hate it.”

Frankie blinked, her mouth agape as if I’d slapped her. I chuckled, watching the panic crawl up her throat and steal the words off her tongue.

Her cheeks flushed, her freckles blurring together, and her bottom lip wobbled with the need to say something.

Anything.

I wished she’d say something, cuss me out for being unprofessional. Anything.

Because the reality of what I'd said slowly set in, and the line between Hayden-the-businesswoman and Hayden-the-person smudged.

Dangerous, I thought.

Whatever this was, it was dangerous.

But Frankie was so flustered, and somehow her incoherent babble calmed the storm raging in me. She shook from head to toe, whether from the panic or the rage, I didn't know. But she was so cute. I looked at her once more before I left, the last thing I said hanging heavy in the room.

"Fascinating."

Chapter Eleven

Burning the Candle At Both Ends

Frankie

“Dad?”

Nothing but a slew of shouts and unintelligible yells echoed down the end of the line, and I frowned into the receiver.

“Dad, what’s going on?” I asked, my voice a little louder. I glanced around the store hoping I wouldn’t disturb anyone, but his silence drove a white-hot knife into my gut. “Are you okay?”

There was a loud rustle, the sound of someone swearing before Dad’s frantic voice finally answered me. “Frankie, you have to get to the hospital *now*,” he panted, and a solid block of ice slid into my gut.

Against my better judgment, I voiced the fear clawing up my throat. “Is Mom okay?”

“Just get here, Frankie,” he answered, anguish twisting his words to ice. “Please.”

He hung up and my phone slid out of my hand and clattered to the countertop. In a blind panic, I fumbled to pick it back

up, scrambling to my feet and sprinting towards the deli.

“Vee!” I called, trying to force the raging hysteria back, trying to keep my voice as steady as I could. But by the look on Vanessa’s face, I’d failed dismally.

“Hun, what is it?” she asked, her hands fluttering around me, looking for injuries I didn’t have. “What’s going on, are you okay?”

“It’s Mom,” I managed to force out, my tongue turning to lead in my mouth. I had to get to her, I had to be there-

But Vanessa understood and she untied the apron and tugged it over her head.

“I’ll get my keys,” she said, jogging toward the staff room. “Joe, I’m taking Frankie out.”

Joe, wherever he was, said nothing, but it was all I could to keep myself from running out of the store and to the hospital on foot.

“I’m here,” she said, and I hadn’t even noticed her come back. She put an arm around my shoulder and guided me out of the store, my feet following along robotically.

The fifteen minute ride stretched out into hours, precious seconds I didn’t have slipping away like sand through my fingers.

Vanessa talked to me the whole way there, but I barely held onto anything she said.

I only registered that she was calling after me once we'd arrived. I hadn't even waited for her to stop the car. I bolted inside, my numb feet thundering past reception.

I didn't stop.

I hurled myself through the door to the stairs, taking them two at a time until finally, finally-

“Dad.”

My father looked up from his hands where his face had been buried, his eyes gaunt and mouth drawn.

“Poppet,” he croaked, his voice rough and his hair disheveled. He got to his feet just as I reached him and pulled me into his arms. His hands shook where they splayed across my upper back.

“What's happening?” I sniffed, panic and despair welling up until I could barely breathe. “Where's Mom?”

He pulled away, coughing a little to clear his throat. “She's been rushed into emergency surgery,” he said gruffly. “She suffered acute heart failure and they- ah, they say she might not make it.”

I stared at the mug in my hands, blurring in and out of focus along with my thoughts, shoving forward then reeling back. Like the tide, I mused vaguely. Rushing in all at once, almost drowning me. And then retreating, waiting for the next wave.

The little café bustled around me, friendly waiters taking excited orders. Friends chattered over their iced coffees and smitten couples swooned over their shared milkshakes.

Cliché, I thought, but soon that thought slipped away as well.

“So, she’s okay for now?”

I curled my fingers around the warmth from my coffee, nodding numbly. “The doctors say she’s stable for now,” I said, my throat raw. I looked at June, her usually bright face crumpled in concern. “They want to move her to CCU but we don’t have the money for it. Dad’s thinking about going back to work.”

June reached across the small Parisian-style table, her hand squeezing mine gently in silent support.

“I can’t imagine how hard this is,” she said, her dark eyes mirroring the desolation I felt. “I know it’s passé when people offer their help, but you know I’ll do whatever I can to help, right? So, please just let me know.”

I nodded again, only managing the smallest upturn of my mouth in lieu of a grateful smile.

“There’s just so much going on right now,” I admitted, the lump in my throat tightening. “She pulled through surgery only to hit another hurdle because we don’t have the money for it. I’d take another job but I can’t just leave the store when Hayden is running around tearing it to bits.”

I stopped myself before my anxiety throttled me, took a deep, shaky breath and cleared my throat.

“That’s why I asked you to meet me,” I explained, studying her face. “I know you’re looking for help at your store and I’d be so grateful if you let me do it.”

June frowned and leaned back, her brows pulled tight. “Frankie,” she murmured. “I can’t offer you nearly enough to cover your mom’s medical bills. And the hours would be hell on you. Working at Ivey’s and then still pulling a shift for me?”

“I’ll teach the kids as well,” I offered, praying that she could see I was serious.

“That’s gonna take a toll on you, Kiki. Why don’t you ask Hayden for a loan?”

The idea alone sent a white-hot poker down my throat.

“No,” I said. “This has nothing to do with Hayden. My parents opened that store to take care of me; doing this is the least I could do. My mom is worth it.”

“You know I love having you at the store,” she sighed eventually, resigned. “Just... promise you’ll remember to look after yourself, okay?”

“Deal.”

Keeping my promise to June was nowhere near as easy as I’d hoped.

And considering I'd known it would be difficult said a lot.

I jogged my way to Ivey's every morning before six-thirty, opening up and getting the store ready for the day. I ran through stock take, deliveries, and juggling Hayden's incessant investors as thoroughly as possible before taking a cab to June's store during lunch.

June's store was my guilty pleasure; the one selfish indulgence I allowed myself if I was ever struggling.

I waited for June to finish up with a client, walking through the display room in awe. The guitar strings strummed softly under my fingers, the corded metal cool under my touch. Familiar. Of course, none of the guitars on the wall resembled the one I had at home.

My guitar was old, the painted rose artwork smoothed out and worn away under years of playing. I'd lost count of how many strings I snapped, how many picks I'd lost to the abyss of the sound hole.

By the rattle I heard any time I lifted the guitar, I could guess it was a lot.

I lifted one of the acoustic guitars off its stand and took a seat on the stool beside it, nestling the body of the instrument between my thigh and shoulder. It slid into place like a jigsaw piece, like an extension of myself that helped the other pieces stay together.

I lost myself to the soft sounds of the guitar, mindlessly tuning it to perfection thanks to years of frustration and

practice.

With one hand wrapped around the fretboard and the other dancing across the strings, a quiet, familiar melody filled the trembling silence inside me.

“You sound a little rusty.”

I opened my eyes, not even realizing I’d closed them in the first place, and looked up at June.

Her thick, curly hair sat in two neat Dutch braids atop her head, her round-framed glasses perched on her nose.

“I’m doing great, how are you today, June?”

And though I was kidding, she winced.

“Sorry, time and place,” she said through a cringe.

I set the guitar back on its stand. “It’s fine,” I told her, getting to my feet to hug her. “I haven’t had much time to practice lately.”

She squeezed me tight before letting go, her eyes narrow with worry. “You just offered to work here so you could goof off and play guitar, didn’t you?” she teased, seeing the exhaustion in my eyes.

I smiled. “What? No,” I said defiantly. “I also did it for the piano and the drums.”

“You’re a menace,” June giggled. “Let’s get you settled, yeah?”

“You sure you’re okay to close up alone tonight?”

“Yes, for the hundredth time, Vee,” I groaned, struggling to hide my exhaustion from her. “Now go watch your kids’ recital!”

“You’re my star,” she said, blowing me a kiss and rushing off.

I watched her go, waving each time she turned back to make sure I hadn’t collapsed.

“Okay, Frankie,” I said to myself in the echoing silence of the empty store. “Just two hours, you can do this.”

I cashed out the few registers, figuring that anyone coming to the store after seven at night would surely use a card. Or maybe it was my wishful thinking doing the heavy lifting.

Unfortunately, that task took less than ten minutes, and soon I was left with absolutely nothing to do. And over an hour and fifty minutes left on the clock. I groaned, resting my head in the cradle of my arms. My eyes burned with fatigue and I squeezed them shut, trying to fight off the burn after keeping them open for so long.

“Frankie?”

I jumped a little at the sound of someone very close to me, lifting my head to find Hayden watching me closely.

“What are you still doing here?” she asked, brow furrowed. “It’s after ten.”

“What?” I mumbled, squinting at the time on my phone. “No, it’s- oh, fuck. I fell asleep.”

I dropped my face into my hands, embarrassed and tired to my very bones. I braced myself for Hayden’s lecture.

But it didn’t come.

Cautiously, I lifted my head and looked at her.

“I’m really sorry,” I blurted before she could say anything. “This was a one-time fluke, and completely my fault. It won’t happen again.”

She stared at me for a long moment, her wine-stained lips parted just a little. “Are you okay, Frankie?”

My spine stiffened and I sat up straight, my hands folded in my lap. I tried not to look at her for too long; her forest green eyes did enough to derail my train of thought alone.

“I’m fine,” I said, bobbing my head like I was trying to convince myself.

She didn’t look convinced. “I know we haven’t exactly known each other long,” she said, leaning forward against the other side of the counter and, subsequently, to me. “But I know you’re not one to slack off. Are you sure nothing is on your mind?”

For the first time since she’d been revealed as the new owner of Ivey’s, I softened a little at the concern in her voice. It was sincere. There was nothing else behind. This was the Hayden who saved me from a bad date, who’d captured me right from the start.

My chest warmed and I nodded, unable to smother the smile playing on my lips. “I’m good,” I said softly, and the weight of my mom’s health, juggling two jobs, and everything else loosened its grip. Just for a moment. “Just feeling the effects of Vee’s ‘no caffeine on Wednesdays policy.’”

Hayden shrugged but I saw the delicate bob of her throat.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or the fact that it was just us in the store, but I let my eyes roam. Down her throat, over her clavicle and jade green silk blouse.

I lifted my gaze to hers again and found her eyes just as hungry as my own, though we both said nothing about it.

I smiled a little. “Thanks for asking.”

Chapter Twelve

Ignorance is Bliss

Hayden

I stared out the window of my car, watching the little water droplets slide down the glass. They slid slowly, stopping here and there to join together before continuing down to the very bottom.

I always hated the rain.

“Mi amore?”

I hummed in response, not bothering to turn around in my seat. Vinny sat beside me, the privacy visor separating us from Kelly, my driver, closed.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Vinny asked, something a little heavier in his words.

I forced a smile and turned to him, reaching out to squeeze his hand where it lay between us on the seat. “I just have a ton on my mind,” I told him, hoping my voice sounded less tired to him. “That’s why I need something to take my mind off work for a bit.”

His concerned frown slowly stretched into a soft grin, his brow cocked in interest. “Ah, I’m to be yet another distraction,” he mused, his hand turning over to carefully thread his fingers through mine. I wished I felt the tiniest spark for it.

For him.

But if I was totally honest with myself, my time with Vinny was coming to an end.

So why was I clinging to him?

“If it’s not too much of an imposition,” I said coyly, sending him a smirk.

He lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug, those gorgeous dimples making him even more gorgeous somehow. “You know it’s a privilege to be your distraction.”

Distraction, I mused. The word rang hollow in my ears, the sound of it leaving a bad taste on my tongue just thinking about it.

“So,” he said, bringing the back of my hands to his lips for a chaste kiss. “Where are you wining and dining me tonight?”

“You’re being so cheeky today, Vinny,” I noted, but I didn’t mind. Somewhere along the way, we’d both decided that going out together wouldn’t change the nature of our agreement.

But Vinny had... expensive taste. As he should, being a model who was internationally in demand. I supposed it was fine with me.

The money I spent would be negligible.

“I bought that Michelin-star restaurant down on fifth,” I said with a shrug. “I thought it might be fun to have you try their Italian food. You’d know best if my investment was worth it.”

His eyes lit up and he burst into a rush of Italian, too fast for me to keep up.

Maybe I was just too tired to keep up.

He let me be after that, his nose almost pressed to his phone as he smashed out text after text to his friends.

We arrived at the restaurant not long after, and Vinny practically buzzed with excitement. I bit back a smile.

“Reservation for Jones, Hayden,” I told the maître d’ smoothly.

He glanced at his iPad before bowing us in.

We followed our waiter to the table while I lost myself in the delicate aromas wafting between the guests where they sat. The decor was minimal, tasteful yet undoubtedly exquisite.

“I didn’t know you bought Michelin-star restaurants,” Vinny murmured across the table, accepting the evening’s menu from our waiter.

I was surprised he remembered what I did at *all*.

“I’m not usually in the business of buying built-up brands,” I explained, glancing over the selection of dishes on the menu. “I prefer investing in smaller brands with a lot of potential and helping them grow.”

“Wouldn’t you make more money if you just bought the big brands that have all the bells and whistles?”

I smirked. “You’re not the first to ask me that.” I sighed. “And I doubt you’ll be the last. The answer is: I already have money. I’ve already built my empire. I’m in a unique position to help others realize that dream.”

“For a price,” he cut in.

I nodded, smiling sadly. “Everyone has a price.”

He frowned in concession. “It sounds so brutal,” he said, his vibrant eyes a little dim.

“It’s just business,” I told him. “Everyone needs money.”

“I think you’re a really good person,” he said suddenly and I blinked in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

He waved his hand around as if he could pull the words he was looking for from the air.

“You often talk like you’re this cold-hearted tycoon who only cares about making business deals,” he explained, and something in my gut twisted in discomfort. “But you’re just trying to help people. I think that’s wonderful.”

A breathless laugh slipped through my lips and I shook my head. “You’re *so* full of it today,” I accused lightheartedly, hoping he couldn’t hear the fractures in my heart splintering.

“Hey! I’m trying to be sincere here.” He chuckled, flashing me those perfect white teeth. “Could you just be open to

compliments for once?”

In the split second after he spoke I saw the glimmer of mischief in his eyes and I leaned forward, grateful for the distraction he offered.

“Oh, if you want to compliment me, there are *ways* to do it, sweetheart,” I crooned, dragging the tip of my nail over the back of his palm on the table.

“Right now?” he asked, waggling his brows like a cliché villain.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. “No, we need to set a good example for the staff here.”

“Bummer.”

“So, are we going to talk about the very obvious Dior purse in Vinny’s most recent selfie online, or...?”

I narrowed my eyes at Alex, sitting across from me, innocently twirling the end of her fiery ponytail between her fingers. She leveled a knowing look at me, her brow arched.

“Stop looking so smug,” I grouched, flipping the end of my braid off my shoulder. “We go out sometimes, what does it matter?”

“I didn’t say it mattered.” She frowned nonchalantly, winking at Cameron beside me. “I just wanted to know which season the purse is from. It’s to die for.”

“You’re full of shit, Alex.” I sniffed, grabbing my glass and taking a sip to give myself something to do.

Vinny had spent the night last night, and our tumble in the sheets before work had done nothing to ease the twist knotting my gut. I tried not to think about it.

“Alex just loves poking her nose into other people’s business,” Reid teased, waving Alex’s reproachful glare off. “You know her.”

I only hummed, hoping the conversation would change. Usually, I’d be the one to change it, forging ahead with another topic. I had no energy for it.

Cameron must have sensed my exhaustion because she cleared her throat delicately.

“Alex, we’re supposed to meet for the new Pierce Tech building later,” Cameron noted, dropping her chin into the palm of her hand. “Did your assistant give you the details?”

Alex took a sip of her drink through her straw and nodded in response. “She mentioned it this morning after your legal team confirmed it. But I haven’t had a chance to look at the proposed schematics yet.”

Cameron waved her off. “It’s not a huge renovation but it definitely needs your expertise.”

They fell into their own conversation and I let my thoughts drift for a while, aimlessly stirring my drink.

I didn’t really want to talk about Vinny’s post; he’d begged me to let him post it because he loved the restaurant, and I

agreed because my face wasn't visible.

That familiar discomfort in my gut twisted again, and I pressed a hand to ease the sensation. I had to go back to the store after lunch, and the thought of seeing Frankie again tightened the knot in my stomach.

No, this is just business. Nothing more.

I wasn't losing my cool over Frankie.

"How are things going at the store, Hayden?"

I swallowed the groan in my throat and looked at Reid. "It's a pain," I said a little belligerently. "But it has so much potential; I can't bear to see it go unused."

"Is it because of that woman?" Taylor chimed in, her eyes bright. "Frankie?"

"Neither of you is funny," I deadpanned and picked up my fork. I stabbed at the crisp lettuce on my plate, refusing to entertain either of them.

"Come on, Hayden," Taylor pleaded. "We're not teasing, we really want to know."

I sighed and looked back at my two friends. Their faces held very little of the sincerity Taylor had claimed, but I knew they wouldn't stop until I said something.

"If you absolutely have to know," I said, relenting, my attention on my plate. "Then, yes, Frankie has made things very difficult."

"Ooh, sounds like I missed out big time."

Our heads collectively snapped to Elliot, who walked up behind Cameron's chair.

"You're back!"

I'd never heard Cameron sound so excited. Ever.

"I am," Elliot said, smiling down at Cameron, her eyes soft. She leaned down and pressed her lips to Cameron's and I huffed.

"I hope you're saving some attention for the rest of us," I teased.

Elliot's mouth stretched into a grin and she pulled away. But her hand found Cameron's.

"It's good to know you missed me so much," Elliot mused.

I rolled my eyes. "You're a breath of fresh air among the withered trees." I sighed dramatically.

"And, there she is," Alex chuckled. "Hayden can never stay mopey when Elliot is around."

Before I could say anything, Elliot's eyes fell on me again. "Mopey?"

"Oh, yeah," Reid offered, sucking on her teeth. "She's been a drag if you can believe it. All for a pretty little thing at the store she recently bought."

"Ivey's?" Elliot guessed. She frowned in concentration. "I remember you being hyped up about it. What happened?"

I buried my face in my hands, both out of frustration and embarrassment.

“We’ll leave out the sob story,” Reid explained, and I wished she’d have left out the *entire* story. “Long story short, Hayden has a thing for this girl who works at the store.”

“Okay, I don’t really see the problem...”

“The problem is Hayden’s obsession with casual relationships *and* keeping business relationships entirely professional. For better or worse.”

Elliot glanced back at Cameron, color blooming in her cheeks. “Good thing you liked me back.” She chuckled, and I wanted to groan out loud.

Cameron looked up at her girlfriend, starry-eyed and so in love that it sent a pang of want through me.

I’d wanted that once.

“It’s not like that.” I sighed, pressing the tips of my fingers into my temples. “She’s so averse to any changes I want to make to the store. It could be so big, and it could help so many people, but she’s holding onto her parents’ goals for the store like her life depends on it.”

“So her parents owned the store before you bought it?” Elliot asked.

“Yeah, they did.”

“I kind of understand why she’d be so against changing it, then,” Elliot admitted, and honestly? I did too. Maybe that’s what had gotten to me the most.

“Sentiment and business do not belong together,” I explained, but Elliot’s eyes studied me harder, as if she might find something else if she looked hard enough.

“You know, for someone who totes around young men like a Chanel purse, you’re pretty boring in other aspects of your life.”

Safe, I wanted to tell Reid. I was safe, and so was my heart.

But I didn’t respond.

Chapter Thirteen

A Peace Offering... Sort Of

Frankie

“Joe, could you give me a hand, please?” I called from the loading bay.

The latest delivery had finally arrived, but I’d bitten off more than I could chew when I offered to handle it alone.

The men in the truck had off-loaded crate after crate, and I’d caved the second they started on the seventh one.

Joe huffed as he jogged towards me. “Cold room?” he asked, and I nodded in thanks.

“Sign here, please,” one of the men said gruffly, handing me a clipboard and pen. I signed for the delivery and he marched off, hopping into the truck and driving off without another word.

“They’re new,” Joe noted.

“Yeah, I think they’re Phil’s son’s friends,” I mumbled, preoccupied with how we were going to get the crates inside and out of the heat before they spoiled. “Okay, let’s get the fruits and veggies out of the heat,” I suggested. “The meat is

stored in the sealed coolers so it should be fine but the greens will spoil faster.”

“Aye aye, cap,” Joe said, rolling up the sleeve of his plaid shirt.

It took the better part of fifteen minutes and no less than six trips between the loading bay out back and the cold room. But we finally closed both doors, sweat sticking to our foreheads.

“Thanks,” I huffed, trying to slow my breathing. God, I was unfit.

Joe wasn’t huffing and puffing though, and he nodded in response before he disappeared into the back.

“Iced coffee?” Vanessa offered, sliding one across the counter to me as I approached.

“You’re literally the best,” I breathed, hopping onto one of the stools and taking a long, icy sip. “It tastes like *heaven*, thank you.”

Vanessa smiled and brushed it off, turning back to her coffee machine.

“How’s your mom doing?”

“Pretty much the same.” I sighed, fidgeting with the straw between my thumb and forefinger. “The doctor says she’s not likely to make progress very quickly but he’s confident she’ll get there.”

“At least that’s some good news,” she said gently. “I know it’s hard, but your mom is as strong as an ox. She’ll get

through this.”

Vanessa said it with so much confidence that I believed her, and I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed someone to tell me that.

“Thanks, Vee.”

Vanessa smiled at me for a moment. “Now, how are things between you and the boss?”

“Vanessa,” I groaned, dragging out the last syllable of her name in protest. “Can’t I just enjoy my wonderful iced coffee in peace?”

“Consider this payment,” she said with a wink.

I grumbled under my breath.

“Frankie?”

Saved by the bell. I turned around, so relieved at my escape that I hadn’t recognized the voice. I came face to face with Hayden.

Wrong bell.

“Hi,” I said, fumbling for my composure.

She smiled at me before looking at Vanessa. “Morning, Vanessa,” she said, her voice smooth and soft. Deadly, somehow.

Maybe I was overthinking it.

“Mornin’, Hayden.”

She turned back to me, those piercing eyes pinning me to the spot. “Are you free for lunch?” she asked, and I almost choked on my own spit.

I definitely wasn’t overthinking anything, not when her voice was an echo of pleasure and I bit the inside of my cheek *hard*.

“Lunch?” I repeated, my gaze snagging on the deep ruby dress she wore. “Today?”

“Yeah.”

I stared at her for a moment, a little blank.

I’d promised June I’d put in an extra shift during my lunch break, but I couldn’t let Hayden know that. I couldn’t help but wonder how suspicious it would be if I turned her down.

“Yeah, I’m free,” I forced out, making a mental note to text June *and* buy her takeout from her favorite place to make up for it.

“Fantastic,” Hayden said, her plush lips widening into a smile. “I’ll text you the location. See you at one!”

She waved at Vanessa and left, and I heard her calling out farewells to the rest of the team before the door swung shut.

The silence in the store pressed in on me, growing and threatening to burst until-

“So, it’s a date.”

“*Vanessa!*” I hissed. But she’d already whisked off to gossip with Joe.

I stared up at the restaurant, my jaw clenched tight. It was the restaurant we'd met at, the same one she'd saved me in. Was this a joke? I glanced around at the bustling sidewalk, wondering if there was a secret camera crew filming me.

I reread the text that Hayden sent, double-checked that the pin she'd sent led right there, and sighed. I supposed I shouldn't keep my boss waiting.

I took a deep breath and anxiously fidgeted with my hair as I walked in; I was *not* dressed for the occasion.

The restaurant was just as beautiful as I remembered, if not more in the light of day. While the lights had been dimmed for the night, the thick, dark drapes had been thrown open to let in the summer sun. The light bounced off at least a hundred crystal chandeliers, refracting and bending once it reached the marble floor.

With little effort, a waiter led me to a table where Hayden was already waiting, her back to me.

I swallowed the rush of anxiety. Her dark curls sat in a pristine bun at the top of her head, exposing the smooth column of her neck. She'd removed her jacket, which now lay draped over the back of her chair.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, forcing a smile. I rounded the table and she looked up from her phone, a radiant smile brightening her face.

My heart stuttered for just a moment.

“No problem,” she said, locking her phone and slipping it into her purse. “Everything okay at the store?”

“Oh, yeah, uh,” I floundered for an excuse, not sure why I even *needed* one in the first place. “Crazy traffic.”

Hayden’s smile softened like she knew I was lying but chose to ignore it. “Glad you made it here,” she said instead, her voice just as soft as her smile. I’d have been lying if I said it didn’t send a shiver down my spine.

“So, what’s this all about?” I asked, hoping she’d stop looking at me for just a second so I could catch my breath.

“I thought we could just hang out,” she said simply, her eyes still on me. “I know we don’t really get along, so I hoped that bringing you to one of my restaurants would help put your mind at ease.”

My mind blanked.

“This is- wait, you *own* this restaurant?” I gaped.

She nodded like it wasn’t anything special. “I bought it about ten years ago,” she explained, leaning her elbows on the table. My eyes dropped to her bare shoulders for a millisecond before I wrenched them away. “It was the first family restaurant I bought.”

I glanced around pointedly. “*This* was a family restaurant?” I asked, unable to keep the disbelief from my voice.

“It still is.”

I frowned in confusion and she relented. “They all still work here,” she said, nodding at a few of the people in uniform. “The woman who owned it has since retired, but her kids run it on my behalf and their kids work here as well. Once they’re old enough, of course. Just as she intended.”

I hummed, deep in thought. “What was the restaurant like before you bought it?” I ventured, praying she wouldn’t see the poorly veiled question for what it really was.

Her smile told me she saw right through me. “Apart from a few decor changes and a menu overhaul, it was exactly the same as it is now.”

She slid the menu toward me on the table, her perfectly manicured fingers graceful as she pulled away. “Order whatever you like,” she told me, lifting her own menu.

I picked it up and opened the soft leather cover.

I was greeted with something I’d never seen in all my time going out to eat.

“Are these...?” I paused, bringing the menu closer in case I *was* misreading. “This is a menu of allergy-friendly food.”

Hayden glanced at me before going back to her menu. “That was the menu overhaul,” she said, flipping to the next page. “The restaurant had already begun catering to people who suffered from food allergies. All I did was expand on that.”

“Why?”

“Because, Frankie,” she said, my name like honey on her tongue. She leaned forward as if she was sharing a secret and,

mirroring, I leaned forward too. “I believe that people should be able to eat wherever they go, regardless of their dietary preferences and requirements.”

For a brief, fluttering moment, I remembered what she’d been like the night she chased my date off. Charming, seductive, effortlessly funny, and dangerously intelligent. I never imagined she’d be compassionate enough to build an empire around food allergies.

Reluctantly, I began to look at her in a different light.

“Do you have a food allergy?”

She chuckled softly, the sound settling somewhere low in my gut. “No, but a dear friend of mine suffered from allergies.”

“Are all the restaurants you own like this one?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“A lot of my initial investments were purely made for capital gain,” she explained through a smirk. “I couldn’t really change the culinary world without money, could I?”

I guessed not.

“So, that’s why my parents’ store interested you,” I deduced, a little slow on the uptake. But she smiled, and I willed the blood to stop from rushing to my face.

“Precisely,” she crooned, and I hid my bare arms under the table, trying to rub the goose flesh away. “Your parents were pioneers and have amassed a great deal of loyalty. They filled

a need that many people relate to, and that's something that has an infinite amount of potential.”

I understood, albeit reluctantly, but it still wouldn't sway me. I opened my mouth to reply but she beat me to it, perhaps seeing the defiance in my eyes.

“But today isn't about business,” she purred and, God *damn* her for it. I squeezed my knees together. “Today is just lunch.”

‘Lunch’ turned out to be Hayden asking me questions while I offered up stiff, monosyllabic answers.

I left a little while later after Hayden was called away to work, and I was...

Conflicted.

I finished my shift at the store in a daze. My mind was trying to fit the different sides of Hayden together like a puzzle but they wouldn't fit.

By the time I got home my feet dragged across the threshold, exhausted. I flopped down face-first on my sofa, my face squished in the colorful throw pillow Mom had gifted me when I moved in.

My eyelids grew heavier but my phone buzzed in my back pocket, interrupting my well-deserved nap. Without getting up, I fished it out and answered it without looking at the Caller ID.

“Hello,” I mumbled, stifling a yawn.

“You sound like shit, you okay?” Nikkie asked, sounding concerned.

“Fine.” I sighed. I pushed off the pillow and sat up, kicking my shoes off. “Just super tired. How’s your trip going?”

“It’s amazing,” she gushed. “Malta was so beautiful and we’re heading to Sicily tomorrow so I thought I’d call before I left. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just this new boss,” I admitted.

She grumbled something unintelligible and sighed. “Is she still giving you hell?”

“I don’t even know what to call it,” I murmured, staring at a spot on the floor in front of me. “I feel confused but I don’t wanna talk about it right now; my head might explode.”

“Give her hell, Frankie,” Nikkie said. “And tell your mom I said hi, love you, and feel better.”

I chuckled.

“Come home soon.” I pouted. “I miss my best friend.”

Chapter Fourteen

A Professional Courtesy

Hayden

“Did you enjoy lunch?”

I glanced up at Marina as she walked, carrying our coffees in her hands. She shuffled forward, careful not to spill any of it before she reached my desk.

“Lunch?” I asked blankly, my thoughts preoccupied.

“Yeah, you said you had an important lunch meeting yesterday and you didn’t come back to the office,” she mused, settling my coffee down on my coaster. “I’m guessing it went well?”

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing my coffee for a sip. “And I actually don’t know if it went well or not. I suppose it remains to be seen.”

“Was Frankie surprised?”

My eyes snapped up to hers and she smiled a little guiltily.

“I made the reservation,” she explained with a little shrug. “I guessed it was Frankie from the new store.”

“Right, I forgot about that.” I chuckled. “She was surprised. I hope she feels a little more at ease with me around.”

“I’m sorry if this is forward, but was she not happy with you taking over the store?”

I laughed for real that time. “No. God, no,” I said. “She was pissed that her parents sold the place; imagine how she felt when I walked in.”

“I don’t really get it,” Marina admitted, folding her hands behind her back. “It’s not like you’ve replaced the staff and cleared out the store. Why is she so resistant?”

I didn’t want to say that it might have something to do with me. I didn’t want that to be the reality of our relationship.

“I guess she grew up in the store and she’s afraid of losing that.” I sighed. “I don’t know much about her home life or how she is with her family, but I know that she protects them fearlessly. I want to respect that, at least.”

“You’re the owner,” Marina reminded me, and I nodded. “So, in theory, you could do whatever you wanted regardless of her resistance, no?”

“In, theory, yes,” I told her. “In practice, it’s not that simple. I only just bought the place and inciting that kind of negativity is the wrong way to go about it. I want them to know they can trust me to take care of things. I want her to trust me.”

I didn’t let my mind wander too far from the implications of my statement. It was just professional courtesy.

“I understand that,” Marina said, pressing her lips into a thin line. “It’s just- you seem put out about it.”

“Of course I am,” I agreed. “Business is never easy but it’s made all the more difficult when there’s so much resistance. I don’t want it to slow the progress of the store down.”

Nice save, Hayden.

“And why that store in particular?”

“Because the family aspect of it is the gem.” I sighed. “Their entire business was founded on the basis of helping their daughter with her food allergies, and they’ve been successful ever since. It’s a powerful angle because everyone wants to feel like they have a family, whether by birth or found. In a society that dismisses food allergies that are often fatal, that’s something money can’t buy.”

Before Marina could answer her phone buzzed and she quickly excused herself to answer it. Her voice echoed through the open door and she was back seconds later.

“Ms. Voss is on her way up to see you,” she said. “I’ll go get drinks ready.”

I grumbled an assent and sat back in my seat, not looking forward to whatever Reid was there to grill me about.

I had my suspicions already.

A few moments later, Reid walked in, her pixie cut styled in edgy waves as usual.

“Good morning, my friend,” she said smoothly, dropping her purse onto the sofa and collapsing on it. She stretched her long legs out, the lace of her black bralette faintly visible through her sheer black blouse.

Effortlessly chic.

“Is this how Cameron feels when I barge into her office for nothing?” I chuckled.

“I believe the correct way to reply is: Good morning, Reid. How are you?”

“How are you, Reid?”

“Splendid, thanks,” she said with a wink. “I wanted to check on you, see how you were doing.”

My spine stiffened and I sat up a little straighter. I didn’t want her to worry for no reason.

“I’m okay,” I told her as sincerely as I could manage. She raised a disbelieving brow. “Really. I’m just sorting through some stuff.”

“You’ve sorted through stuff before but it’s never gotten to you this much,” she pointed out, and I silently agreed. “You know you can talk about it, right? I won’t drag you over the coals for it.”

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly with a nod. “I know, it’s just I’m not a hundred percent sure what it is just yet.”

“Maybe talking about it will help you get there,” she said, patting the spot on the sofa beside her. I leveled a heatless glare at her, but she only patted the sofa harder.

“Fine.” I groaned, only a little exasperated because, in truth, I was always happy to see my friends.

I got up from my seat and walked toward the sofa. As soon as I was within arm’s length, Reid grabbed my hand and yanked me down beside her.

“Excellent,” she said, smiling wide. “I can’t stand to see you so wrapped up in your thoughts.”

I laughed and allowed her to pull me into a tight hug.

“Now, what’s on your mind and how do I get my Hayden back?”

“It’s the store,” I admitted, tucking a few curls behind my ear. I leaned back on the sofa, draping an arm along the back and crossing one leg over the other. Reid turned to me, her knees bent beneath her. “I’ve never hit such a wall before and it’s affected me a lot more than I expected.”

“What kind of wall?” Reid asked carefully.

“The immovable kind,” I mumbled. “It’s such a unique store, and with a few tweaks it could be huge. But Frankie doesn’t want that at all. It’s making everything incredibly difficult.”

“Hayden,” Reid said flatly, “be honest with me. It’s more than that, isn’t it? It’s not just her aversion to change.”

“Why can’t it *just* be that?” I argued, my gut twisting in response.

“Because I *know* you, obviously,” Reid answered. “And you’ve dealt with egotistical megalomaniacs in the past and it never got to you.”

“Frankie isn’t an egotistical megalomaniac,” I countered and glanced away. “That’s the problem. She’s just trying to protect her parents’ store, even if it is a little misguided.”

“And she’s hot.”

“And she’s hot- Reid!” I snapped, covering my eyes with a hand.

Reid giggled beside me, her hand warm on my knee. “I’m so sorry, Hayden,” she said. “I couldn’t help it. Plus, now that it’s out in the open it’ll be easier.”

“How is it going to be easier?”

“You’ve at least acknowledged that you’re attracted to her,” Reid explained as if it was the simplest thing in the world. “Now you can do something about it so you can get back to business.”

“What the fuck do you mean ‘do something about it’?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, please,” she drawled. “I only meant that you should use this as an opportunity to work out those emotions you’ve kept locked up so tight.”

“Reid, she’s an employee,” I reminded her needlessly. “I’ve never let my business and my personal life overlap. I won’t

start now.”

“I’m not asking you to do that,” Reid said calmly. “All I’m asking is that you stop treating this poor girl like Nat. They’re not the same, and Frankie deserves better than to be compared to someone she doesn’t even know.”

“I know, ugh,” I groaned. I buried my face in my hands, the weight of the truth pressing down on me. “I know she doesn’t deserve it and that’s not what I’m trying to do, okay?”

“Then what are you trying to do?”

“I want to make this store a success,” I said. “I want to prove that it *can* be a success without having to be stripped of its individuality. But it does need to change in order for that to happen.”

“Then why is it so important to you that she complies with everything?”

“It’s professional courtesy,” I insisted, hating the lie that leaped off my tongue. “I couldn’t imagine how I’d feel if someone bought H Corp and came in to turn everything I’d worked for on its head. Besides, as I told Marina, the real gem of that store is the family aspect. If I change that, their customers won’t be happy.”

“A professional courtesy,” Reid echoed, chewing the words over. “Tell me, is she somehow immune to the infamous Jones’ charm?”

“Could you stop?”

“Aha!” Reid cackled gleefully. “Oh my God, she really is! You have no effect on her and it’s eating away at you. Oh, this explains *so much*.”

“What a wonderful friend you’re being right now,” I groused, but Reid only laughed harder.

She pressed a hand over her mouth, trying and failing to smother the giggles bubbling up her throat. “I’m sorry,” she said, still stifling her chuckles. “It’s just that I never thought we’d get here. You have everyone wrapped around your finger in minutes. But this one pretty store manager has you stumped.”

“Yes, fine, she has me stumped. And I’m not happy about it.”

I hated to admit it, but there was no point in fighting this tiny particle of truth.

It was so much better than acknowledging the deeper aspect of it all.

“So, what?” she prompted. “You’re going to leave it at that? Come on, the Hayden I know would salivate at the challenge of it! Put on a pair of big girl pants and woo her already.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that slipped through my teeth. “You’re so full of it,” I told her. “I didn’t know I needed the pep talk but thank you for forcing it on me anyway.”

“Always.” She winked. “I know Cam is your best friend, but I’m also here for you. Alex and Taylor too but they’re out of town on business. So you’re stuck with me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

A soft knock signaled Marina’s return, and she carried in two iced coffees despite the cappuccino cooling on my desk.

“You and Sophie are godsend,” Reid said. “I wouldn’t function without you two.”

Marina smiled.

“I still have a lot to learn,” she said shyly. “Sophie is the queen of organization I could only dream of being.”

“You’re excellent as you are,” I cut in, and Marina’s cheeks turned pink.

“Thank you.”

She scurried out, leaving Reid to glare at me.

“What?”

“Your rizz is still in full force, I don’t get how she stays sane around you.”

“Excuse me?” I blinked. “Rizz? What the hell is that?”

“Your flirting skill or whatever,” she explained and I couldn’t help but snort in amusement. “Who taught you that?”

“The young ones in the concept art department.” She chuckled. “I learn something new every time I’m down there for a meeting.”

“Rizz,” I repeated, scoffing quietly. “Whatever it is, I don’t understand it either. She puts me on edge whenever she’s around me. I feel like she’s constantly peering into my soul.”

“Is that so?”

I tried to ignore the shit-eating grin spreading on Reid’s face.

“Yeah, I feel like I have to know why she’s so unaffected by me.”

“Oh, you’ve got it so bad.”

Chapter Fifteen

A Rock and a Hard Place

Frankie

I chuckled to myself, watching the group of kids sitting around me whack away at the guitars they held. I no longer felt sorry for the guitars themselves, not since June told me they were all old stock and wouldn't be used anyway.

“Okay,” I called, getting their attention again. They all turned their doe eyes on me. “Who can tell me where the frets are?”

At once, more than ten hands shot into the air, excited squeals echoing in the small space. I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips.

“Nina?”

“Here!” Nina said, her small palm tapping the neck of the guitar. The instrument was so big that only a part of the neck lay over her lap, the rest on the floor beside her.

“Very good!” I said. “And where are the strings?”

More hands shot up, and I pointed to a smaller boy sitting near the back.

“Yes, Tye?”

“They’re over here,” he said a little quietly, his fingers clumsily strumming over the strings.

“Excellent!”

One of the kids jumped to her feet, letting her guitar clatter to the floor.

Okay, I winced a little at that.

“Can we play the drums next?” Adina asked.

I set my guitar down and looked back at her. “We can,” I told her. “As long as everyone else wants to play as well.”

The kids let out a collective ‘whoop’ and jumped to their feet.

They were about to sprint to the drum sets before I called out, “Hold on! What do we do with our instruments when we’re done with them?”

The kids rushed back, each of them picking up their instrument and leaning it against the padded wall behind me.

“Sorry, Miss Frankie,” they all chorused. I followed them to the drum sets in the adjacent space.

With a sigh, I mentally prepared myself for a killer headache.

I wiped down one of the guitars on the display stand, grateful for the air conditioning that blasted down the back of my neck.

The music store was unusually busy after the kids' class, which meant I'd spent the better part of my shift helping customers find the right instruments.

It also meant I'd been on my feet for four solid hours.

"Don't you want to sit down for a bit?" June asked from behind me, her arms folded across her chest. Her curls had been tamed into twin space buns atop her head, her round frames perched on her head as well.

I gave her a close-lipped smile and shook my head. "I'm kinda used to standing all day," I said, turning back to the guitar I was cleaning. "I've always worked on my feet, it helps keep my mind awake."

June laughed and grabbed a stool to sit on, groaning as her joints popped. "Well, I'm just old then," she joked. She gulped down a bit of water from her water bottle. "I can't imagine having a full day of this."

"How are things going here otherwise?" I asked.

June lifted a shoulder. "Pretty much as always," she said, adjusting the buttons on her shirt. "The classes are filling up now that you're here, so that's been a pleasant surprise."

"Glad I could help." I smiled.

"What about back at Ivey's?" June asked. "How are things over there?"

My shoulders drooped and I sighed. "They could be better," I admitted. "I think I'm just stressed out; it all feels like it's too much."

“I’m sorry.”

“Nah, I’ll be okay,” I assured her. “I’m probably overreacting. It’s not as bad as I make it out to be.”

A lie. But I didn’t want June to feel guilty for helping me out when I needed it.

“I doubt that. You’re usually the type to underplay just about everything.”

That was true, but I couldn’t bring myself to agree.

June must have noticed my reluctance and switched gears. “How’s your mom doing?” she asked instead.

I shook the cloth out and threw it onto my shoulder. “I’m going to see her later today,” I said, chewing the inside of my cheek. “Dad has been a little out of it since he can’t stay by her side all day and all night.”

“I can’t imagine how hard that must be,” June mused, a deep frown marring her face. “I saw him in the cafeteria when I went to pick up my medication. He looked tired. I’ll come and visit soon, I promise.”

“That’s okay. I know you have tons on your plate and she knows that too.”

“Yeah, but I still should have gone to see her by now.” June frowned. “I’ll come with you this weekend, is that okay?”

“Of course,” I said. “She’ll be so happy.”

June was quiet for a long moment, gnawing on her bottom lip in thought. “Hey,” she said, and I turned to her. “When’s

the last time you played?”

I frowned at her, my brows furrowed in confusion. “Today,” I reminded her. “With the kids.”

She shook her head in irritation. “Not like that. I meant for real. When was the last time you picked something up and just played for the fun of it.”

I thought about it and realized I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even tuned my guitar at home.

“I thought so.” She sighed, correctly interpreting my silence. “If you ever have a break and want to play, you can come here. Everything is tuned and you know your way around.”

My chest squeezed tightly. “That’s great, June,” I said. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I didn’t have the time to think about music anymore. “I appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

Jude rolled her eyes playfully and stood up. “You’re doing a hell of a lot for me too.”

“How is she doing?”

Dad glanced back into the ward where Mom was having yet another check up.

“The doctors are keeping her under close supervision,” he said, his shoulders rounded with exhaustion. His cheeks

hollowed, probably worse than the last time I'd seen him. And his eyes had lost that warm sparkle I'd grown up with.

“That doesn't tell me anything about her situation.” The anxiety coiled around my gut had become a familiar weight inside me, but it didn't make it any easier to see Mom stuck in the hospital.

“I know, poppet,” he said sadly. His hand rubbed comforting circles on my back and the guilt smothered me.

I was supposed to be looking after them. I didn't want Dad to worry about me when it was all he could do to remember to eat. I grabbed his hand and led him back to the plastic-covered chairs. They squawked as we sat down, the plastic dragging along our clothes.

“I know you and Mom always tried to shield me from stuff like this, but...” I paused, wondering if it was the best time to bring it up. But if I didn't, how would I be able to help? “What is her hospital bill looking like?”

His eyes shuttered and he leaned back in his seat with a tired sigh.

“Dad, please let me help,” I pleaded, squeezing his forearm with both my hands. “I can help now and I wish you'd let me.”

“Frankie,” he said, his face drawn. He dragged out a sigh, rubbing his hand over his face. “As much as I want to keep you out of it, I know you've already been funneling money into your mother's account.”

I ducked my head, guilt heating the back of my neck like I'd been caught with my hands in the cookie jar.

“Yeah, you didn't think you could fool your old man, did you?” He chuckled drily. “I may not have eyes in the back of my head, but dads can sniff these things out, you know. It's why we're always sneezing.”

“Right, and that's why they're loud enough to wake the dead.” I snorted, happy that he was smiling at least. I could never imagine how difficult all of this was for him. Helping out with the bill was all I could do just then.

“Don't sass me, kiddo.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway,” he said, getting back to business, as he called it, “I also heard from June that you're working at her store. Is that right?”

“That little tattle tale,” I muttered under my breath. I sighed. “Yes, it's true. I wanted to do whatever I could to help. I hate seeing you guys struggle. You were talking about going back into the workforce and I just... I couldn't bear it.”

Dad smiled at me, his grin somber.

“You've always been such a good kid, you know,” he murmured, more to himself than me. “I wish it didn't have to come to this. We're your parents; we should be taking care of you.”

“But you *have*,” I insisted. “You always have, and it's okay to be taken care of for once. I promise you'll still be the

coolest dad in town.”

He patted my knee without a word, and the doctor finally came out, giving Dad a smile as he walked over.

He fell into conversation with him but I slipped into the ward, eager to see Mom.

I froze at the door, my eyes widening a little.

“You’re standing!” I gasped, rushing over to help the nurse.

Mom’s laugh was a wheeze, her breathing shallow. “You’re here almost as much as your father,” she scolded, accepting my hand nonetheless. “Don’t you want to hang out with friends instead of coming to see me in this boring place?”

“My friends are all promising me to come visit you,” I countered, helping her take small steps around her bed. “Soon, we’ll end up having drinks here. Maybe the nurses will come and dance with us.”

Mom’s nurse, Delilah, smirked. “We’d put y’all to shame,” she teased.

“It’s a competition, then.” I laughed.

We helped Mom back on the bed, and the nurse disappeared.

“How are things going at the store?” she asked, and I deflated.

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “Hayden is so intriguing; she has this dream to make it easy for people to eat wherever they want to without worrying about allergies and preferences.”

“That’s a good thing!” she exclaimed, the light in her eyes twinkling defiantly. “So, are you two seeing eye to eye?”

“Absolutely not.”

I heard her sigh.

“Why not, Frankie?”

“Our store has been doing that for years already,” I argued. “Why does it have to change to fit a mold that it already fits?”

“With that logic,” she countered, shifting into a seated position, “there wouldn’t be many changes at all.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Ivey’s is the blueprint. Why change something that already works perfectly?”

“To grow,” Mom said emphatically. “So that we can help more people. That’s the dream, honey. Helping people.”

“We’ve achieved the dream,” I said, but my words lacked the strength I’d had earlier. I didn’t want to argue with her. I didn’t want her to worry about anything. “And I’ll make sure it stays that way.”

Mom pursed her lips at me. “Don’t limit yourself when you still have so much left to experience,” she said seriously. “There’s so much out there; don’t tie yourself to a fleeting dream.”

Chapter Sixteen

Unexpected But Not Unpleasant

Hayden

I glared at my reflection in the mirror for what might have been the twelfth time in the last ten minutes. I fidgeted with my hair until the curls turned loose and wavy, but I didn't really care about that.

I turned my attention back to my phone, at the green dial button under the number.

I'd decided to tell Frankie about the changes I wanted to make to the store. And I was going to pull out all the stops. But I had to call her first.

My thumb hovered over her phone number, my bottom lip between my teeth in apprehension. What if she ignored my call? Did she even have my number saved? God, what if she'd blocked me?

Focus, Hayden, I told myself, shaking off the sudden insecurity.

I was a business mogul, with over a hundred companies under my belt. I'd faced down the most arrogant and

narcissistic people and won them over every time.

So, why did Frankie scare me so much?

“Fuck,” I breathed, my throat burning with frustration. Without allowing myself a chance to second guess my decision, I pressed the dial button and held my phone up to my ear.

The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

It rang until I was ready to launch the damn thing clear across the room. But the dial tone cut and Frankie’s voice echoed down the line.

“Hey, sorry just a sec,” she said, her voice strained. I resisted the urge to drop the phone like it had branded me. “I just, ugh... Joe! Could you come take a look at the generator please?”

I waited for her to finish whatever it was she was doing, my fingers tapping an anxious rhythm into the top of my kitchen counter.

“Whew, sorry about that,” she said, a little out of breath.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, brow creased.

“Yeah, just the generator that seems to have a thing for Joe and not for me.” She chuckled drily. I savored the levity in her voice. I’d gotten so used to her sharp and edged tone that I’d almost forgotten how intoxicating she sounded. “It decided to

give up on me and only Joe knows how to get the damn thing started again.”

“If we need to replace the generator then that can be arranged,” I offered, unconsciously slipping into what Marina called ‘business mode’. “We can add it to the budget and have it all sorted by tomorrow.”

“God, no,” she said quickly. “It’s something we always do. I think Joe enjoys being handy.”

“Very well,” I conceded, pulling my notebook out and making a note to add the generator into the budget anyway.

Just in case.

“So, what did you call for?”

My throat dried up and I coughed to clear it. “I was hoping you had time for lunch again today,” I said, trying my best to sound neutral. I didn’t want her to think I was using these lunches to persuade her.

Even though that’s exactly what I hoped would happen.

“Oh,” she said softly. She hummed, the chatter of the store around her filtering through the speaker. “I can ask someone to cover for me.”

I let out a breath, unable to keep from smiling at the slight flutter in her voice. “Perfect,” I crooned into the phone. “I’ll text you the location.”

“Okay,” she said, a little breathless. My stomach flipped.

“And Frankie?” I said, stopping her before she hung up.

“Yeah?”

“Wear something pretty.”

I hung up before the cringe caught up with me. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed to whatever higher power was listening that Frankie hadn't laughed the second I hung up.

God, what was *wrong* with me?

I shook whatever it was off and turned back to the mirror, adjusting the waistband of my white palazzo pants. My black bralette, inspired by Reid, left an inch wide strip of skin exposed above the waistband of my pants.

I cocked my head, wondering what Frankie would see when she looked at me.

I clenched my jaw tight, unable to wrench my gaze away from Frankie as she descended the few steps that led to our table.

She'd pulled her fiery waves into a high ponytail, exposing her neck and collarbones. Her dress stopped just above her knee, tight from her chest to her hips.

My mouth turned very, very dry.

I reached for my glass, downing a gulp of water.

Her eyes met mine and she smirked, surprising me.

Little shit, I thought. She knew exactly what she was doing.

I had my work cut out for me.

The waiter pulled her chair out for her and she sat down, thanking him sweetly. She turned those glittering eyes on me, a brow cocked in interest.

And a challenge.

“What do you think?” she asked, all coy and innocent. “Is this what you had in mind?”

Not quite, I wanted to say. It was something I’d never expected her to wear. But I carefully composed my expression, burying any trace of emotion.

“I’d say so,” I said, letting my eyes travel the length of her bare arms. I watched as the hairs on her arms stood on end, and smirked.

I reached across the small table and dragged the tip of my index finger down her forearm, my own heart fluttering at the light touch.

“Cold?”

Her mask of indifference fractured just a little, and she stilled under my touch. I pulled back after a second too long and she quickly rubbed some warmth into her skin.

“Must be the air conditioning in here,” she said feebly, so at odds with the swagger with which she’d walked in.

“Shall I ask them to fix it?”

“No! Uh, I mean, no thanks. I’m fine.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

“Anyway,” she hedged, tucking her hands beneath the table to hide her arms. “Did you want to talk about something?”

I tilted my head, studying the delicate shape of her face. *How?* I wanted to ask. *How are you unaffected by me?*

A dangerous thought teetered at the very edge of my conscious, tempting and terrifying. Maybe Frankie just... wasn't interested in me.

I shook it off as quickly as it had settled, reminding myself that I had nothing to fear in that department. She'd worn something pretty, after all.

“Can't I just ask you to lunch because I want to see you?” I countered, watching her brows climb toward her hairline. Her freckles darkened as she flushed.

It was too easy to fluster her.

“You wanted things to stay professional,” she told me, and I frowned in consideration.

“I *am* being professional,” I said, the lie sitting like ash on my tongue. “I want to see my store manager. We don't exactly work side by side, unfortunately. So I have to rely on our time together... elsewhere.”

She visibly swallowed and glanced away. “So, you just want an update on the store?” she asked. Was that... disappointment tainting her voice?

“I want a lot of things,” I said truthfully, my eyes never leaving hers. She blinked. “But let's start with the simplest thing. Are you hungry?”

She stared at me for a solid second before nodding in silence.

The waiter took our order and vanished, and I turned back to Frankie.

“I’m glad you agreed to meet with me again,” I said quietly, resting my chin on my fist. “I’m guessing I have Vanessa to thank?”

“She only agreed to cover for me because it was you,” Frankie muttered, and her cheeks went pink. “B-because you’re the boss, obviously. So, it’s technically work.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Frankie frowned a little, a tiny dent forming between her brows. “But you said that-”

“We could be friends outside of our professional relationship,” I finished for her, though I knew that wasn’t what she’d meant to say. “Unless you’re feeling uncomfortable. I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” she said, and a small tightness in my chest loosened at that. “I’m just confused, I guess.”

“About what?”

“You,” she confessed and I went still. “I can’t get a good read on you. I think one thing and then you do the complete opposite. Like this lunch, I have no idea what your motive is.”

“I don’t have an agenda, if that’s what you mean.”

Her disbelief shone clear in her sharp eyes.

“The reason I wanted to meet you today,” I explained to her. “One of them, anyway, was to talk to you about franchising the store.”

Frankie’s eyes narrowed and I continued before she could shut me down.

“Hear me out, please,” I said, keeping her gaze on me. “It doesn’t have to be an immediate thing. It doesn’t even have to happen in the next year. But it *is* something I want to consider.”

“Franchising was never a part of my parents’ dream,” she argued, her tongue sharp and dripping venom. “I already told you I’m not interested in seeing the store turn into a faceless corporate giant.”

“I’m not trying to turn it into that at all. I just want to reach a wider customer base. By franchising the business we can go national, maybe even international.”

“And what happens to the flagship?” she demanded, sitting upright in her seat. She perched her elbows on the table and laced her fingers in front of her.

Blocking me off.

“What do you think is going to happen?” I asked, keeping my voice smooth. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” she snapped, and the lie was plain as day. “I just don’t want my parents’ hard work to

disappear under the face of a global company. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, actually,” I admitted. I let my mouth tug up into a half-smirk. “In fact, I have to say it’s very... admirable that you care so much.”

“They opened that store for me,” she huffed. “It’s my job to keep it going.”

“What about other kids?” I pressed, leaning forward to challenge. “Kids who live out of state or across the country, without a local Ivey’s to cater to their dietary needs?”

“Don’t try to guilt me into submitting,” she hissed. “If that’s what you were after, you could have opened your own chain of food-allergy-friendly stores!”

“True,” I agreed easily. “I could have bought an entire shopping mall and turned it into a haven for people like you.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because I didn’t want to.”

“That’s not a real answer,” she accused, her cheeks aflame. “You can build whatever you want, whenever and wherever you want. You said so yourself! So why are you trying to dismantle my *family’s* store?”

“I understand that you haven’t had much time to acclimate to the way I do business,” I began but she scoffed, cutting me off.

“Don’t you *dare* try to condescend to me,” she warned. “I might not have your business savvy, but I have a store that’s very precious to me, built by the people I love most. Business doesn’t trump everything.”

I wanted to retort, to fight back and argue that business trumped everything.

But I could only stare at her, at the delicate flare of her nostrils, her white knuckle grip on the edge of the table. Her heart-shaped mouth tightened defiantly, turning into a frown.

But she’d never been sexier.

I sat in utter disbelief, in awe of the woman in front of me, fighting tooth and nail to save her family business from the villain.

From me.

“If you’ve got nothing else to say,” she said curtly, tossing her napkin onto the table in a heap as she stood. “I’m leaving.”

She walked away and all the words I wanted to hurl after her turned to smoke and air.

I called Vinny that night.

We didn’t talk.

Chapter Seventeen

Letting Loose

Frankie

“FRANKIE~!”

Nikkie’s cry startled me and just about everyone around me. I craned my neck, searching the hordes of people coming through the arrivals lounge for my best friend.

I clapped eyes on her and could have cried.

We sprinted towards one another, all unintelligible squeals and sniffing, hanging onto each other for dear life.

Ignoring the group of disgruntled and tired onlookers, we babbled into each other’s hair until we let go.

“You’re so *tan!*” I whined, sniffing back an excited sob. “And your hair! You cut it!”

Nikkie turned this way and that, showing off every angle of her straight cut bob, her once waist length hair a distant memory.

“Do you like it?” she asked, her eyes imploring. “I ended up being a little more impulsive than I should have and cut it.”

I ran my hair through the soft, silkiness of her raven hair.

“It’s hideous, isn’t it?” she moaned.

“No, are you kidding?! It’s *gorgeous!*”

“You sure?”

“Yes, now hush and let me hug you.”

She giggled wetly into my hair. “It’s only been a couple weeks,” she sniffed, but she clung to me just as tightly. “Can we go see your mom?”

I scoffed and pulled away, wiping the tears from my face. “I knew you only liked me because of my mom,” I accused, and she whacked my arm lightly with the back of her hand.

“You know you’re my one and only, asshole,” she tutted.

I smiled to myself as we walked arm in arm out of the airport. I knew that.

“And there’s this gorgeous cathedral that we visited in Sicily,” Nikkie said, her tales a full-blown theatrical performance. She stood at the foot of Mom’s hospital bed, her arms waving around her body as she described her trip in excruciating detail.

Perhaps a little *too* much detail...

“And the tour guide was *so hot*, Auntie!” she complained. Dad coughed pointedly from his spot beside me and I

smothered my laughter. “He was married, obviously; they always are.”

At that, Dad perked up, a satisfied grin on his weary face.

Something in me settled while watching Nikkie entertain my parents. Familiarity, I realized.

We hadn’t spent time together in so long. With work, Mom’s health, and Nikkie’s wanderlust, at least one of us was never in the same country.

Mom laughed, her breaths a little short.

“Next time,” Nikkie said, taking Mom’s hand in hers, “we have to go as a family, okay? And you can’t get sick again to get out of it.”

“Deal,” Mom conceded, her eyes soft with fondness.

“Okay,” I announced, getting to my feet and patting Dad’s shoulder. “I’m going to take Nikkie home before she wakes the whole floor. I’ll see you guys tomorrow?”

“Can’t wait,” Dad said, squeezing my hand gently.

Nikkie and I left the hospital, and once we were in the safety of the car she turned quizzical eyes on me.

“So,” she prompted, her arms crossed. “You never told me what happened with that blind date I set you up on.”

“I didn’t?” I gaped. “To be fair, a lot has happened since then, but I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

I hadn’t really told her much of anything after she left for her trip. Apart from Mom’s medical crisis.

“Well, it’s a long way back to my place,” she huffed, getting comfortable in the passenger seat. “So spill.”

I did.

I told her all about the awful date she’d set me up on, about Hayden swooping in and saving me. I told her about Hayden buying the store and everything that had happened since. I artfully left out a few embarrassing moments, but other than that...

Truth.

Mostly.

“She sounds kind of rude,” Nikkie mused, frowning in thought.

My eyes widened and I snapped my head around with a glare. “She’s not *rude*,” I argued. “She’s just obsessed with business, I guess. I just wish she’d leave my parents’ store alone.”

Nikkie’s silence practically screamed her thoughts.

“Please don’t,” I whined, dropping my head back against the headrest in defeat. My please went unacknowledged.

“Oh no,” she purred. “I like what I’m hearing. You *suck* at keeping your crushes a secret. It’s like you’re incapable of even pretending you’re uninterested.”

“I don’t see why I should be persecuted for being honest about my feelings,” I countered.

“There is a big difference between being transparent and being honest,” she pointed out.

I flipped her the bird and refused to give her the satisfaction of an answer.

That amused her even more.

“I have to meet her,” she announced gleefully, likely already planning my nonexistent wedding. She always took so much pleasure in facilitating my love life.

“You will do no such thing,” I told her, praying my voice was firm enough. Truthfully, I couldn’t imagine anything worse than that.

My best friend meeting the woman I’d developed a crush on despite my best efforts to the contrary. I shuddered at the thought.

“You’re so dramatic,” Nikkie said, clicking her tongue in disappointment. “How bad could it be?”

“I don’t wanna let my imagination get that far,” I deadpanned.

“Wimp,” she teased. “Anyway, where do you want to go tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“We’re celebrating my return, duh,” she said, scrolling through her playlist. “It’s been ages since we went out, and I need to buy you a drink to apologize for that date.”

I instantly warmed up to the idea. “Yeah,” I chuckled. “You really do.”

The music blared through the bar speakers, the heavy bass reverberating through my limbs and shaking the stiffness loose.

The moment I stepped foot inside, some of the tension that had made its home on my shoulders evaporated. Bodies upon bodies lined the walls, moving like an ocean as we squeezed past. Nikkie’s hand was a vice around mine.

I usually ended up drifting too far and getting lost for most of the night.

I didn’t recognize the song but it didn’t stop me. I hopped along behind Nikkie happily.

She dragged us to the front of the line at the main bar, flashing the bartender a smile and yelling our order. I swayed to the beat of the music behind her, perfectly happy to let her take the lead when it came to interaction with people. It came naturally to her. She was beautiful and engaging, and she made friends as easily as she found lovers.

I’d always been a little jealous of her, wishing I could be as carefree.

It wasn’t until years into our friendship that I learned the price of her charity. Or the cost. So I stood behind her, jamming out to the music, stuck in my own world.

Her mouth was suddenly pressed to my ear and I strained to hear what she said.

“Let’s head up to VIP,” she yelled, and I nodded my assent. She handed me my drink and blew a kiss at the bartender.

After a little more bobbing and weaving, my drink clutched to my chest for fear of spilling it, we finally made it into the air conditioned VIP room.

We fell into the leather sofas, out of breath already.

“We’re getting too old for this.” I laughed, taking a long sip of my drink. It burned all the way down my throat, but the warmth that pooled in my stomach was worth it.

“Are you insane?” She chuckled. “I *live* for this. Tell me this isn’t always fun.”

“Only when we’re together,” I countered. “Otherwise I wander off and June gets mad.”

“True, you do need a bit of mothering here and there,” she teased. “But you’re my baby chickie and I’ll protect you.”

“Please, you’re as responsible as a five year old!”

“A five year old who’d dig through a dumpster to find you.” She winked.

I laughed.

“Whatever ick you have going on in your mind,” she said, pointing her claw tipped finger at me. “I want it out so you can really have fun tonight.”

The music in the VIP room was softer, melodic. It made it easy to talk without having to scream.

“It’s Hayden,” I admitted, taking another sip of my drink. “I’m just... so angry that she wants to change my parents’ store, you know? I get why she wants to do it, but she could do it to someone *else’s* store. We’re fine as we are. I’m so scared she’ll change things anyway. And then it won’t feel like home anymore.”

“I get why you feel like that,” she said. “But why project all of this onto Hayden?”

“Because she’s the reason I’m scared.”

“Do you think that maybe you’re letting your crush get in the way of all of this?”

“She- that’s, you know what?” I stammered, heat flooding my cheeks. “Shut up.”

I downed my drink, set the glass down on the table and turned back to Nikkie, who watched me in amusement.

“Finish that,” I ordered, my cheeks hot. “We’re gonna go dance.”

“Ooh, I like this,” she mused, downing her drink and following me out. “Let’s get you laid!”

Maybe it was what I needed. Maybe getting laid would shake Hayden’s grip on me loose or something.

Hopefully.

I tried to push the thought from my head as we followed the throng of pulsing bodies onto the dance floor. Nikkie spun me around and pressed her chest to my back, our hips swaying as one to the music.

Her arms hooked over my shoulders, her voice loud in my ear as she messily sang along.

I giggled, a little giddy, and lost myself to the push and pull of the beat.

I let everything slip away. My fears of losing the store, the fear of losing Mom, and the fear of feeling something I shouldn't for Hayden.

They all slipped through my fingers like sand and turned to dust at my feet.

I began singing along with Nikkie, dancing along when she pulled away to throw her hands above her head. She grabbed my hand and spun me around, my peals of laughter muffled by the bass of the music. I turned around again, facing the entrance of the bar, launching into the chorus.

And froze.

Nikkie's hands tried to turn me back around but I wouldn't budge an inch.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she yelled, but I shook my head. I gaped at the people who had just walked in, almost hysterical with disbelief.

No way. But I'd recognize that face anywhere.

“Hayden,” I mouthed, still questioning what my eyes refused to deny.

She stood next to a beautiful young man, whose olive skin and dark hair made him look almost too good to be real.

But it was Hayden I couldn't stop looking at. Her hair hung in loose curls over her shoulders and down her back. She wore a skin tight black dress that left nothing to my already churning imagination, her long bare legs ending in black heels. Unbidden, my mind forced a brand new image to the forefront of my thoughts: her legs hooked over my shoulders, those heels just barely hanging on.

I snapped back to reality, blaming the alcohol in my system for my inappropriate thoughts.

“Hey! Wakey wakey!”

I wrenched my wide-eyed gaze away from Hayden and turned to Nikkie.

“We have to leave,” I shouted, but she shook her head.

“No way, we're here to have a good time!”

“Hayden is here,” I told her, my voice wavering.

I pointed to where I'd seen Hayden standing next to that man, and Nikkie followed my gaze.

“Oh, shit, *that's* Hayden?!”

I could only nod, and my gaze drifted back to Hayden. I followed the length of her legs, up to her hips, the curve of her waist, over her breasts. My breath left me in a startled gust.

Hayden was looking right at me.

Chapter Eighteen

Fancy Meeting You Here

Hayden

I stared at Frankie, bewildered by her presence, in a *bar* of all places.

“What do you think?” Vinny asked, leaning in close to shout into my ear.

I couldn't drag my gaze away from Frankie.

She'd turned to the woman beside her, pressing her lips close to the woman's ear. A pang of jealousy jolted through me, and I hoped the woman was a friend and nothing more.

Silly, I thought. Why would I care?

“It's loud,” I yelled back.

Vinny laughed and wrapped an arm around my waist. “Let's get you a drink,” he crooned. “Then we can dance until our feet hurt.”

I followed him to the bar, my eyes peeled for any sign of Frankie. She'd disappeared and I searched for her, my eyes scanning the roiling crowd for a flash of fiery hair.

“Gin?” Vinny offered, and I nodded absently.

There.

Without thinking, I leaned forward, watching as Frankie twirled around the same woman from before. She was breathtaking. Her long waves bounced around her while she twisted and swayed her hips. Her eyes stayed closed, her lips parted in a blissful smile. She wore a deep red corset-styled top with leather pants, and if I could, I’d have ripped them off.

Something ice cold pressed into my hand and I whipped around to see Vinny giving me the drink.

“Thank you,” I said blankly, turning around to stare at Frankie again.

I should stop. I shouldn’t be staring at her. My skin tingled with the need to stop, to look away and save myself from spiraling into my twisted thoughts.

But Frankie made it impossible.

“Mi amore?”

“Mm-hm?”

“Would you like to dance?”

I turned to look at him, guilt burning the back of my throat. Vinny was a nice guy; he didn’t deserve to be ignored like that.

“In a sec, darling,” I told him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Let me get some liquor in me before I attempt to navigate

that.” I gestured at the packed dance floor, a thinly veiled excuse to watch Frankie again.

Vinny’s smile was bright; flawless.

“You would put them all to shame,” he said, but led me away to the booths lining the far wall anyway.

He shifted closer to me, the length of his thigh pressed close to mine. The heat of his skin seeped into me and I fought the screaming urge to look back at the dance floor.

“Have you even seen me dance?” I scoffed, leaning into him to try to stay anchored there.

With Vinny.

And not out there with Frankie.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.” He chuckled darkly. “But I’ve experienced you in bed. I can’t imagine it would be very different.”

“Slick.” I chuckled, my attention drifting where it shouldn’t. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to seduce me.”

“Always,” he drawled, entirely unashamed.

Any other night, I would have gladly fallen into his seduction.

Excited screams erupted from the dance floor as one song ended and transitioned to the next. The squeals came from Frankie and her friend. They jumped up and down together, singing at the top of their lungs, and a part of me turned cold.

I wouldn't ever get to see her like that up close.

I got to my feet suddenly, the rush of discomfort hitting me with the force of a freight train.

“Amore?”

I looked down at Vinny, his dark brows pulled low over his golden brown eyes.

“I just remembered I have a crazy busy day tomorrow, darling,” I said, pressing the palm of my hand to his cheek. “We'll do this another time.”

He smiled, turning to kiss my palm. “Another time, then,” he said, holding onto my hand until it slipped from his reach.

I walked back down the few steps that led to the dance floor, forcing my eyes not to stray. But a flash of red drew my gaze anyway, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Frankie. I turned to look at her, helpless to the urge that drove me.

She walked toward me, her eyes heated. And fixed on me.

My steps stuttered to a halt and I stood in place. She walked closer and closer, my heart thudding unevenly against my ribcage.

She walked past, turning back to me for just a second.

She stared at me, her lips parted and...

Inviting.

She turned around and disappeared into the bathroom, and I stood there gasping for air.

I could leave...

I *should* leave.

Everything about the situation gnawed at my better judgment, practically begging me to turn around and just go home. But I followed after her instead.

The crowd parted around me, and the distance between me and the entrance to the bathroom stretched out. One step turned to five, turned to ten. I lost count.

I shoved the heavy door open and walked in, letting it slam shut behind me. The deafening thud of the music died as soon as the door hit the frame. I walked inside, the click of my heels echoing on the tiles.

Frankie was there, her hip leaning against one of the basins. It was mercifully empty apart from us, and for a moment, we simply looked at each other. I let out a long breath, trying to shove the tension coiled in my shoulders.

Up close and in the light, I saw that her corset was a deep berry color, so dark against the porcelain of her skin that I found myself aching to reach out. Her leather pants clung to the curves and dips of her hips, flaring out from her calves.

“We have to stop running into each other like this.”

Her voice, husky from singing for hours, slithered down my spine and left goosebumps prickling at my skin.

“I believe that’s my line,” I answered, only because I didn’t trust myself to say anything else.

She chuckled, folding her arms across her chest.

My eyes dropped to her breasts, the soft skin glittering with sweat.

Fuck.

Get it together, Hayden.

She scoffed quietly, smiling to herself. She pushed off the sink and shoved her thumbs through the loops of her waistband. “You always have an answer for everything.”

“Am I not supposed to answer at all?” I asked, my voice so loud in the silence of the bathroom.

“I think that would be worse,” she said. Her cheeks rosy, she watched me with an expression I’d never seen before.

“Worse if I didn’t speak to you?” I clarified, realizing that we’d never really held much of a civil conversation for this long. I was suddenly afraid of shattering the fragile peace.

“Yeah,” she said. “I can barely get a decent read on you on a good day. Imagine if you never talked to me at all.”

I couldn’t.

And I didn’t say that I’d never be able to stop myself from talking to her.

“You look great,” she continued, running my thoughts head first into a brick wall. “You always do, but tonight... Sorry, I shouldn’t be talking like this, right?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, taking an unconscious step forward. Closer to her.

“We’re supposed to keep things professional, remember?” she reminded me, and the words were a punch to the gut. “But it’s getting hard to keep pretending.”

“Pretending what?”

Her eyes fell to my lips and stayed there for a beat. “That I’m not attracted to you.”

My mouth went dry.

She took a step toward me, her chest rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths. “Are you not gonna say anything now?” she asked softly. “Of all times for you to be at a loss for words. Figures.”

“I’m not at a loss for words, Frankie,” I told her, my voice husky even to my own ears.

“Then what?”

I chewed the side of my tongue, weighing my options, the pros against the cons.

I came up with nothing.

The truth was that I had *too* much to say; too much I couldn’t even admit to myself just yet.

“I have so much to say,” I admitted, watching as her footsteps swallowed the distance between us. I remained rooted to the spot. “But I can’t say any of it.”

“Why not?”

Her expression never changed, it was open, waiting. There was no judgment hiding in her eyes.

“Because I shouldn’t.”

“Then what *can* you say?”

A dangerous question, but the up tilt in her lips coaxed the words from me.

“I can tell you the truth, I suppose,” I crooned, watching the way the change in my voice sent a single shiver through her. “I can tell you that you look amazing tonight, just like you always do. I can tell you that you looked hypnotizing on the dance floor.”

She was right in front of me, the scent of her perfume filling my nose. The alcohol on her lips joined the scent of her perfume and I was intoxicated.

Maybe it wasn’t the alcohol.

“What else?” she breathed.

I swallowed the dryness in my throat. “You’re running me ragged,” I told her. “I can’t help but want to know more about you, find out what makes you tick, what makes... you come undone.”

“That’s not very professional, Hayden,” she murmured, but her mouth curved into a smirk. “Besides, I kind of figured that part out already.”

“Yeah?” I grinned, a little breathless at her proximity. “Then what haven’t you figured out yet?”

“Why?”

The word was a whispered breath against my lips and every lick of sense left me.

“Why?” I purred, the word tapering off into a chuckle. “You want to know why? Have you seen yourself? Who *wouldn't* be attracted to you?”

Her fingers warily traced the back of my hand and I willed my heart to slow down before it leaped right out of my chest. She leaned forward, until I could taste the bubblegum vodka on her lips.

All it would take, all that stretched out between us was a single question.

My eyes drifted down her face, over her freckles and stopped at her lips. I lifted a hand to her face, picking a few stray curls out of her eyes.

“It would be so easy,” I murmured, caressing the rosy apple of her cheek.

“What would?”

The door flung open, the loud bang and even louder music shattering the tenuous glass wall that sheltered us from reality. I snatched my hand back, listening as a group of drunk women stumbled in, their giddy shrieks and laughs shrill. I glanced over in their direction, my lungs shriveling up. Frankie let out a soft noise, something between a scoff and a sigh. I looked back at her, catching the flash of sadness in her eyes.

“Frankie?”

She stepped away, turning her back on me and dragging in a long breath. “Let’s forget this happened,” she said. “We should keep things between us professional, for the sake of my family’s store.”

She walked away without looking back, the overhead light arching off her curls with each step.

I stood there for far too long, my eyes locked on the place she’d disappeared.



By the time I’d left the bar, Vinny had called me twice and left me a text.

Can I come over?

My fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment before I typed out a quick reply, hitting send before I could convince myself to think better.

I needed a distraction.

Chapter Nineteen

Knocked Down A Notch

Frankie

The guitar strings hummed under my fingertips, a soft, unfamiliar melody filling the otherwise empty store. It filled the bit of silence inside me as well, left behind by Hayden.

What had I been thinking?

Why would I have ever believed she'd be interested in me? Maybe she was, on a physical level. But that just... wasn't enough for me.

I plucked at the strings, absently following the melody, letting it lead me wherever it felt right. I'd missed playing for the sake of it. After talking to June about it, I'd pottered around my apartment, throwing furtive glances at my guitar. I hadn't touched it in over a year, only moving it to clean it along with the rest of my apartment. My fingers prickled with guilt on the strings of a different guitar. But I didn't let it stop me from following after the skeletal melody. I fell into it, letting it sweep me up and away from my thoughts the way the music at the bar had. It was easier not to think in words, easier to think in chords and scales.

“I haven’t heard that one yet?”

I jumped in surprise, whirling around to find June leaning against the wall. Her eyes sparkled as she watched me get up from my seat on the floor.

“It’s your day off,” I said, stretching out the stiff joints in my lower back. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to check in,” she said, her face glowing. “And I found you playing a tune I’ve never heard before.”

“Oh,” I said lamely, glancing back at the guitar almost guiltily. “I guess I was just playing around.”

I thought about the melody, the thought that wove between each simple note. It all tied together, leading me back to Hayden. I’d written a song for Hayden without even meaning to. I cringed internally and set the guitar back on its stand.

“So, why are you really here?”

June’s mouth split into a megawatt smile and she stuck out her left hand, waving it around in answer. It took less than a second to notice the emerald and diamond sitting on her ring finger and my eyes bugged out of my skull.

“You’re ENGAGED?!” I shrieked, pulling her into a bone-crushing hug. Her laugh turned into a high pitched squeal.

“Yes!” she gushed, hopping up and down in place. “Dane proposed this morning and I was so excited I just *had* to tell you.”

“I’m so happy for you,” I told her, my heart full to bursting for my dear friend. “How did he pop the question?”

She giggled, her cheeks turning bright red. “He was so *Dane* about it.” She swooned. “He took me down to the beach where we had our first date and he’d arranged a whole bunch of pink rose petals into a heart shape-”

I listened to her explain how Dane had dropped down on one knee and professed his love through some cheesy poem. She teared up, mascara smudged around her eyes.

I was so happy. But it also hurt. More than anything, I wished I could share that kind of happiness with someone too. It had never hit me quite as hard, but I blamed the wave of vulnerability and sudden insecurity on my feelings for Hayden. I’d never met someone like her, and I probably wouldn’t ever again.

“Anyway,” June continued, blissfully unaware of my internal self-loathing, “we’re celebrating tonight and I’d love it if you could come.”

“Sure,” I said automatically. “Name the place, I’ll be there.”

“You really don’t have to go if you’re not feeling up to it.”

I blew out an exasperated sigh, the pillows soft under my head where I lay on Nikkie’s bed.

“It’s June, Nikkie,” I told her. “Of course, we’re gonna go. We even made a bet, remember?”

She chuckled darkly from her place in the closet. “If so, then I won, right?”

I rolled my eyes and chucked one of her lacy bras at her head. “Yeah, yeah,” I muttered, disgruntled at a loss I was sure I’d avoid. “You’ll get your money, you asshole.”

“Thanks, sweetheart, I need a new pair of shoes.”

“Seriously, though.” I sighed. “We’re going, okay? We need to be there to support her.”

“I know, I’m just...” She paused, her voice growing nearer as she walked back toward the bed. “I’m worried about you. You haven’t been yourself lately and I don’t want you to burn out.”

“Be careful, Nikkie,” I warned jokingly. “Mom may be in the hospital but she’ll still hand your ass to you if you try to take her place.”

“Could you be serious for more than a second?” She chucked a pillow at me and it hit me in the gut, making me give out an *oof*.

“Fine, I’ve got my serious face on.”

“I know this thing with Hayden has you down,” she said, sitting next to me and threading her fingers through my hair, “but I want you to know that I’m here like I always am. And you’re allowed to feel upset about it.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, enjoying the sensation of her fingers gently dragging through my hair. It brought me enough peace

that I let her continue doing it, remembering how we'd sit like this when we were kids.

“And I want you to know that I totally understand your crush on her because, *Goddamn*, that woman is fire.”

“Fire?” I giggled despite myself. But she had a point. “She’s really something.”

Nikkie hummed. “Which is why we’re gonna doll you up all nice and party with our friends,” she announced. She hopped off the bed and yanked me up by the arms.

I groaned, turning my body to dead weight. “Can’t I just nap for ten minutes?” I pleaded. “It takes you way longer just to do your hair.”

“Not anymore,” she insisted. “It’s short and easy to maintain. You could learn a thing or two.”

“I should be short and easy to maintain?”

“You know what I mean now, scoot your butt into the shower!”

“I’d like to propose a toast!” Nikkie announced, lifting her champagne glass. The chime of her knife against the glass quieted the rest of the group, each of us turning our attention to her.

“Of course you would,” Dane teased from beside June. His long blond hair fell in waves around his broad shoulders, but his face was soft as he stared at his new fiancé.

“Hush, Danny boy,” she tutted, using the nickname she knew he hated. “Anyway, I’m not a huge believer in love at first sight, but I am a believer in soulmates.”

“Hear, hear!” one of Dane’s friends chorused, but Nikkie forged ahead.

“And I think that soulmates will always find each other,” she said, looking at Dane. “Even if there are a few extra changes along the way.”

I smiled. Dane’s transition hadn’t been an easy one, but June never left his side.

Part of me relished the giddiness of it all, the sweet romance that fluttered around them like butterflies on a spring breeze.

Without meaning to, my thoughts switched June and Dane out, replacing them with Hayden and myself.

I imagined what it might be like if she and I ever made it past the awkward tension that constantly simmered between us. *An immature dream*, I scolded myself. Why wish for the impossible? Hayden was only interested in her business. Why would she ever choose to settle down when she could have a different person in her bed every day? And why would she ever choose me?

The ache in my gut churned and I forced myself to focus on what Nikkie was saying. I focused on June and Dane, and how exciting the next chapter of their lives together was going to be.

They sat side-by-side, their arms and hands entwined. June rested her head affectionately on Dane's shoulder, and I remembered how we'd tease them for being so nauseatingly cute together. I really was so happy. I wished the happiness would drown out the ache that grew inside me, swallowing up bits of my emotions as it spread.

Nikkie sat back down, flipping her short dark hair triumphantly. "I should do that for a living," she chimed, fanning herself theatrically.

"You sure are on a roll today," I said, sliding her phone back across the table to her. "You're already gathering your own fanbase."

"Fanbase?" She frowned, following the finger I pointed over her shoulder. Three of Dane's friends immediately waved back, vacant, dumbstruck expressions plastered on their mugs. She snorted daintily. "They'll get over themselves. I'm way too high maintenance."

"Worth it, though." I chuckled.

"As are you, my love," she declared, knocking the lip of her glass against mine. A toast of our own.

I drained the rest of my drink and glanced around at the small crowd that had poured into June's favorite restaurant to celebrate the engagement. The food and alcohol flowed freely, and soon enough, we were rowdier than most football matches.

“We’re gonna get kicked out soon,” Nikkie muttered as a new chorus of whoops and cheers echoed from Dane’s friend group. “Funny, isn’t it? That someone as soft and artistic as June would end up with a jock.”

“Dane is hardly a jock.” I laughed. “He played baseball once and hit someone in the face with the bat.”

Nikkie threw her head back in a melodious laugh. “Oh, God, that was hilarious,” she gasped, her palm hitting the table. “He couldn’t show his face around the coach for a week!”

“Exactly.” I chuckled. “But I get what you’re saying. It’s kinda weird how things turn out like that sometimes, I guess.”

“I don’t think I could date my polar opposite,” she said. “A clone of me? I would get down on both my knees and beg them to marry me.”

But I’d drifted off into my own thoughts again, her toast from earlier ringing in my ears. I’d never given much thought to soulmates. As a kid, I’d had zero interest in romance and as a teen, I was too confused to even start. As an adult, the confusion was gone but the question remained.

“What you said just now,” I said to Nikkie, tapping her forearm softly. “About soulmates... Do you think they’re real? Do you think we all have one?”

Nikkie studied me for a long moment, her eyes narrowed. Whatever conclusion she came to, she left it unsaid.

“I think soulmates are special,” she said. “I don’t think every person on Earth has one special person made just for them. Some people have more than one, and some people don’t have one at all. I think it’s up to the person.”

I nodded, collecting her words like shells along the shoreline and adding them to my thoughts, sparkling gems among the chaos.

The melody I’d written earlier that day drifted through my thoughts, threading Nikkie’s words and my scattered hopes together.

“Come on, you lovesick puppy,” Nikkie cooed, pulling me out of my seat and dragging me to the makeshift dance floor, where Dane’s friends had created a circle.

I danced with Nikkie by my side, grateful that she’d picked me to be her best friend one day in the second grade all those years ago. We danced until our feet went numb and laughed until our sides ached.

I hugged June and Dane so many times it was borderline too much, but they accepted my embrace every single time.

And when I finally managed to convince Nikkie to leave the restaurant, after the staff had all but swept us out the doors, we glanced at each other on the sidewalk. And laughed some more.

My phone chimed then, buzzing in my pocket and I unlocked it to see a message from Hayden.

My heart thudded, thoughts sprinting leagues ahead of me as I opened it:

Meet me at H Corp tomorrow, bright and early. 7 am sharp.

Chapter Twenty

The Line In The Sand

Hayden

I paced back and forth in my office, no doubt wearing a hole into the rug as well as my heels.

My nerves crackled like static on an old television, making it difficult to focus on just one thought at a time. Frankie would be arriving any minute, and we'd talk for the first time since that night at the bar.

Or rather, I *hoped* we would talk.

The anxiety left my fingertips icy, and I clutched at my hot coffee mug for some semblance of warmth.

"Marina?" I called, and she shot to her feet and hurried into my office.

"Yes, Miss Jones- Hayden?"

"Is the conference room all set up?" I asked for the nth time.

Marina nodded as if I'd asked her the first time, grabbing her diary from her desk and flipping it open. "I have it all scheduled," she assured me. "Miss Ivey is due to arrive soon

and the conference room has been booked for the next three hours. The rest of the guests will arrive at eight.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, falling back into the repetitive motion of pacing.

It was a big gamble, especially after how we’d left things. But I couldn’t keep dragging my feet.

“Let me know as soon as she gets here,” I said, *again*, chewing on the tip of my thumb. “I don’t want her going into this blind.”

Marina nodded and understood the silent dismissal. She returned to her desk, leaving me to fret in silence.

“Why am I nervous?” I muttered, irritated with the effervescent panic that ate away at my confidence.

Barely a minute had passed before Marina tapped at my door.

“Miss Ivey is here,” she said.

My head snapped up and I fought to compose myself. “Send her in.”

I walked back to my chair and sat down, resisting the urge to sit on my hands to stop them from fidgeting.

“Hi,” Frankie said as she walked in, dressed in a pair of simple black slacks and a loose button down shirt. “Can I come in?”

Awkward, *so* awkward.

“Please do,” I said, waving a hand at the chair in front of my desk. She sat down but kept her eyes on her hands for a beat too long.

“I didn’t think you’d actually come today,” I admitted.

She lifted her head, eyes meeting mine. “Why not?” she challenged.

“Well, let’s just say I wouldn’t have held it against you if you chose not to,” I explained. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior. It was wrong for me to say those things.”

She hummed, and I wondered if she could smell the blatant lie.

I wasn’t sorry at all.

I was angry with myself, but whether for what I did or what I *didn’t* do, I was unsure.

“I just want to make one thing clear,” she said carefully, and I nodded for her to go on. “I came because I take my family’s store seriously. It isn’t a joke to me or anyone else who works there. You’re the owner. You asked me to meet you, so here I am. Although ‘ask’ would be an exaggeration.”

I winced at that.

I’d labored over the wording of my text for what felt like hours, typing, deleting, and retyping my request again and again until I’d almost gone mad. In the end, I’d forced myself to hit send when there were no more phrases left at my disposal.

“I’m sorry about that as well.” I sighed. “The reason I wanted you to meet me here is because I’d like to start involving you in the decision-making processes for the store.”

Her cool expression slipped, revealing a sliver of surprise.

“Why?” she demanded, and I remembered the last time she’d asked me that.

For a brief moment I was back in that bathroom, her bubblegum-flavored lips hovering inches away from my own. I shook myself free of the wild need and focused on the buttons on the shirt.

Three on her collar, I noted, counting each one to keep myself grounded. *Two unbuttoned and five left buttoned*.

“Because I want to take your role as store manager a little further,” I began, lacing my fingers together on the table in front of me. “You have your own visions for the store and I want to incorporate them wherever possible. I’d also like your input on active changes that are being discussed, so that we can reach an amicable agreement before the store becomes collateral.”

“And I had to catch a cab at six in the morning for you to tell me that?” she deadpanned, and I shook my head, biting down a smile.

Always so defiant. A living spit-fire. I couldn’t deny that she made it look sexy.

“We are meeting with a group of potential investors to hear their proposed stake in the store’s future,” I said. “You’ll be

able to hear what they have to say and make a decision for yourself rather than hearing it from me.”

She scoffed and looked away. “You think I’d turn it down just because it’s coming from you?”

I lifted both brows. “You haven’t exactly been my biggest fan.” I shrugged, watching as she tensed. “From the moment I walked into the store that first day, you’ve been intent on crucifying me.”

“That’s not true,” she argued, but she lacked the conviction she needed to make me believe her.

“Either way,” I continued, ignoring the dent between her brows, “the door is open, although I’d prefer you to consider it as a request and not an invitation.”

I didn’t want her to think I was just trying to smooth things over. I wanted her involved, and I wanted her on my side. If I could only have one, I’d rather just have her involved.

The store wouldn’t survive without her.

She chewed the inside of her cheek and blew out a sigh through her nose. “What time is the meeting?”

The rush of relief almost knocked me on my ass. I quickly gathered myself enough to answer. “Ten minutes. Are you in?”

She shook her head and got to her feet. “Lead the way.”

“We’re projecting a huge increase in stock sales in the third quarter,” James said, his delivery animated and captivating. A front, obviously, because I’d warned him that Frankie would be a tough win.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, paying close attention to the subtle downturn in her lips, or her fingernail digging into the notepad in front of her. If I was right, and for once a part of me hoped I wasn’t, Frankie was not happy.

At all.

“How do you plan on boosting stock sales?” she asked, and James blinked in surprise.

Admittedly, I did too.

We all looked at Frankie, a little shaken by her question.

It was the first time she’d said anything since she introduced herself.

“We’ve done careful research on the sales trends and buyer forecasts,” he explained, flipping the presentation to a slide of charts. “First, we intend to market individual products from Ivey’s and place them in supermarkets and value centers nationwide. When the interest and demand increase, we can go ahead with placing franchise stores strategically.”

“And what would these individual products be, exactly?” she asked. “We source most of our products from local suppliers. How do you propose to fly fresh produce across the country every day while remaining true to our promises as a company?”

Even though her argument was detrimental, I turned away to hide the smile threatening to expose me. I'd underestimated her. And worse, I was even more attracted to her when she coolly picked apart James' entire proposal.

Business first, I reminded myself.

James blinked, looking a little out of his depth.

"We take our values very seriously," Frankie continued, undeterred by James' stunned silence. "And ensuring that our community is served well is a priority. We need the suppliers we currently work with the same way they need us. We're trying to improve the community, Mr. Carlisle, not profit from it."

James' mouth opened and closed, and I quickly stepped in to call things off before he had a mental breakdown.

Who knew Frankie could be as sharp as Cameron?

"I think that's enough for today, gents," I said, getting to my feet. I angled myself between them and Frankie, although I wasn't sure who I was trying to protect.

James nodded and quickly packed his things, his colleagues filing out after him.

I waited until the door snicked shut behind them before turning to Frankie.

"You are a hellion, you know that?" I laughed. "I've never seen James so shaken up; he looked like he was about to wet himself."

Frankie huffed out a breath and I noticed her racing pulse, jumping in her neck like crazy. A hellion, but also not a fan of confrontation.

Noted.

“Are there going to be more of these meetings?” she asked, turning her eyes on me.

I shook my head. “It’s your choice whether you attend or not,” I reminded her, making sure she understood that I wasn’t forcing her to attend any of them. “I take it that did nothing to change your mind?”

“Not a bit.”

“Figures.” I smirked. “You’re out of James’ league, poor kid.”

“If changing my mind is the goal with these meetings, Hayden,” she said, standing up and walking to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, “we’re both wasting our time.”

“I know that’s how you feel,” I pressed. “But I hope you’ll consider it someday.”

“Maybe I will,” she conceded. “Maybe I’ll take a page out of your book and stick to my guns.”

“Meaning?”

“I want to ask you something,” she admitted. “And I don’t want a bullshit answer.”

“I don’t typically bullshit you.”

“Hayden.”

“Fine.”

“Why are you so careful with relationships?”

Every nerve ending in my body turned numb, my bones rigid. “I’m assuming you’re referring to personal relationships.”

She didn’t answer. I clenched my jaw, knowing that whatever I said would break any brittle truce we might have formed between us.

“I’m not interested in commitment,” I said, the words perfectly rehearsed after years of practice. It was almost too easy. “I prefer casual acquaintances, one-off things that don’t interfere with my business.”

“See, I want to buy that,” she said, turning her gaze to the city beyond the window. “But something just keeps gnawing at me. You don’t sound like you mean it.”

“Why does it matter so much?” I hedged, scrambling to deflect her questions. All I wanted to do was spin on my heel and walk out.

But this was Frankie. My mind and body weren’t seeing eye to eye. At least not when it came to her.

“I asked myself the same question,” she confessed. She folded her arms across her chest, the loose shirt tightening around her elbows. “And I can’t come up with anything that makes sense. But I think I might know what happened.”

“Is that right?”

She turned back to me, those keen eyes seeing too much. “I know it’s none of my business, but it seems like you went through a really rough breakup. And something tells me you were the one who was hurt the most.”

I stared at Frankie, my aching jaw tight around the thousand venomous words I wanted to throw at her for prying too close.

“You’re right,” I said finally, slipping a cool mask over the fracturing hurt.

“So you were hurt,” she said, and the sadness in her voice threw me for a loop. But the damage was done.

“No,” I corrected, every word burning like acid as it left my lips. “You were right about it being none of your business.”

She recoiled as if I’d physically hit her, and I hated myself for it.

“I think it would be best if you focus on the business rather than things that don’t concern you.” I turned on my heel before I could see the pain I’d inflicted with those words.

I didn’t visit the store that week.

And Vinny spent each night in my bed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Whispers and Blurred Lines

Frankie

A week had passed since Hayden and I last spoke.

Or even saw each other.

Hayden's absence from the store hurt more than I cared to admit, even to myself and it didn't go unnoticed.

"Boss lady still too busy to drop by?" Joe asked, leaning on the handle of his broom. It was late, almost closing time, and Hayden hadn't showed up. I shrugged, the little hole in my chest still fresh with Hayden's reprimand.

"I guess she has more important business matters to worry about," I told him, pushing off the back wall in the staff room.

"What do we do?" he asked, and I glanced at him, unease tugging the corners of my mouth into a frown.

"What we've always done." I sighed. "We get to work and make sure the store runs for our customers."

Joe didn't say anything else; he packed the broom away in the supply room and dusted his hands off.

I pooled all my focus into closing the store, pushing my dark thoughts away whenever they brushed along my subconscious. I waved at Joe when he left, noting the pensive furrow in his thick, graying brows.

The store around me hummed quietly; the dull buzz of electricity running the refrigerators and fluorescent light bulbs overhead.

It was silent.

With a weight in my gut, I shut off the lights and locked the store, shoving the keys deep into my backpack.

“I figured you’d be closing up again.”

I whirled around at the sudden voice, panic gripping my throat and holding my voice hostage.

Hayden grinned at me from where she stood a few paces away, her curls slightly disheveled.

“Hayden?”

She hummed and took a wobbly step closer, the yellow light from the street lamp illuminating her clothes. Her shirt had one too many buttons undone and had once been tucked into her high waisted pants.

“Did you forget me already?” She chuckled, and though she smiled, sadness tinged her words.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my heart lurching. “What are you doing here?”

“M fine,” she mumbled, tucking a long curl behind her ear. “I was just out for a walk when I saw you so I thought I’d come say hi.”

A lie.

“Is that why you smell like a bar?”

She smirked lazily, dragging a fumbling hand through her knotted curls. “I may have stopped at a bar or two on my way here,” she admitted. “I’m supposed to go home, but I can’t seem to find my way back.”

One truth; one lie. I narrowed my eyes at her, my heart thudding rampant against my ribs.

“Isn’t there like, someone you could call?”

“I don’t have my phone.”

I groaned. “Then, you should take a cab-”

“Will you take me home?”

My galloping heart stuttered to a halt before doubling, faster than ever. I stared at Hayden, my blood rushing in my ears and my chest burning.

I *wanted* to, but the logical, reasonable part of me screamed for any other alternative. Anything but facing my feelings for Hayden while she stood in front of me.

Asking me to take her home.

I swallowed the sense of foreboding in my throat. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Hayden.”

“I’ll be good.” She snickered. “I swear.”

And despite all the red flags, all the warning bells jingling in my head, I sighed. “Fine. But I don’t have a car so we’ll have to take a cab.”

She nodded as I pulled my phone out and called for a cab.

“So this is... *one* of your houses?”

I craned my neck to take in as much of the looming building as possible, but it climbed up into the darkness of the night sky, scattering into stardust.

“It’s not my favorite,” Hayden grumbled.

I glanced over at her, color sitting high in her cheeks. Still very tipsy, then.

“Tell me you at least have keys to get in.”

“I have my hands,” she said, waving her hands at me as if the answer was obvious. She scoffed at the confusion scrawled across my face and stumbled past me.

On instinct, I reached out and caught her by the waist. The warmth of her body seeped into the palm of my hand, and my stomach tightened at the brief contact.

“Oops,” she gasped, her breath fluttering over the base of my throat.

A shiver rolled down my spine, nestling at the base with a humming warmth.

Oh, shit.

I gently helped her back onto her feet and snatched my hands back the second she was steady again.

“I’m such a klutz.” She giggled. Her fingertips grazed the skin on my arms and left goosebumps in the wake of her touch.

I for sure was not going to get through this with my sanity intact.

After a few fumbles with the fingerprint scanner, the door finally clicked open, revealing a massive entryway.

I didn’t have time to ogle; Hayden’s fingers slipped through mine and hauled me inside.

“Wait, what are you-”

“I need a friendly face to keep me company for a little while,” she said with a shrug. “And yours is the only friendly face I wanna see right now.”

Despite myself, my heart fluttered, my breaths turning short and desperate. “You’re drunk,” I managed to say, tearing my eyes away from the seductive glint in Hayden’s green eyes.

“Just a little,” she admitted, holding up her thumb and forefinger to show me. “Not drunk enough to hang out, though.”

“Hang. Out?” I tested the words on my tongue. They were foreign, tempting.

Way too tempting.

She dragged me into a sprawling living room, the walls lined with abstract paintings and sculptures that imitated flowing water. But my eyes remained fixed on her swaying back, my body all too aware of our linked fingers in front of me.

She fell onto a luxuriously soft sofa and pulled me down with her. Almost immediately, she lay her head down in my lap, her eyes slipping closed with a sigh of contentment. My breath caught in my throat as I stared down at her, hands hovering a few inches above her body because...

What the hell was I supposed to do?

Hayden had made it clear time and again that she wasn't interested in being with me. And I'd told her I wasn't interested in one night stands.

But her curls fanned out across my thighs, her head tipped back slightly, lips parted on a quiet sigh. My heartbeat quickened and heat pooled in the pit of my gut.

"See?" Hayden murmured. "This isn't so bad, right?"

How could I refuse when she looked so... peaceful.

For the first time in the many weeks since our meeting, the tension that clung to the space between her brows and the outside of her eyes had smoothed out.

"I guess you're right," I breathed. I lifted my hand to brush a few curls from her face but thought better of it, laying it across the back of the sofa instead. "So, are you gonna tell me why you went out to get smashed and ended up at the store?"

She shrugged a little, her eyes still closed. “It’s been a rough couple days,” she muttered, her lip curling in annoyance. “I thought a drink might take the edge off, and one drink led to two, led to...”

“I get it.” I chuckled, shaking my head. “Do you want some water or, I don’t know, black coffee?”

Hayden’s face pulled into a frown. “I don’t like black coffee,” she grumbled. “Just stay and talk to me.”

“Okay,” I murmured, settling back into the sofa. “I can do that.”

Again, the creases of tension in her face smoothed out and the corners of her lips twitched.

Hayden

The very first thing that told me I'd made a mistake was the dull pounding in the back of my skull.

The second: light seared right through my closed eyelids, burning my retinas and forcing a hiss through my teeth.

The third...

“Are you awake yet?”

Against my better judgment I peeled my eyes open, and found myself staring straight into Frankie's eyes.

Every frantic nerve and jarred muscle in my body went still. Her thighs were soft beneath my thudding head. Ringlets of molten lava curled around her face, pink with sleep, her eyes soft as they stared down at me.

My chest squeezed and I lifted my hand, pressing it to her cheek. “You're so beautiful,” I murmured, my limbs melting under her gaze. The pink in her cheeks flushed darker, her eyes darting away shyly.

“Are you still drunk?” She chuckled, her lashes brushing the tops of her freckled cheeks.

I sat up, ignored the violent spinning in my skull, and turned to face her. I leaned my head against the back of the sofa to stop the spinning, my nose inches from her throat.

“To be clear,” I said quietly, leaning closer, my eyes dropping to her lips. “I wasn’t drunk last night.”

“You seemed pretty drunk to me,” she breathed, her spine ramrod straight. I leaned in closer, slowly, giving her time to turn away or tell me to stop. “How else would you explain the black out sleep?”

I breathed a quiet laugh, too nervous to shatter the tension growing between us. My heartbeat rammed against my ear drums, and my entire body pulsed with the need to be closer.

So I waited for her to move away.

But she didn’t.

The rush of relief that cascaded through my unsteady limbs nearly knocked me to the ground. But it was Frankie, closing that fragile distance between us, who sent me sprawling.

Her lips pressed to mine, tentative, soft, as if she was ready to bolt at any second. I was lost to the plushness of her lips, the heat of her breath and the push and pull that drove every rational thought out the window.

“I was sober enough,” I mumbled, my words muffled by her urgent lips. “To know where to find you.”

She hummed against me.

“No smart little retort?” I teased, too caught up in the heat burning between my thighs to think of much else. “No ‘fuck you, Hayden’ today?”

“I think you were drunk.” She snickered, the tip of her tongue flicking out to meet mine.

“Yeah?” I whispered, unable to keep the smile off my face. I wanted more of her. “How do you figure?”

“You talk a lot when you’re sober.”

“Smart ass.”

I threaded my fingers through hers to keep them from fidgeting and pulled her onto my lap. I swallowed up the tiny gasp that slipped from her lips, licking along her bottom lip with a deep, satisfied hum.

Fuck, she tasted like honey.

My heart thrashed against the inside of my ribcage, matching her heart for every frantic beat, until they fell in sync.

A single heartbeat between the two of us.

“I really want to fuck you,” I murmured, our frenzied breaths the only sound in the silent living room. It hadn’t escaped me that we’d fallen asleep on the couch, and her back must have been aching. “Can I? Please?”

She loosed a shaky, desperate breath and nodded. Something white-hot and low in my gut drove my mouth back to hers, needing to hear her, needing to hear her *say* it.

“Tell me,” I breathed, hands digging into the softness of her curves.

She pressed down into me, into the friction I readily offered, the heat of her core mouth-watering inches from mine. “Please,” was all she said.

It was all I needed.

I maneuvered her body as gently as I could, laying her back against the expensive leather of the sofa. With no small amount of shame, I secretly thanked whatever inspired her to wear the flimsy sundress that folded around the tops of her bare thighs.

I didn’t stop kissing her; I was convinced that if I stopped, I’d die. I needed the timid little bites, the tentative, almost nervous way she licked into my mouth. I palmed the soft skin of her thighs, trying to remember every curve and tiny bump but I was lost, so lost in the taste of her tongue.

Of the *finally* of it all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Afterglow

Hayden

“I wanted to kiss you the first night I met you,” I confessed, my gut burning with need. “It was so hard to leave without kissing you.”

Her breathy giggles flitted through me, and my blood turned effervescent.

“And yet,” she whispered, her hands cupping my breasts, “you’re still talking instead of taking my clothes off.”

I groaned, arching my neck back as her lips drifted over my jaw and down my throat.

“You’re not exactly wearing much,” I countered, but I was so helplessly pliable beneath her touch, so eager to do what she wanted. *Be* what she wanted.

She chuckled quietly and pulled away, her eyes boring into mine, burnished bronze almost.

She crossed her arms, her fingers curled around the hem of her dress, and tugged the fabric off. It took a little shimmying but I was paralyzed with each delicious inch of skin she

exposed. It fell to the floor but every sane thought that fought for control shriveled into nothing.

Frankie was...

Ethereal.

Freckles scattered across her pale skin like a hundred constellations, her breasts kissed here and there with darker freckles. Her torso tapered into her slim waist and flared out over her hips and, God damn it, I would not survive this woman.

Her kiss-swollen lips kicked into a smirk and she grabbed my hands, guiding them to her breasts, her nipples peaked between my thumbs and forefingers.

“Jesus,” I breathed, entranced by the soft pink of her nipples. “I just need to-”

I didn't let myself finish but leaned forward, pulling a nipple between my lips and letting my teeth gently scrape over the hardened bud until she whimpered.

Her hips rolled upward, her thighs widening around mine. Swirling my tongue around her nipple, I dropped a hand to her hip, pinning her in place while I wedged one of my thighs between hers.

“Oh God,” she murmured, her hips kicking up to grind against my thigh.

Her hands fumbled for the silk shirt that I still wore and I happily let her tear it off my shoulders. Her fingers hooked into the thin lace of my bra and yanked the material down.

My breasts spilled out of my bra and I couldn't help the startled giggle that slipped from my lips.

"Eager," I murmured.

Her hands curled into my hair and pulled me back to her face, her lips crushing against mine.

If I had a choice, I'd happily kiss her until my very last breath, but she bent her knee, driving the taut muscle of her thigh right into my clit and I *whined*.

"Oh, I like that sound." She giggled, her palms flattening over the curve of my ass and pushing me down over her thigh.

The drag of her bare thigh over the laughably thin silk of my pants did nothing to keep me sane.

"Take these off." She pouted, her fingers tugging at the waistband of my pants.

I'd have stolen the moon out of the sky right then and there if she'd asked.

It was a clumsy, giggle-fueled striptease that held none of the grace and seduction she deserved, but any niggling insecurity went silent as she tugged her thong off, lifting her ass to drag it down her legs.

I pressed my body to her bare, heated skin, her hand wedged between my thighs the moment she captured my lips for another searing kiss.

"Frankie, *Jesus*," I breathed.

She hummed into my mouth, her fingers circling my clit and teasing the entrance.

“Can’t blame me,” she said, breathless and drunk with desire. She slipped her middle and ring fingers inside me, curling gently until her thumb pressed into the oversensitive bundle of nerves.

My body turned boneless. It was all I could do to keep my body weight above her on my elbows, my legs widening with each languorous, lazy stroke. Again, she bent her knee, resting the outside of her hand on her thigh and bucking her fingers deeper.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped.

Her thumb pressed into my clit, hard and slow, up and down, her fingers reaching deeper and deeper and deeper-

“You’re so beautiful,” she moaned, and it was her voice that broke through the solid haze of pleasure. On pure instinct alone, my hand settled beside hers, my mouth watering with just the thought of eating her out.

Focus, Hayden.

I pressed the heel of my palm against her clit, the tip of my middle finger teasing her entrance, dipping in and pulling back out.

I was so far gone it was all I could do to drag her with me, to haul her close to the edge that she dangled me over.

I wondered, briefly, how fucking sexy she’d sound when she came apart.

I grabbed her wrist and lifted one of her legs, her knee resting atop my shoulder. Like this, with the wet heat of her rubbing against me, her back arched deliciously. Her breasts shifted with each roll of my hips over hers, a soft, desperate whine slipping past her parted lips.

The slick of our mixed arousal drove me wilder, desperately searching for the ridge of her clit and there- oh, God, pleasure crackled through my body like live electricity.

Far too soon, that pleasure pooled like molten desire in my core and the quickening breaths that shook her chest turned high and whiny.

“I wanna eat you out,” I mumbled, barely conscious of what I said.

The tethers to my control slowly frayed, Frankie’s fingers plucked them free one by one by one until she dug her heel into the sofa and kicked *up*-

Pure, sizzling white burst behind my eyes, the shock of a third finger inside me tearing a harsh cry from my throat.

Frankie’s body locked up beneath me, her fingernails carving tiny crescent shapes into the flesh on my ribs and shoulder. For eons, maybe minutes, perhaps just seconds, our bodies writhed and rode out the high, our eyes squeezed shut against the intensity.

Sweat tickled along my hairline and I opened my eyes. Frankie lay beneath me, her skin flushed from her hairline to her splotched breasts.

My breath left me in a single, gut-wrenching gust, as if I'd been punched in the stomach. "*Fuck.*"

My entire body burned, my heart thrashing against the inside of my ribs.

Without the haze of sleep and lust clouding my thoughts, the walls began to close in on me.

What had I done?

I stared at Frankie, at the blissed out smirk on her lovely face, the rise and fall of her breasts as her breathing slowed.

Her hands were gentle where they caressed my flushed skin, but every touch felt like a brand; a punishment for what I'd done.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes finally blinking open, and I almost begged her to close them again.

I couldn't stand the thought of the hurt or hatred I'd no doubt see there in just a few breaths.

I nodded stiffly and crawled off her, doing everything in my power not to look at her body as I stumbled to my feet. My thighs were still slick with arousal; hers and mine. My blood still pounded straight to my core, and a deep, longing sense of joy sat low in my gut.

But I fought the urge to rip my hair out at the roots.

Frankie's brows narrowed, her serene smile pulling down into a frown. *No*, I wanted to tell her.

Don't stop smiling.

But I swallowed the words that threatened to make this... even harder.

Frankie cautiously sat up, her eyes never leaving mine and I wanted to crawl out of my skin or sprint out of the room or *something-*

“Hayden?”

My lungs crushed whatever breath still lingered there.

I numbly reached for the jacket I’d dropped some time the night before.

Too vulnerable, my mind screamed at me. *Too weak, too easy to hurt.*

I cleared my throat and forced a clear expression onto my face. “What?”

She blinked in confusion, her knees squeezing together like she, too, felt too exposed.

I hated myself for making her feel that way.

“Are you-” she paused, biting her bottom lip and looking for the words she wanted to see. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I told her, my breathing erratic and harsh. “Never better.”

I tugged my jacket on, closing it up around myself to give me some semblance of control before I spiraled into nothingness.

Frankie’s lips turned to a frown, a small dent forming between her brows. She blinked once, twice.

Three times.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” I shrugged. “But I don’t want you to think this meant anything special.”

“Nothing. Special.”

I nodded, turning away. I needed to clear the air. Set things straight.

Even if they were twisted and unsalvageable.

All because I couldn’t control myself.

“So, what?” Frankie scoffed, grabbing her dress from the floor and tugging it over her head. I looked away, my focus hinging on the dark red splotches I’d left behind on her breasts. “You practically drag me to your place last night after drinking too much, fall asleep on my lap and then wake up to fuck me; and none of that means *anything* to you?”

I forced a sigh, my heart galloping inside my chest, loud enough that I worried she’d hear it and call me out for my lie.

“I told you right from the get go,” I forced out, walking towards the open plan kitchen. “I’m not interested in love and commitment. I don’t have the patience for it, and I don’t care to waste my energy on it.”

“And *I* told *you* that that was exactly what I was looking for,” she argued, getting to her feet and following me. “And you *still* followed me around and then you asked me if you

could fuck me. Or did you already forget that since it means nothing to you?”

Bile rose in my throat, the guilt and shame suffocating me to the point that I was sure I'd pass out. Because she was right. I'd dragged her here because I'd missed seeing her. After an entire week of avoiding her, I'd just wanted to see her. It wasn't supposed to escalate into... whatever the fuck this was.

“You knew exactly how I felt before starting this,” I said, trying my best to keep my voice even, emotionless. “I don't know why you expected anything different.”

No, no, no, no, I thought, panic coiling its icy grip around my lungs and squeezing too tight.

Frankie scoffed again, her dark chuckle void of any amusement, and it stung like salt in an open wound. “Of course,” she said quietly, her shoulders rounded in disappointment. “Why would I be anything special, right? What was I thinking?”

Without another word, she turned on her heel, her bare feet silent on the tiles as she gathered her things and left.

I didn't move, didn't make a sound. I just stood there, rooted to the spot and holding onto the counter as if I'd fall if I let go. The front door slammed shut, the hard bang echoing throughout my empty house, and the silence stuffed itself down my throat. I sank to the floor, my chest squeezing tight and stealing the air from my lungs.

She'd never speak to me again. And I was alone... again.

And I couldn't blame her.

My phone was foreign in my numb fingers, and I could barely see the numbers as I frantically dialed, just needing to hear someone's voice-

"Hayden?"

Reid's voice was an instant anchor, tugging me back from the storm of currents throwing this way and that.

"Reid, I need to talk to you," I croaked, my throat thick with emotion. "Please."

"I'll be there in ten minutes, honey," she said. "Can you wait for me?"

I nodded before remembering she couldn't see me. "Yeah, I'm at my house. Not in the city."

"That's okay, I'll be there soon, okay?"

I clung to those words, hoping the seconds that separated Reid and me would slip away like water sprinting down a window in the rain.

Hoping I wouldn't fall to pieces before Reid got here.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Three Steps Back

Frankie

The next few days were...

Hard.

I dragged an invisible weight with me wherever I went, my back bowed under the force of rejection.

Hayden had done more than just reject me.

She'd *used* me.

And then told me I was nothing special.

“Are you sure you’re doing okay?”

I glanced up, forgetting for a moment that Nikkie had asked the same question no less than five times.

“Great, yeah,” I muttered, turning back to the shelf I was stocking.

Anything to keep my thoughts from spiraling.

“Right, and I’m the king of Fairyland,” she scoffed, grabbing me by the shoulder and turning me to face her. She

plucked the last few cans out of my arms and set them down.

“You would be,” I muttered, trying to reach around her to take the cans back. She stepped in front of me, blocking my way. “Nikkie, please let me do my job.”

“Where’s Vanessa?” she countered, ignoring my half-plea entirely.

“She had stuff to do.” I sighed. “And I needed something to do with my hands.”

“Frankie, what’s going on?” she pressed, but I didn’t want to tell her.

Shame bubbled in my gut, hot and uncomfortable. “Just... didn’t sleep well, I guess.”

“So your solution was picking up more shifts?”

I narrowed my eyes at her and she smirked.

“That’s right, I called June,” she said haughtily. “She told me you’d offered to cover for her while she’s planning for the wedding.”

“She’s helped me out with Mom.” I shrugged. “It’s only fair for me to repay the favor.”

“But you’ll end up working yourself into the ground.” She groaned, her usually bright eyes dark with concern. “Then we might as well just reserve a bed next to your mom’s, is that what you want?”

Exasperation coiled an icy fist around my lungs.

I was so tired.

“It’s not forever,” I said, my voice sounding thin, even to my ears. “Just until Mom gets out and everything at the store... settles.”

Nikkie didn’t say anything, but in her silence I heard the words she wouldn’t say out loud.

I didn’t want to think about the possibility that Mom might not leave the hospital.

I shrugged off the panic and reached around her again. This time, she let me through.

“I’ve never seen you this out of it,” Nikkie said quietly. “And it happened so fast. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay. But at least let me help where I can?”

“I don’t even know what I need right now,” I admitted. “I’m sorry.”

Nikkie tugged me into a hug, her chin hooked over my shoulder. “No, I don’t want to hear you apologize for something that isn’t your fault,” she said. “I don’t expect you to have all the answers. I’m just asking you to call me if you feel like you need a friend.”

I knew. And I knew she’d drop everything to hang out with me if I felt lonely.

But I didn’t want to be *that* person. I wanted to take care of my parents, the store and the employees. I wanted to take care of June’s store while she was away.

I couldn’t do that if I was falling apart.

“I’ll be okay after a nap or something,” I assured her, silently thanking her for the support she always offered. “Don’t you have work to do?”

She giggled and pulled away, some of the light sparkling in her eyes again. “The life of a travel blogger is spontaneous,” she explained with a dramatic flourish of her hands. “Even I don’t know when and where I’m off to next.”

“Just make sure you come say goodbye before you jet off again.”

She dropped a loud kiss on my cheek. “I’ll always make time for my number one.”

She waved as she left, turning down one of the aisles and jumping a little. “Oh! Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

I didn’t pay it any mind; people usually spent a few seconds collecting their jaws off the floor when they bumped into Nikkie.

But the voice that answered sent a bolt of dread down my spine.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Hayden turned around the end of the aisle as Nikkie disappeared, and my feet were rooted to the spot.

Her gaze lifted, her eyes meeting mine, and I forced my expression to harden. “Morning,” I said emotionlessly, turning back to my task.

She was silent, but I poured all my effort into focusing on making sure every single can faced the exact same way.

“How are you?” she asked.

My fingers stilled on the last can but I didn’t turn; I didn’t want to see her face.

Or remember how she’d looked when we’d-

“Fine.”

She hummed.

God, this was too awkward, and a small part of me begged me to turn. A tiny, guilty part.

“How are you?” I asked, my discomfort glaringly obvious.

“Good,” she said, and I couldn’t help myself. I turned to look at her, and it was a punch to the gut.

Her dark curls sat atop her head in a neat bun, pulled away from her face and neck. Her eyes were a brand on my skin, the soft curve of her mouth pressed into a thin line.

And yet, she was still beautiful. Still so otherworldly.

“Is there anything you need-”

“Hayden? Is that you?”

Like a switch had been flipped, Hayden’s eyes shuttered and her lips spread into a smile.

Robotic. Stiff.

“Janine,” she greeted, her gaze on someone behind me.
“What a surprise.”

Hayden's tone implied that it was anything *but* a surprise.

I turned to the woman who'd interrupted us, her long golden curls bouncing with each step. She ignored me entirely, something I was grateful for, and greeted Hayden with two air kisses.

"I heard from my dear Lily that you bought another little gem and I just *had* to see it for myself!" Janine gushed. "You're buying up all the diamonds; there's nothing left for the rest of us."

"Just good business," Hayden replied. "I've been in the game for a long time; long enough to know a good investment when I see one."

I fixed my gaze on Hayden's impassive face, studying the stiffness in her shoulders and the cruel arch in her brow. This was not someone Hayden considered a friend, I surmised. But a slight tug in my gut told me there was a lot more to their history.

"As ruthless as ever, I see," Janine tittered, her voice high and saccharine. It grated on my ears and I longed to gouge my eardrums out. "It's a shame you don't visit the Bella Nostra anymore; we all miss you terribly."

I could have left.

But I couldn't tear my gaze away from the ice in Hayden's eyes. This new side of Hayden that proved her business was her priority.

More than her rejection.

“You barely notice my absence, Janine.” Hayden smirked. “Besides, I’d only bore you all with my life story.”

Janine’s eyes lit up as though she’d like nothing more than to hear every single facet of Hayden’s life. And not for a good reason.

“I doubt that,” she countered. “We’d all love to hear about how well the Jones business is doing.”

“Then you’d have to ask my parents,” Hayden drawled. “I don’t work for Jones Co.”

“Oh, silly me. How could I forget you ditching your family business and going out on your own.”

I swallowed a scoff. Janine was as transparent as glass. What I couldn’t quite understand was why Hayden entertained it.

“Considering it’s been almost two decades,” Hayden crooned, a corner of her lips kicking up into a satisfied smirk. “I’m surprised you forgot.”

Janine’s spine stiffened and I bit down on my lower lip to keep my own smile hidden.

“Yes, well,” she paused, adjusting her expensive pinstripe jacket. “If you cared to visit more often, I’d remember. So, how *is* H Corp doing? All these new acquisitions must have your hands full.”

“What makes you think I’d have my hands full?”

“Oh, you know.” Janine chuckled. “I remember how close to the chest you played your cards. I imagine you still hate delegating where you should.”

Hayden cocked her head in thought. “Funny,” she purred, pointing at me. “Janine, I’d like you to meet this store’s manager. Her name is Frankie and she runs the store so I don’t have to, and does a better job of it than I could anyway.”

Janine turned owlish eyes on me, and I didn’t miss the flash of disdain in her eyes. “Lovely,” she huffed.

“And you’ll find that each of my *many* businesses have equally competent managers that leave me enough time to run my corporation.”

Janine cleared her throat, clearly uncomfortable, but Hayden didn’t stop.

My heart thudded in my chest.

“But, a word of advice,” she said, taking a single step closer to Janine as if she really was going to give her the secret to running a successful business. “Success is usually easier when you keep your nose *out* of other people’s business.”

Janine gasped at the blatant jab and stalked off without another word, the echoing clack of her heels fading as she left.

Unable to stop myself, I let out a breathless chuckle, my thoughts a whirlwind of questions I refused to ask.

“Enjoy the show, did you?”

I sucked in a breath, my smile slipping off my face instantly. “Just wondering how many Janines you have to deal with on a daily basis.” I shrugged. “I can’t imagine how draining they must be.”

I turned around and left before she could say anything, my head spinning with so many new possibilities.

Hayden protected her empire, fiercely and ruthlessly, from people who pretended to be her friends. Was that why she kept everyone at arm’s length? Why she preferred casual relationships? The embarrassment clinging to my thoughts told me not to care. I’d learned one thing, at the very least.

I couldn’t ever let Hayden know about Mom’s health or my job at June’s store.

“You’re already here?”

“In the back!” I called, wiping down one of the latest stock drops. I heard June’s footsteps echoing as she walked toward the back of the store.

“Oh, God, I completely forgot there was a delivery today!” she whined, rushing over to help me unpack.

I gently batted her hands away. “You weren’t supposed to come in today, remember?” I scolded, picking up another box and running the knife through the tape. “So you wouldn’t have had to remember the delivery.”

“But I should have remembered,” she mumbled, leaning her hip against the stacked boxes.

“No, you’re supposed to be planning your wedding,” I told her. “I don’t want you to worry about the store when you should be enjoying this, okay?”

June frowned at me, her eyes a little sad. “I know I already changed the opening times but,” she paused, taking a deep breath like she was getting ready for me to fight back, “are you sure it isn’t too much? I don’t know how the hell you’re working both jobs right now.”

I dusted my hands off and shrugged. “In my experience,” I told her, “it’s easier to do something when you don’t think about it too much. If I start thinking about Mom, the store, your store, I’d probably lose my mind.”

“You’re the epitome of blissful ignorance and I have half a mind to commit you right now,” June accused.

“But then you’d have no one to take care of your store and you’d have to get married in the stock room,” I teased.

I didn’t tell her I’d had a grand total of two hours’ sleep.

I didn’t want her to worry.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The First 'Aha' Moment

Hayden

My fingernail tapped a steady rhythm on the glass top of my desk, my mind elsewhere. Specifically, and rather reluctantly, on Frankie. The circles beneath her hazel eyes had darkened, the dips of her cheeks hollowed out.

“Hayden, Miss Voss is here to see you,” Marina said, flashing me a warm smile.

“Thank God,” I murmured, the pressure in my chest easing slightly.

“I’m so glad you’re happy to see me,” Reid said as she walked in. She didn’t bother flopping down onto the sofa, or even tossing her purse onto it. She walked right up to my desk and sat in the chair in front of me.

“You say that like I’m never happy to see you.” I chuckled. “You know you’re my favorite Cameron stand in.”

“No, you just pretend to be inconvenienced by it. Plus, Cameron *wishes* she was as lovely as I am,” she said with a wink. Her expression sobered. “How are you holding up?”

I shrugged, leaning back into my chair. “Haven’t really thought about it, to be honest.”

“Ah, yes.” She sighed, her grin widening. “If you don’t acknowledge the thing, it doesn’t exist, right?”

“Pretty *and* smart,” I teased her. She flipped me off and I laughed. She was right; I didn’t want to deal with it, so I refused to think about it.

“Well, there’s no use trying to get you to talk when you don’t want to,” she remarked. “What’d you call me here for? I doubt it’s just for my sparkling personality.”

“I wanted your thoughts on something,” I said, sitting forward and resting my elbows on the desk.

“Ooh, this sounds interesting already,” Reid said, lacing her fingers together conspiratorially. “Do tell.”

“I’ve... *discovered* that Frankie is working another job.”

Reid blinked at me. “She’s what?”

I cleared my throat. “She’s working another job,” I repeated.

“How the fuck did you find that out?”

“I’m not proud of it,” I admitted, glancing away. “But I saw her when I was on my way to a restaurant in the area. She walked into a music store and... didn’t come out for almost three hours.”

Reid’s brows crawled toward her hairline. “And how would you know she didn’t leave for almost three hours?”

Heat crept up the back of my neck. “I had Kelly drop me off at the restaurant and circle back,” I muttered, hating the shame that wrapped around each word as it left my mouth. “I did some digging after that, and found out that Frankie is good friends with the owner of that store, and she’s pulling extra shifts when she’s done at Ivey’s.”

“So she’s helping a friend,” Reid reasoned. “No harm in that, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, my gut tightening. “But if that were the case, why is she running herself ragged?”

“What are you saying?”

I dragged a hand through my hair, knowing exactly how it all sounded to Reid. “She’s dead tired every day,” I explained, not meeting her eyes. “She’s gonna burn out and then-”

“And then what, Hayden?” Reid pushed.

Her suggestive tone stiffened my spine.

Too close, I thought. *This was business*. I had to protect my investment.

“I need her at the top of her game so that I can focus on things that need my attention,” I hedged.

Reid leveled an all too knowing look at me, and said nothing.

My heart lodged itself in my throat as I walked into the store, my nerves an uncomfortable bramble of knots and anxiety.

Just business.

“Hey, Hayden!” Blanca greeted, and I spared her a tight smile.

“Is Frankie in yet?” I asked, and Blanca nodded.

“She’s out back with Joe.”

“Thanks.”

The store bustled around me as I made my way to the back. The loading bay doors were open, the heat of summer rolling into the air conditioned store.

“Hey, Joe,” I said, spying the older man directing a lorry back into the bay. He raised a hand in greeting before continuing with his task.

I glanced around, looking for Frankie. I walked around to the back, sidestepping the smaller boxes near the wall.

“There you are.”

Frankie jumped a little, whirling around and almost dropping the case of fresh tomatoes in her arms. “Oh, uhm, hi,” she said awkwardly. She adjusted her hold on the case.

“Can I talk to you?”

She nodded and set the case down on the trolley, brushing her hands off on her jeans.

“Should we talk in the staff room?” she asked.

I studied her appearance; the purple bruises hanging below her tired eyes, the downward curve of her lips and the hunch in her shoulders.

“Yeah.”

We walked back inside in silence, and I followed two paces behind her. The store turned to a blur, my focus intent on the back of her head.

I ran through the how’s and why’s, and what I’d ask her. It wouldn’t be a fun conversation. I was shoved back to reality by the snick of the staff room door behind me.

Frankie and I stood alone in the room, looking at each other, a hundred emotions hanging between us.

I cleared my throat. “So,” I began, walking over to the table and leaning against it. “You work at a music store, too.”

Not a question.

Her eyes went wide for a split second before she schooled her face into a neutral expression.

“What gives you that idea?” she asked defensively.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “We both know you’re far too intelligent to play dumb,” I told her, watching the color flood her cheeks.

“And you didn’t actually answer my question,” she argued.

My brows raised at the blatant defiance, an entirely different heat sizzling in my lower abdomen. “I have my ways,” I said, dodging.

“Right, of course.” She scoffed. “Money gets you just about everything.”

My jaw clenched tight around the retort aching to leap off my tongue. “Usually,” I drawled. “But sometimes, good old charm is enough to get what I want.”

She rolled her eyes. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you do,” I said calmly. “I know you’ve been pulling shifts at the music store down the street.”

Her hands curled into fists at her sides, her lips pressed into a thin, angry line. “What I do in my personal time has nothing to do with you.”

Her words stung but I refused to let it show. “No, but your health has everything to do with me,” I said, regretting the words the second they were out.

Frankie stared at me, her lips parted slightly. The confusion was clear as day on her face, and I hated myself for saying it.

“My health is *none* of your business,” she said quietly.

“It is when it’s impacting my store.”

“I’m so sorry it’s such an inconvenience for you,” she muttered.

“It’s not an inconvenience,” I replied. “I want to know why you’re running yourself into the ground.”

“I- I’m not,” she stammered. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

“Jesus, *fine*, okay.” She exhaled, her voice drained of all fight. “I took the job because I need the money.”

I stared at her, thoughts churning. Despite my gut instinct begging me to leave it alone, I had to know why she hadn’t come to me.

“Why wouldn’t you just-,” I frowned. “*Ask* for a raise? Or just ask for help?”

“I’m helping a friend out,” she said, avoiding the question. “She’s getting married soon and doesn’t have much time to run her store and still plan an entire wedding.”

“How magnanimous of you,” I said. She shot me a glare. “But that doesn’t tell me why you didn’t just ask me for help instead.”

Frankie wound her arms around herself, her gaze fixed on a spot just above my shoulder.

“Because I don’t want you to think I’m using you for money,” she admitted, and her words shook me to my core. I stared at her blankly. “I’m not interested in being indebted to you either.”

“What?”

“I don’t have the kind of money you have,” she explained, her cheeks bright red. “And I know what people will do to get it. We barely know each other, and it’s a family matter anyway-”

“A family matter?” I cut in, my mind whirling, trying to piece together the tiny shreds of information she offered. “Did

something happen?”

Frankie groaned and sat on the small sofa. “My mom is in the hospital,” she finally confessed, and my heart sank. “And she won’t be discharged any time soon. I can’t bear the thought of my dad working right now, so I told June I’d help her out for extra cash.”

“Frankie,” I began, but she interrupted me.

“Don’t,” she said, her voice turning watery. “Don’t do that. I don’t want pity.”

“I don’t pity you,” I said softly. “I just- can we talk about this?”

“Why?”

“Because you seem like you need an ear to listen,” I said.

She stared at me, a thousand emotions flitting across her face before a soft giggle slipped through her lips. “Fine.” She sighed. “I guess you’re right. At least I don’t have to worry about you getting all coddly with me.”

I frowned but she continued, “I guess I can tell you why I’m so difficult to deal with, especially when it comes to my parents’ store.”

“I can figure that one out quite easily,” I murmured.

“Then you understand why I feel responsible for the store,” she said. I nodded. “My parents dropped their lives to open this store, to make sure I was taken care of. That other people like me would always be taken care of. They made sure I had

time to do the things I loved, like playing guitar, and I *owe* it to them to take care of this place. Of them.”

“You play guitar?”

Frankie nodded. “Whenever I have time,” she said. “At the music store, if it’s quiet enough. But I can give it up if it means that my parents are happy.”

Something ached in my chest, twisting like the tip of a dagger, but I didn’t say a word.

It wasn’t my place. I’d made sure that it would never be my place.

“You know,” I said instead. “You’re doing a great job of protecting the store. Not that I want to steal it away, but you’re a serious hellcat when it comes to making sure nothing changes.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she grumbled. “I’ve heard it from everyone.”

“It’s admirable,” I told her. Her eyes shot up to mine. “Not everyone has something dear enough to protect so fiercely. It’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

I pushed away from the table, getting ready to leave. The floor swayed beneath my feet, my mind unbalanced with everything Frankie had just admitted.

And whether or not it was true.

“So, you’re not gonna chew me out over the other job?”

I scoffed, a little offended that she'd expected me to haul her over the coals for it. "No, Frankie," I said, straightening the cuffs of my jacket. "Like you said, your personal time is none of my business."

I walked toward the door, trying to come to terms with the fact that maybe, just maybe, Frankie really wasn't interested in my money.

I pulled the door open and paused, looking back at her.

"Just remember to take care of yourself too," I reminded her. "I don't want to find you passed out after closing hours again."

Chapter Twenty-Five

An Alternate Universe of Sorts

Frankie

“Still on your feet, honey?” Vanessa said by way of greeting. I rolled my eyes. “Looks like I’m gonna win that bet.”

I frowned. “What bet?” I demanded.

“Joe thought you’d be tapped out in two weeks.” She shrugged.

“And you?”

“I know you way better than that,” she said with a wink. “So don’t let me down.”

I chuckled at the villainous waggle of her brows. “How could you hustle poor old Joe like that?” I scolded her.

“Oh, no,” she deadpanned. “Believe me when I say he had it coming. He owes me.”

“All right, I’ll take your word for it.”

“Are you doing all right, though?” she asked. “I don’t care about the bet; I want you to be healthy.”

“Fuck, do I really look that bad?” I sighed, a sad smile on my face. “Everyone keeps telling me how terrible I look.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Frankie,” Vanessa said, her voice uncharacteristically serious. “I know you too well, and I know you think working harder is the solution to just about everything.”

“I promise I’m taking care of myself, okay?”

“Mhmm, as well as your dad is taking care of himself?”

“Hey!”

“Yours is a family that lives in a glass house, and my, my, my do you love throwing stones,” she said, the implication glaringly obvious.

“And you have no filter,” I retorted, unable to come up with anything witty to say to that.

“Guilty as charged,” she sang. “Are we expecting company today?”

“You mean Hayden?”

She pulled her apron over her head, tying it in place and tugging the now-pink beads out of her collar. “She was very obviously absent for a little while,” she said, the undertone in her words needling. “Everything okay on that front?”

“Vee, could we maybe not talk about it right now?”

“Wha-”

“Good morning, ladies.”

Vanessa spun around, her eyes wide as she beheld Hayden walking toward us.

“Wasn’t expecting you today,” Vanessa said, recovering easily. “Can I get you a coffee?”

“I’d love that, please,” Hayden said, her smile soft and easy.

I watched her carefully, wondering how she’d react after finding out about my second job. And the reasons behind it.

“You too, Frankie?”

I hummed automatically before wrenching my gaze away and back to Vanessa. She watched me expectantly.

“Coffee?” she said again.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Please.”

I knew she saw right through me, but I couldn’t find the defiance to defend myself just then.

The longer Hayden existed in my world, the more mysterious she became. Just when I thought I had her figured out, she turned into a completely different person.

Always shattering my expectations.

She fascinated me. The juxtaposition of her kindness and ruthlessness intrigued me. Maybe I just wanted to hold onto the idea that the very first Hayden I’d met was the truest one. The closest to the real Hayden I’d been allowed to see.

“You look rested,” Hayden said, and it took me a second to realize she was talking to me. Looking right at me.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I guess so.”

“I’m glad,” she said. “Can’t have my favorite employee dragging her feet around.”

I choked on my spit and Vanessa quickly swooped in to cover it up.

“Hey, I thought I was your favorite,” she said playfully, setting Hayden’s cup in front of her. She slid mine over to me and I mouthed a silent ‘thank you’.

“What can I say?” Hayden shrugged. “You’re all so amazing, I have a hard time picking just one. Frankie’s special.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Vanessa said, and I struggled to keep my expression neutral.

What the hell was going on?

“Who wants to come up here and show the class what we just learned?”

At once, fifteen little hands shot into the air, followed by a chorus of high-pitched “Me!”

“We’ll go one at a time, how about that?” I asked.

The kids screamed again and I set my guitar aside with a smile. As loud as they were, I couldn’t deny how cute they were.

One by one, in alphabetical order to make sure it was fair, the kids stood in front of the class, their small fingers plucking

slowly at the strings. They were clumsy efforts, littered with giggles and pleas to start over.

I was happy to indulge them. The kids' classes did more than enough to keep my mind occupied, giving me a break from the stress clinging to my back.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I ignored it, watching as Den, the tiniest of the group, waddled to the front. His little arms struggled to hold the guitar and I helped him sit down so he could rest the guitar on the ground. Even the smallest guitar was still too big for him. His hand smacked against the frets, the sounds jangled and disjointed, but his giggles weaved between the crying frets and it was adorable.

My phone vibrated again and I pulled it out, checking to make sure it wasn't Dad or Vee, before sliding it back into my back pocket.

Once every child had enjoyed their temporary spotlight I called for their attention to pack up.

“Teacher, we didn't hear you play!”

I glanced at my watch. “We still have a few minutes before your moms and dads come get you,” I conceded, lifting my guitar and settling it on my lap. As easily as a jigsaw piece, it fit between my upper thigh and underarm.

I didn't have anything I wanted to play in particular, so I let my fingers lead me into a simple melody, soft, soothing. Exactly what I needed to hear.

The group of kids sat in silence, their bright eyes wide as they watched me. I didn't mind. Playing for kids has always been easier. They were awed by the simplest tune, by just a few plucked strings. Granted, their attention span was... volatile at best. But that meant that I didn't have to think about impressing them or holding their attention.

A jingling bell signaled that someone had opened the door and I figured it was one of the parents. I didn't stop playing, not while all the kids were still enraptured. I'd been around kids long enough to know that if they were sitting still, the goal was keeping them that way.

When none of the kids moved I looked up to see if maybe a customer had walked in.

And froze.

Standing just inside the door, near the cashier's till, stood Hayden.

Watching me with a soft smile on her face.

Blood rushed to my face and I put the guitar down, clearing my throat and turning back to the kids. "Okay, let's get all our instruments put away," I told them, watching as they jumped to their feet and set about putting their instruments back on the various stands.

I tried to ignore Hayden, to ignore the prickling realization that no one outside my immediate family had ever heard me play. Much less the woman I was sure I was falling for.

One by one, the kids left with their parents, and I waved them out as they went.

Keenly aware of Hayden's attention.

By the time the last kid left, Hayden had paced further into the store. Closer to me. There was no way I could keep pretending I hadn't noticed her.

"I'm surprised to see you here," I said, wiping down the acoustic guitar I'd been using. "Are you following me around now?"

Hayden chuckled, her hair pulled into a low ponytail. Her finery had also vanished, replaced by a simple pair of black jeans and an oversized button down shirt. And sneakers.

"I just fancied a walk," she said flippantly, her green eyes sparkling. "And I ended up here."

I didn't allow myself to remember what had happened the last time she'd 'gone for a walk'.

"That's quite a walk," I noted, keeping my eyes on the guitar.

"I had a lot on my mind."

I hummed, the absurdity of the situation a little too much to grasp.

"How long have you been playing?" she asked.

"Oh, shit." I pondered, my brows pulling together. "More than twenty years, I guess?"

"Did you ever think about pursuing it?"

I laughed. “You mean, professionally?”

“Yeah, why is that so funny?”

I shook my head, the heat of her gaze burning into the side of my face. “I never had the time to get any better at it,” I explained. It couldn’t hurt to be honest. “And when my parents started getting too old to run the store alone I wanted to help. It’s just a hobby.”

“A hobby you don’t make time for,” Hayden said, and she sounded almost sad about it.

“People have to make sacrifices all the time.” I shrugged, knowing that she’d understand. “It happens.”

“Too often.”

“Hayden’s here again?” Vanessa whispered, huddled in close in case Hayden overheard her.

“I know,” I hissed back, keeping my eyes forward. I didn’t want it to look like we were gossiping. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Did you get in trouble again?” Vanessa teased, smiling nonchalantly as another customer walked by.

“What?! Why would you assume *I’m* the one in trouble?”

Vanessa turned to look at me, her expression schooled into a ‘really?’. “Need I remind you of the very public arguments the two of you have already had?” she asked, cocking a brow at

me. I grumbled something unintelligible and she smirked. “Didn’t think so.”

“Just because we’ve had words doesn’t mean she’s here so often because of me.”

At that, Vanessa laughed loud enough to catch everyone’s attention, including Hayden’s.

I melted below the counter, just out of sight, and swatted Vanessa’s calf. “Would you keep it down?” I whisper-shouted.

Vanessa’s cackles grew louder and I buried my face in my hands.

“Are you worried that she’ll come over here and see your bright red face?”

“I’m actually hoping she’ll come over to tell you to shut up.”

“That’s not very nice; I’d never tell Vanessa to shut up.”

I swallowed my groan and slowly climbed back up to my feet.

Hayden stood on the other side of the counter, her eyes soft as she watched me appear from my hiding spot.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly.

“Hi, yourself.” She smirked. “Everything okay over here?”

“Yeah, totally,” I said.

Her eyes twinkled. “Is Frankie giving you hell, Vanessa?”

My jaw fell to the ground between my feet and Vanessa howled with laughter.

“I’m feeling very attacked right now,” I said, unable to keep the amusement from my voice.

“Do you want to file a complaint with HR?”

I stuck my tongue out at Vanessa, but every bit of my attention zeroed in on the small dimple in Hayden’s cheek. I’d never noticed it before.

“No, because you’re probably *their* favorite, too.”

Vanessa pinched my cheek and earned an eye roll as I swatted her hand away.

Hayden’s phone rang and she quickly excused herself to take it outside.

I glared at Vanessa. “Why are you smiling like the cat that ate the cream?” I mumbled, eyes narrowed at the suggestive wink she sent my way.

“It’s so painfully obvious.” She giggled, wiping down her workstation as if I was asking about the weather.

“Care to enlighten me?”

“Hayden,” she clarified, and my cheeks turned warm.

“What about her?”

“She’s so into you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Past Follows

Hayden

“See you tomorrow, Vee!” Frankie called, waving as Vanessa got into her car and drove off.

She finished locking up, double and triple checking the locks and security system out of what looked like habit.

The sun was beginning to disappear behind the horizon, casting long, cool shadows stretching out to swallow up more and more of the city. Glancing around, I took a deep breath, relishing in the crisp breeze whispering through the buildings. I closed the last few feet between us, calling out to her as soon as I was close enough.

“Done for the day?”

My voice caught her off guard, but the warmth in her answering smile sent a pleasant thrill through me.

“Just locked up,” she answered, turning with her hands shoved deep in her pockets. “Out for a walk?”

I looked around, up into the few trees that had slowly turned amber in the dry heat. “It’s finally cool enough to walk

without sweating through my eyeballs,” I joked. I swallowed a little before asking: “Want to join me?”

Her eyes widened a little and her cheeks turned a light shade of pink. “Sure,” she said, walking towards me. Her steps were cautious, as if she wasn’t sure of herself.

I waited until she stood in front of me. “Wonderful.”

We fell in step together, the silence so different to what it once was. Where it was once tense, awkward, and charged, it was now calm. Comfortable.

As much as I wanted to hear her voice, hear about her day and everything that might have happened while I wasn’t there...

I was happy to just enjoy the warmth of her company.

I shook my head.

“Something on your mind?” she asked, her head tilted toward me. Her voice was quiet.

I frowned and lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Usually,” I admitted, mouth tugging into a smile. “But it’s boring stuff; I don’t want to darken the evening.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said flatly. “I’m not asking out of courtesy. If you want to talk about it, go ahead.”

“Really?” I smiled. “Usually people just ask because they’re expected to, out of social etiquette.”

“I’ve never really been great at taking social cues.”

“Lucky for me.”

“So, what is it?” she asked. “You don’t have to talk about it if you really don’t want to, but I don’t mind. Think of me as a free therapist.”

“I’ve been around for far too long to think anything is ever truly *free*.” I laughed. “What do you want in return?”

“Do I have to want something in return?”

I paused at that, unable to keep my eyes off her serene face. She meant it.

“Isn’t that the point of everything?” I quipped, trying to inject a little amusement into my voice. “Give and take, push and pull?”

“No, some people do things because they want to.” She shrugged. She stopped on the sidewalk, attention pulled away to a group of buskers on the other side of the street.

Her gaze darted up and down the street before she reached back and grabbed my hand. “Come on!” she said and dragged me across the busy street. “Don’t fall behind.”

Before I could catch up with her she’d turned back to look at me, her burnished curls wild in the wind and her face bright with excitement. My stomach clenched tight, my heart thudding, and we reached the other side too fast. She let my hand go but my skin still prickled where she’d touched me.

“I remember them,” she explained, just a little out of breath. She looked at me with a grin. “They used to perform in the subway. I’d listen every day before school.”

She turned her attention back to the group of performing musicians, her joy almost palpable.

Infectious.

I felt my own smile spread, watching her clap along with the artists, any sign of exhaustion or stress melting out of her body. I was grateful that the music was loud enough to drown out my shaky laugh.

I'd have stayed there beside her for hours, soaking up the quiet joy that rolled off her, but the buskers wrapped up their performance and Frankie darted forward, dropping a handful of bills into the open guitar case. She chatted with the musicians, her face animated, her hands waving around like she couldn't help herself.

“Hayden?”

The warmth that Frankie had left behind drained down to my feet and washed away like water down a creek. I turned, praying that I was hallucinating, or maybe just heard wrong. But I hadn't.

Natalie stood a few paces away, looking exactly the same as the day she'd broken my heart.

Frankie

My heart beat wildly in my chest, the rush of serotonin riding me hard as I waved the musicians off. I turned around, eager to talk to Hayden about their performance or what we might do next.

But she wasn't beside me anymore.

I frowned, finding her a good distance away, talking to someone else. I hung back, not wanting to interrupt. But there was something in the stiff edge of her shoulders, the harsh tilt of her chin, that pushed me forward. Slowly, I neared them, noticing that there were two women talking to Hayden, but Hayden said nothing.

My heart lurched and instinct forced my hand out, gently holding her upper arm.

“Hayden?”

She looked at me, her movements jerky and stiff. Her face was a careful mask of stone; cold and impenetrable.

But the agony in her eyes left me speechless for a moment.

“Oh, who's this?” one of the women asked, her smile dripping honey. I glanced away from Hayden, taking in the tall, beautiful woman in front of us.

“Frankie,” I said coolly. “And you are?”

“Natalie,” she said, flipping her long auburn hair over her shoulder. Her chestnut brown eyes roved over me from head to toe and back up, her lip curling in distaste. “But most people call me Nat.”

I would do no such thing, but I nodded anyway, my grasp on Hayden’s arm sliding lower.

“How do you know each other?”

Natalie’s dark eyes darted over to Hayden, her smirk growing when Hayden said nothing.

“I’m Hayden’s ex. And this is my wife, Selene.”

The revelation hit me like a bus, but I fought the urge to look at Hayden, to see what those words did to her.

“Nice to meet you,” I lied, sensing the hostility boiling over beside me. Hayden’s displeasure was a living thing, twining with a pain I could never truly comprehend.

“Likewise,” Natalie drawled. “I never imagined I’d run into you on the street. Let alone see you with a new girlfriend.”

“I can’t say I’m happy about it,” Hayden muttered, but Natalie laughed.

“You used to be so much fun,” she said, her fingers lacing with her wife’s. As if taunting Hayden with it. “You need to ease up.”

“You need to back off,” I said, my gut burning with anger. “Or are you still obsessed with Hayden?”

“Excuse me?” Natalie blinked in offense and her wife’s jaw dropped.

“You must still be obsessed if you came this far to flaunt your lovely wife,” I pointed out, the acid on my tongue white-hot. “Take it from me, it’s pretty pathetic. If you’ve moved on, then act like it.”

Natalie opened her mouth, a babble of curses and retorts tripping over each other. I didn’t care to hear any of it.

I wrapped a hand around Hayden’s wrist. “Let’s go.”

I turned on my heel and stalked off, Hayden’s hand firmly gripped in my own.

“The nerve!” I huffed, my face hot with indignation. “I can’t believe she’d just flaunt her wife like that and c- wait.”

I skidded to a halt, forcing Hayden to stop as well.

She looked at me, her expression blank.

“I have an idea,” I said, the pain in her eyes twisting something in my chest. “Will you come with me?”

She only nodded, and it bugged me. We set off, back toward the store, but my mind was filled with questions.

How much had Natalie hurt Hayden for her to react that way? To shut down so completely? I didn’t dare ask any of the questions that chased themselves around my head.

I unlocked the gates and shouldered the door open, the chill of the night doing nothing to cool the heat of my skin.

“Come in,” I said, my voice gentler. Hayden obeyed, sidling past me and waiting as I locked up again behind us. “Just a sec.”

I fumbled against the wall for the light switches, flipping them one by one until the store was bathed in a warm light.

“What are you doing?” Hayden finally asked, and I frowned.

“Distracting you.” I shrugged. “Obviously.”

“Are you going to make me do stock take?”

“Ah, so you’re making jokes again.” I smiled, leading her into the kitchen area behind Blanca’s workstation. “That means you have an appetite.”

“An appetite?”

“Yeah, I don’t know about you but I’m starving,” I said, flipping the stove plates on and fishing around for the ingredients I needed. “Unless you’d rather not eat?”

She was quiet for a moment and I took that as her acquiescence. I laid out the pans and ingredients on the counter between us, mentally running through the list in my head.

“You’re going to cook?” Hayden asked slowly. “For me?”

“Us,” I corrected, my cheeks warm. “I’m hungry, and Mom taught me that if I’m gonna cook, I should cook for everyone around me.”

“How,” Hayden paused, picking at her fingernails. “How is she?”

“Mom?” I asked, busying myself with preparing the vegetables. “I was supposed to go and visit her today, but June asked me to come in during lunch to help a customer out with a custom drum set. When I called Dad, he said she was doing okay.”

I dragged in a deep breath, measuring out a cup of water and tossing it into the pot. “But I don’t know how true that is.”

“What do you mean?”

“My parents have always tried to protect me,” I explained, moving over to the chopping board and dicing up the vegetables. “Even now, he’d lie so that I wouldn’t freak out. He doesn’t know that his lying voice is obvious.”

Hayden chuckled quietly. “Lying voice?”

“Yeah,” I said. “His voice goes all cutesy, like he’s talking to a toddler. He swears he doesn’t do it, but when I went home for dinner last month he tried to convince me he hadn’t been eating his weight in fried food by saying ‘I pwomise Dad didn’t do that’.”

Hayden laughed a little more that time, and some of the tension in my chest eased. I kept my eyes on the diced vegetables, scraping them off the board and into the pot with practiced ease.

“And he believes he doesn’t sound like that?” A bit more life had wriggled its way back into her voice.

“He honestly does.” I chuckled. “Mom tried to convince him but he told her she was biased against him.”

“Your parents sound wonderful,” she said.

I smiled. “They are. They’re something special, even though they’re characters straight out of a comic book.”

“Your childhood must have been straight out of a comic book too.”

“Oh, God, it was insane.” I laughed. I hovered over the stove, stirring mindlessly and launching into one of my favorite stories.

Hayden laughed, her shoulders slowly relaxing, the pain in her eyes receding. I wondered, not for the first time, if Hayden was a lot lonelier than she let on.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

One Chance

Frankie

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

I stared at my hands, my fingers laced together between my knees.

“Yeah, I am,” I told Nikkie.

She nodded from her spot on my sofa, her legs curled beneath her. She hugged one of my fluffy pillows to her chest, her mug of tea cooling on the coffee table between us.

It was early; early enough that her usually perfectly styled hair was still wrapped up in a haphazard knot on top of her head, her thick-framed glasses perched on the end of her small nose.

“I’m just asking.” She yawned, covering her mouth with a sweater paw. “I know she’s hot and everything, but she really hurt you, and I don’t want to have to go to jail for murdering one of the richest women in the country.”

I rolled my eyes and she spoke through another yawn.

“I mean, I’ll do it,” she mumbled. “But I won’t be happy about it.”

“You’re alarmingly happy about being given a motive to commit actual murder,” I accused her.

She offered me a lazy smile in response. “You, my darling, know me too well.”

“But back to the point,” I said, curling my hands around my half empty coffee mug. “I think she’s been through a shit ton of, well, *shit*. What if all she needs is someone to show her that she’s worth more than her money?”

Nikkie pouted at me, her brows furrowed unhappily. “You’re too much of a romantic, Frankie,” she accused. “I don’t want you to get hurt, and I’m worried that the next time will be even worse.”

“I know, and I get it,” I assured her. “But how would you turn out if you’d been used your entire life and then cast aside once people were done with you?”

“You don’t know for sure that that’s what happened,” she countered.

“Could you stop playing the devil’s advocate for *two seconds*, Nikkie?” I groaned. “You’re the one who’s always setting me up on dates, some of which, may I remind you, were awful. Hell, that’s the reason I met Hayden in the first place!”

“Yes, and wonderful women don’t just fall out of the sky and into your lap!” she exclaimed. “Trust me, I know.”

“I do, too,” I reminded her. “But you were also the one who told me to stop being so guarded, remember?”

She whined in defeat and threw her head back onto the sofa. “Fine, but answer me this: why Hayden?”

I replied without hesitation, “Why not Hayden?”

“You’re willing to, sorry, could you repeat that?”

I rolled my eyes at Vanessa’s theatrical disbelief.

“I *said* that I’m willing to be a little more amenable to some of the changes that Hayden wants to make.”

“Christ, is it gonna snow or something- Joe! Come over here!”

“Don’t make it into something bigger than it needs to be.” I groaned. “I already got an earful from Nikkie and I don’t need another one from you or Joe.”

“Oh, we’re not going to give you an earful.” She laughed. “We just wanna make sure you didn’t fall out of bed and hit your head real hard.”

“You are not helping.” I sighed. “Why is this such a major surprise?”

“You changing your mind at all?” Joe said, finally close enough to hear Vanessa tease me. “That’s as common as pigs flying over a blue moon.”

“Har har,” I drawled. “I’m kind of nervous about the whole thing, could you maybe be a little more supportive?”

“We always are.” Vanessa smiled. “We just hate seeing you all grown. You’re thirty and yet we still feel like you’re our little whirlwind, you know?”

“Okay, less mush please?” I laughed. “I’m going to ask Hayden to meet me for lunch to talk it all over. Is that okay?”

Surprisingly, Joe was the one who answered. “Of course it is,” he said. “We’re more than capable of holding down the fort so you can go to lunch with the boss.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking a deep breath. I pulled out my phone, walking away from Joe and Vanessa for good measure to call Hayden.

She answered almost immediately. “This is a surprise,” she greeted, but I could hear the smile in her voice.

“Well, get ready for another,” I joked, my heart fluttering just a little. “Are you free for lunch?”

The brief beat of silence on the other end of the line told me I had surprised her.

“I can be,” she answered eventually.

“Perfect, I’ll text you.”

The handful of hours that stretched out between my call with Hayden and lunch were torturous. The minutes crawled by as

if they were trying to light a fire under the anxiety already burning in my gut.

I wasn't nervous, exactly, just anxious.

But eventually, we sat across from one another, menus in hand.

"You've never been here?" I asked her.

She shook her head, taking in the quaint decor with an impressed frown. "I may have heard about it a while ago," she said, turning back to me. "But I've never had the time to drop by."

"I thought you were obsessed with food."

"Oh, I am." She chuckled. "So you can understand that missing out on this meant I was really busy."

"I'm glad you could meet me here, then," I said with a smile.

"Why am I here?" she asked, folding her arms and leaning forward.

"I wanted to talk to you about Ivey's," I explained, taking a steadying breath. "I know I haven't made the transition easy and I've thrown a lot of proverbial spanners into the works."

"Indeed." She chuckled. "But I wouldn't be where I am today if a little challenge threw me off."

I grinned. "Well, I want to work with you." I clarified. "I want to hear the ideas and changes you have planned for the store. I want to try to be more helpful, if I can."

Hayden's grin softened around the corners, her eyes boring into mine.

Like she was searching for any hint of a lie.

"As much as I love hearing those words," she said, her voice taking on a harsher edge, a business-like tone I was all-too familiar with. "What brought on the sudden change of heart?"

"I'd be a lot more help to my parents if I helped improve the store where necessary instead of doing everything I could to keep it the same."

"Is that all?"

It was the way she asked, the hint of concern that maybe seeing her ex had made me feel pity for her, that churned in my gut.

"There are a lot of reasons," I admitted. "Many of them are personal, but the ones that count are the ones I can share. I want to be able to help my parents, to make sure they're happy and healthy, and not worried about the store. But I also want to make sure that, even after all these changes, it's still Ivey's. If that makes sense."

The suspicion cleared from her eyes, her face relaxing a little. "I'm really happy to hear that, Frankie," she said. "I've been honest from the beginning, and you know that I want Ivey's to retain its family values. I just want it to grow, so that it can reach more people who need it."

I nodded, the anxiety slowly releasing its grip on my lungs. “I also wanted to apologize,” I added.

“What for?”

“For making things a lot more difficult than they should have been.”

“That’s normal,” she said, her fingers toying with a long gold chain around her neck. “I wouldn’t have expected any less, and you weren’t being difficult; you were being protective. A lot of businesses force themselves to move with the times because they’re afraid of falling behind. But by adopting modern practices or technology, they lose the competitive edge that made them unique.”

I listened, enraptured by her, by the quiet confidence she held when talking about business. The hard-earned wisdom that, when paired with her razor-sharp intellect, was lethal.

“Which is why I wanted you to be a part of the transition,” she continued. “As someone who not only works there, but practically grew up in the store, you have a unique insight into what truly makes Ivey’s special. I don’t want to lose that.”

“I don’t know what to say to that,” I confessed. “I’ve only ever known business as it is at Ivey’s. So when I was faced with these sudden changes, I hated everything about it.”

“Again, that’s normal.” Hayden shrugged. “I’m kinda surprised you didn’t throw me out that first day.”

I blinked in surprise. “Has that actually happened to you?” I blanched.

Hayden smothered her laugh with her hand. “I was once escorted out by security in a building I’d just bought,” she explained.

A bubble of laughter escaped my lips and I quickly covered my mouth. “I’m so sorry.” I giggled. “What did you do to be escorted out? And, wait, wouldn’t they have been *your* security detail?”

“They were.” She chuckled. “I’d made the grave mistake of suggesting the conference walls be made glass instead of the hideous mustard yellow and the previous owner was *not* a fan.”

“To be fair.” I shrugged. “I’d have been pretty mad if you changed the color scheme of the deli.”

“Just the deli?” she asked, brows furrowed.

I nodded. “I chose those colors when I was twelve,” I explained, my voice edged toward mischief. “I consider that my very first masterpiece.”

This time, Hayden didn’t try to smother her laughter. “I’d been wondering who thought mauve and electric green were a good pair.”

Something in my chest fluttered at the easy conversation, how simple it was to talk about meaningless things while we ate. And how comfortable the bouts of silence felt.

Too soon, the waiter dropped off the check and I snatched it off the table before Hayden could reach for it.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her brow raised quizzically.

I pulled out my card and waved it in response. “Paying, obviously.”

“But I-”

“I invited you,” I interrupted, handing the waiter my card. “Remember?”

She went silent, confusion scrawled across her face.

I thanked the waiter and we walked out, Hayden walking a pace behind me.

“Thank you,” she said to me once we stepped out onto the sidewalk.

I looked at her, wondering how many times she’d been given the chance to say those words when she was usually on the giving end.

I smiled wide. “You’re welcome.”

“Oh my God, you are so whipped.”

I glared at Nikkie, who rifled through my kitchen in search of snacks. As usual.

“I paid for the lunch that *I* invited her to,” I explained for what must have been the fourth time. “How does that make me whipped?”

“She’s a billionaire, sweetie,” Nikkie said, as if I needed a reminder. “And you’re working two jobs to pay for your mom’s medical bills, *which*, might I add, you won’t let me help with either.”

“Because it’s my responsibility.” I groaned. “You know I hate owing people anything. If I can do it myself, I will.”

“And you’re going to single handedly prove to this ridiculously wealthy goddess of a woman that she’s worth loving, yeah, I know.”

“So, what’s the issue?”

“No one’s ever done that for me.” She pouted.

The brief flare of irritation died before it had even reached my lips. “Aw, Nikkie,” I cooed, pulling her out of the pantry and hugging her tight. “You’re such a sweet little thing.”

She mumbled something unintelligible against my shoulder and I laughed.

“You’ll get something even better, okay?” I promised her, knowing that whoever caught Nikkie’s eye would be divine incarnate. “You’ll see.”

“Whatever, go be all lovey dovey with your boss,” she mumbled.

A pang of fear sounded through me, because I realized my crush had very quickly turned into something far more serious. And there might not be a way out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Unexpected

Hayden

“There’s a new show I’m working at next week,” Vinny said, his cheek pressed to the hollow of my bare stomach.

I ran absent fingers through his thick hair, my thoughts straying far away. “Where is it?” I asked vacantly, replying on autopilot.

“It’s in Italy,” he mumbled, his voice deep and rough with sleep. “I’m going to visit my sister while I’m there.”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Mm, it’s been a long while since I last saw her. I wonder if she’ll recognize me.”

“Of course she will,” I told him, my fingernails lightly scratching his scalp. He groaned in response, almost purring under my touch. “It’s not like you’ve been away for years.”

“No, but I still worry.”

“Why?”

“My family was,” he paused, then corrected himself, “*is* very traditional. My career choice wasn’t exactly celebrated.”

“You’re worried she won’t want to see you?”

“More or less,” he admitted.

Guilt seeped into my gut, icy, oily, and sickening. Vinny would have been worried about his trip home for weeks, there was no doubt about it. And I’d pretty much ignored him.

“Vinny,” I said evenly, threading my fingers through the waves at the base of his neck. “I can’t promise you anything because I don’t know what your sister is like, but I know that she’d be proud of you for going back. Whether you left on good terms or otherwise, being the bigger person will always be the right thing to do.”

He hummed softly, burying his face in my skin. “You think so?”

“I hope so,” I admitted. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

He lifted his head immediately, shifting his body until he lay on top of me, his chin propped on my chest. “I’m all ears.”

“I think that after your trip home, we should stop seeing each other.”

His full lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes downcast in thought. “If that’s what you want, amore,” he said.

I toyed with the few strands of hair that fell over his brow, searching for the right words to offer him. “I don’t think it’s

about what I want so much as what's best for both of us, don't you think?"

He dragged in a long breath. "You know," he began, a small smile tugging his lips. "When I first approached you all those months ago, I was sure you would laugh at me and tell me to run off with the other kids."

I laughed. "Really?"

He nodded. "But then you talked to me, and I think it was the first time I felt at home in this stupidly huge city."

I remembered the night he was talking about. I remembered his swagger, the way his nerves peeked through his over-confident facade as he tried to flirt with me.

"I hadn't been planning on entertaining you," I admitted to him.

He frowned. "I knew it!"

"Relax." I chuckled, brushing the pads of my thumbs over his high cheekbones. "You've spent the last few months in my bed, why are you offended?"

"True." He smirked, pressing a kiss to the dip between my breasts.

"But I think our time has come to an end."

Truthfully, my interest had slowly dwindled. I knew the cause. Even if I refused to admit it out loud.

And Vinny would be flitting about the globe soon anyway.

“It was fun, amore,” he hummed. He leaned in and kissed me softly; a farewell kiss.

“Yes, it was.”

Without Vinny around to provide a distraction my thoughts took every opportunity to turn back to Frankie. I was quickly losing my mind.

“Hayden,” Marina said, knocking on the open door more out of habit than courtesy. “It’s after seven already.”

A quick glance at the clock on the wall told me she was right. “Oh God, you’re right,” I groaned, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes until tiny lights burst behind my eyelids. “Why are you still here?”

Confusion flitted across her soft features. “Because you’re still here.”

“No, Jesus, please go home,” I gaped. She jumped a little at my outburst. “Wait, does that mean that all these nights you’ve been working late, you’ve been staying because of me?”

“Uhm, yes?” she said uncertainly.

I wanted to punch myself. “No, Marina, when you’re done for the day, you can leave,” I told her. “Just because I’m staying late doesn’t mean you have to as well.”

Her mouth dropped into a little ‘o’, her cheeks pink.

“Go home,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She left shortly after that and I stared at my computer screen for a long moment.

Work had become my only distraction, and I'd happily flung myself into every new project, chasing the frenzied rush it brought to my schedule.

"Why am I not surprised that you're chained to your desk?"

"Because your powers of clairvoyance are astonishing," I told Reid, not bothering to look up from my computer. "Or you've invented a spectacular device that can detect when I've been at my desk for more than seven hours in one sitting."

"Neither, smart ass," she huffed. "I just so happened to bump into Vincenzo today."

"How convenient," I said pointedly, but she shrugged the suggestion off.

"He told me you'd broken things off."

"He's not lying." I sighed.

"What happened?"

"The same as always," I lied, shifting in my chair. "I got bored and figured it was time to move on."

"Ah, so who are you seeing now?"

"What?"

"When you get bored, it's usually because you've found a shiny new toy," she explained. "So, who is it?"

"No one, okay?" I answered, my words a little harsh. "I lost interest, and that's all there is to it."

“Bullshit.” Reid smirked. “That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“So what?” I huffed, pressing at the aching hole in my chest. “It was time for Vinny to move on and I was tired of him.”

“Hayden, please be serious,” she said. “You always do this; you always try to lie when you should know better. We’ve been friends forever. You do have someone new, but you won’t let yourself have that, so you’re working through the night like a freight train.”

My shoulders slumped. “Do you have a kink for always being right?” I grumbled, trying to dodge the topic with a feeble attempt at humor. “Is that what gets you off?”

“As a matter of fact, yeah.”

“You’re insufferable.”

She walked over to my desk and sat on the very edge, her arms folded across her chest and her eyes hard. “I didn’t want to have to tell you this.” She sighed. “I can’t believe it’s come to this but... I miss your stupid jokes.”

My startled laugh cut through the silence, getting louder as Reid’s ‘confession’ sank in.

“It must be pretty serious for you to admit you like my dad jokes,” I teased.

“And this is exactly why I didn’t to tell you,” she grumbled. Her phone vibrated in her hand and she checked it with a sigh. “I’ve gotta go, but stop fighting things so hard, okay? Let

things happen instead of stepping into the ring with every good thing that comes your way.”

“Welcome back,” Blanca greeted as soon as I stepped foot in the store.

“Hey, Blanca, how are your courses going?”

“Really well!” Her eyes lit up as she dove into her latest syllabus. “We’re working on a brand new alternative to soy and the options are fascinating. I’m hoping that we might be able to introduce some of the alternatives into Ivey’s stock soon.”

“Sounds brilliant,” I said.

It was one of the best parts of having money; using it to help others grow. Blanca flourished immediately.

I wandered around the store when Blanca had to help a customer, aimlessly inspecting the shelves I’d memorized ages ago. I wasn’t sure why I’d visited the store.

“Hayden, hi.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. “Hey, Frankie.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were visiting today; I would have come to see you.”

“Relax, I’m not here to micromanage you.” I chuckled, the tightness in my chest loosening ever so slightly.

Frankie smiled back at me.

She'd pulled her curls into a ponytail with a few strands slipping free from her hair band to frame her face. She wore a dress again, so similar to the one she'd worn not too long ago. I didn't let my thoughts linger there for too long.

"Then, I'm going to go out back to check on the week's deliveries," she said, lifting a hand in farewell.

I watched her jog off, her sneakers squeaking on the tiled floors. I stood there for a moment before Vanessa called out to me.

"Hey boss! Your coffee is ready!"

True to her word, a cappuccino waited on the counter for me when I got to the café.

"Thanks, Vanessa," I said, taking a long, delicious sip. "I don't know how you do it, but these always taste better than the last one."

"It's a gift." She shrugged, and I didn't doubt it.

"How are things going?" I asked her, sitting on one of the empty stools on the other side of the counter.

"Smoothly," she mused. "Especially since Frankie loosened the reins a little bit."

I huffed a quiet laugh.

Indeed, since Frankie had treated me to lunch, she'd tried hard to be a lot more accommodating. Even going as far as entertaining investors herself, although that may have been more for my benefit than hers.

“She’s full of surprises,” I said, taking another sip of my coffee.

Vanessa hummed thoughtfully, her gaze on me. “You’ve probably heard it a hundred times in the short amount of time you’ve been here,” she began. “But you’ll keep hearing it; she’s a special person.”

“I’m learning that.”

“When we first opened the store, foot traffic was very slow,” Vanessa said. “But she’d gather up all her favorite toys and books and hold free talent shows every afternoon after school.”

“Talent shows?” I chuckled. I remembered the melody she plucked from the guitar. “I’m guessing she was quite the little musician.”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“I found out about her working at the music store,” I admitted, and Vanessa’s eyes went wide as dinner plates.

“Then you know about her mom, too?”

I nodded. “I got the sense that she wasn’t happy to tell me,” I said, glancing down at my cup. I rolled it between my palms. “Is her mom’s situation serious?”

Vanessa smiled sadly. “I can’t really say,” she murmured. “It’s not my place. Just know that everything Frankie does, she does it from a good place. She wants everyone around her to be happy, and sometimes she forgets that burdens are best dealt with when they’re shared.”

I nodded, wondering if Vanessa meant for me to take her words to heart.

I tried not to think about it for too long either.

“So these talent shows,” I prompted, wanting to hear more about Frankie’s childhood. “How long did she do them for?”

“Every day for almost three months.” Vanessa chuckled. “She was so dedicated to the cause. Before she really understood that the store had been opened for her, she was convinced that her talent shows would bring people in from all over the country.”

“And? How did she do?”

Vanessa smiled softly. “Most of the suppliers we work with right now are contracted to us thanks to Frankie’s little talent shows.”

And that, somehow, didn’t surprise me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

A Close Call

Frankie

I sprinted down the packed sidewalk, dodging the other passers-by to keep from colliding with them. Even though it was relatively early there was little to no room on the sidewalk for headlong sprints, so I relented.

But with just a few hours' sleep in my back pocket I'd missed my alarm, meaning I was late.

Very late.

I shot past a convenience store but quickly circled back, the aching grumble in my stomach too painful to ignore any longer. As fast as I could, I snatched my favorite brand of granola bars off the shelf, paid for it, and high-tailed it to my parents' store before it opened.

With my packed schedule, I could barely remember to eat every ten hours.

I'd gotten home well after ten last night, my feet as heavy as lead as I shuffled into my apartment. I'd only had enough

energy to wash the day's grime from my skin before collapsing into bed.

I'd missed breakfast again thanks to my butchered sleep schedule.

I shook the thought from my mind, focusing on the list of things I had to get done before the store opened.

By the time I arrived, the blaring horns of cabs filled the street but the store was still locked. Somehow, I'd made it in before anyone else and I was grateful for that small mercy as I tore open my granola bar and wolfed it down.

I tossed the wrapper into the trash can behind the cashier's till and dusted my hands off, ready to go about prepping the store.

I'd grabbed a broom from the supply closet when the door chimed, and suddenly, my throat began to close. I cleared my throat, setting the broom aside and rushing to the trash can behind the cashier.

Because this felt all too familiar.

I fished the wrapper out and smoothed it flat, my heart sinking. Nuts.

"Frankie?"

My head snapped up to Hayden, my voice trapped in my swelling throat.

I needed to get to the ER. Fast.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she asked, close enough to see the panic on my face. Her gaze dropped to my lips. “Fuck, what did you eat?”

I handed her the crumpled up wrapper, the floor swaying dangerously under my feet, and she took it from me, her hand replacing the wrapper.

“Okay, you’re gonna be fine,” she said calmly, her hand locking around my waist to keep me upright. My lips were already tingling. “I’m taking you to the ER.”

I couldn’t speak, just let her lead me through the store and out onto the sidewalk, her free hand fishing her phone out of her pocket. She held her phone to her ear as she opened the passenger door of a sleek, black car for me, and ushered me inside.

“Marina, have Kelly meet me at the hospital,” she said, her voice even but firm. “And call Joe and Vanessa; tell them I’m taking Frankie to the ER.”

She shut the door and ran around to the driver’s side, getting in and hitting the ignition in one fluid motion.

My hands trembled on the seat belt and she noticed.

“Here,” she said gently, reaching over to click the belt in place.

Without another word, she sped out into traffic, weaving in and out with a practiced ease I would have been impressed by. If I could breathe.

The edges of my vision turned dark and I blindly threw a hand out toward her, the panic seizing my lungs.

“I’m here,” she said, grabbing my hand and squeezing gently. “We’re almost there, I promise. I want you to squeeze my hand if you’re about pass out; I don’t want you getting hurt on the dashboard.”

I nodded, trying to count the tiny, forced breaths scraping in and out of my throat.

Hayden swore as she turned a corner and hit traffic, but the darkness spread across my vision and I squeezed her hand as hard as I could. The last thing I remembered was Hayden’s arm bracing me against the seat to keep me from falling head first into the dash board.

Bright white fluorescent bulbs glared down at me the moment I opened my eyes. I hissed at the burn, trying to shield my eyes but finding an IV strapped to my arm.

Oh. Right.

I passed out in Hayden’s car.

I glanced around, looking for any sign of her and found nothing. *Maybe she had urgent work to get back to*, I mused. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had. I was sure her assistant hadn’t blocked out time to take me to the ER. As gently as I could, I shifted my body into a sitting position, and nausea roiled in my gut.

Just then, Hayden's voice filtered into the room and I perked up, straining my ears to hear more.

"Thanks, Doctor," she said. "I'll take her home and keep an eye on her."

My cheeks heated and my heart sped up because surely, *surely* Hayden wouldn't actually keep an eye on me.

Right?

The door opened and she walked in, her mouth pulled into a tight line that softened when she saw me.

"You're up," she said, crossing the distance to my bed. "How do you feel?"

"Disgusting," I admitted. Her frown deepened and she looked as though she was about to call the doctor so I quickly added, "But that's completely normal! The medication usually makes me feel nauseous for a while after."

She narrowed her eyes at me but let it go.

"The doctor is going to come and check on you before he discharges you," she explained, even though I knew the process by heart. Part of me loved that she was still there, that she hadn't just called Vanessa to come and take care of me.

"I should be okay to go," I told her. "I just need to be unplugged."

"Unplugged," she breathed, huffing a quiet laugh.

I lifted my arms in answer, showing her the drips stuck in both of them.

“Can’t go anywhere when I’m hooked up to half a pharmacy,” I pointed out.

“I’m so relieved that you’ve got your sense of humor back.” Hayden sighed. “I can’t say that walking in and seeing your lips turn blue first thing in the morning was laugh-worthy.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, sobering up immediately. “It was a stupid mistake and I’m so lucky you came in when you did. Thank you.”

Hayden folded her arms across her chest. “What was a stupid mistake?”

“I was in a rush this morning and grabbed the wrong granola bar,” I explained. “There’s only one brand that doesn’t have nuts in it and it looked a lot like the others.”

The doctor walked in before Hayden could respond, and he ran the usual tests to make sure my body was responding to the medication.

It always did, and in the monotony of his rehearsed warnings I found myself staring at Hayden. She listened to the doctor intently, her brows drawn down on concentration. She nodded almost imperceptibly here and there, and it was just...

Adorable.

Once he’d finally signed off on my chart and discharged me, Hayden waited for me to change.

“You good to go?” she asked when I reemerged from the bathroom.

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “Uh, could you maybe drop me off at home first?” I asked, fidgeting with the hem of my t-shirt. “I wanna pick up some food before heading back to the store.”

“You’re not going back to the store,” Hayden said, shaking her head as she unlocked her car.

“Then where...?”

She jerked her chin at the passenger door. “Get in.”

Hayden spent the majority of the car ride on the phone with various assistants and partners, handing out orders. Exhaustion clung to my bones, and I slipped in and out of consciousness.

I must have fallen asleep because suddenly Hayden was at the passenger door, her hands gently undoing my seatbelt.

“Can you walk?” she asked, her hands braced on my forearms.

I nodded a little blearily and struggled to get out of the low car. “Why is your car trying to become one with the fucking road?” I groused, huffing to my feet and trying my best not to eat dirt.

Hayden chuckled, her breath soft against the shell of my ear. “You can make jokes once you’ve slept and then eaten something bigger than a granola bar,” she countered, walking me up the few steps into her house.

“Fair point.”

She walked me inside, leading me directly to the living room. I took one look at the long sofa and my body could have collapsed in relief.

“Woah, Frankie, hey,” Hayden said, her arm tightening around my waist to keep me upright. “Don’t pass out on me again.”

A hint of panic tinged her words and I waved her off. “I’m just tired,” I murmured through a yawn. “Had a super late shift at June’s last night.”

“Yeah, and I bet you had a long shift the night before that as well.”

“Maybe,” I hedged, flopping down onto the sofa with a graceless groan.

“Careful,” Hayden scolded, her hands fluttering over me worriedly. “Hold on, okay? I’ll grab a pillow and a blanket.”

She hurried off and I mumbled something in reply. I sank into the softness of the sofa, feeling safe.

Hayden

I rushed back into the living room, arms laden with pillows and blankets in case the sofa was too uncomfortable.

“You still with me, Frankie?” I asked as I walked in. I scanned her still figure on the sofa and sighed. “Not anymore, I guess.”

As gently as I could, I lifted her head and put a pillow beneath her, but I could have dropped a nuclear warhead and she would have probably slept right through it.

I draped the blanket over her and she shifted slightly, making me freeze in case I woke her. But she only hummed and snuggled deeper into the blanket. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief and stepped back. There was no way around it now.

I sat on the sofa beside her sleeping form, listening to her deep, steady breaths, counting each one to keep myself from falling apart. Frankie mumbled in her sleep, one of her hands reaching out and fisting in the fabric of my shirt. I chuckled softly, running my fingers through the wild curls of her hair, losing myself to the silkiness and the quiet intimacy.

I pulled out my phone and answered a few texts while she slept soundly beside me, and ordered some food for her to eat the moment she woke up.

It was quiet, but not the kind of quiet that ate me up. Despite the frantic start to my day, a part of me felt more at ease with

Frankie beside me.

Where I could take care of her.

It was something I hadn't allowed myself to experience for years, and it was something I was too proud to admit that I missed. And even though I fought it, even though I tried my best to keep them standing, one by one, the walls I'd built came crumbling down.

Frankie woke up a few hours later, her face puffy with sleep and her eyes still half-closed.

"You're still here," she mumbled when she saw me, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"I live here," I teased, but it was half-hearted at best. "How do you feel?"

She blew out a long breath, staring at nothing for a moment before nodding. "Much better," she said.

I reached forward and grabbed the takeout off the coffee table and set it on her lap. "You'll feel even better once you've eaten this."

She stuck out her bottom lip petulantly but opened the container anyway, taking small bites.

I grabbed the water bottle off the coffee table and offered it to her.

"Mm, thanks," she said around a mouthful of pad thai.

I watched her eat, making sure she ate every last bite before
I said, “Anytime.”

Chapter Thirty

Breaking

Hayden

“Coward,” I muttered, staring at my reflection in the mirror above my basin. More than a week had passed since Frankie’s trip to the hospital, and I’d once again retreated to the safety of my own isolation.

I was falling for her.

Hard.

And it terrified me.

A loud, thunderous bang echoed from the front door of my city apartment, making me jump out of my skin. I stalked over and flung the door open, ready to cuss whoever it was the fuck out-

“I come in peace.”

I blinked at Elliot, at her hands raised as if she was trying to placate me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, instinctually looking around for Cameron.

“It’s just me,” she said. “I’ve been sent on what Reid describes as a diplomatic mission.”

I sighed and stood aside, holding the door wide enough for Elliot to come in.

“Thanks,” she said. “Oh, wow.”

I closed the door and looked back at her. She gaped at the interior, her eyes wide.

“Sorry,” I murmured, feeling a little self-conscious at the obvious lack of living in the apartment. “I don’t really stay here much, just when I need to get away.”

Elliot shook her head, turning in a full circle to take it all in. “It’s gorgeous!”

I laughed, walking over to the kitchen and opening the refrigerator. “It’s not that different from Cam’s,” I told her. “Water?”

“No, I’m okay, thank you.”

“So tell me about this diplomatic mission you’ve been saddled with.”

Elliot hopped up into one of the stools, her feet swinging freely. “You’ve missed the last two brunch dates,” she said sadly. “And they seem to think you’ll listen if I came to invite you personally.”

I scoffed, just a little amused. “I can’t say my friends don’t know me.” I sighed.

Elliot’s eyes lit up. “So you’ll come?”

“Of course I will,” I joked. “You know you’re my favorite.”

“Thank God, because Reid promised to resort to some really questionable things if I failed.”

“Don’t take her too seriously,” I noted. “She’s only ever half serious.”

Elliot leveled a dead stare at me. “That is still terrifying.”

As promised, I attended brunch the next day, steeling myself for the inevitable lecture I’d get from my friends. The only compromise was that we agreed to meet at the restaurant Frankie had taken me to.

Elliot was already there, alone at our reserved table, her bottom lip secured between her teeth.

“Thank God you’re here early,” she whined as soon as her eyes landed on me. She hopped out of her seat and pulled me into a hug.

“Everything okay?” I asked her, rubbing her back soothingly.

Her heart thrashed inside her chest, hard enough that I felt it beating against mine. “I need to talk to you about something before Cam gets here,” she said, her eyes wide. “Or any of the others, really.”

“Go ahead.”

She sat in the seat next to mine and dragged in a deep breath. “I wanna propose to Cam,” she said in one quick exhale.

It took all of five seconds for what she’d said to register before my heart lurched and I grabbed her face in excitement. “You do?”

She nodded, her cheeks turning pink in my palms.

“She’s going to cry.” I chuckled wetly.

“You think so?”

I let go and grabbed her hands. “Are you kidding? She’ll fall apart the moment you ask her,” I told her. “When are you planning on proposing?”

“Okay, don’t judge but I’ve kind of had everything planned out for... a long time.”

I laughed because *of course* she’d planned it all out already. It was Elliot.

“Well? Spill!” I urged her, excitement fluttering in my chest.

“Okay, so you know she loves that one art gallery, right?”

“She loves *all* of them.” I laughed. “But go on.”

“I’ve been trying my hand at painting,” she explained. “I’m no good at it, but I- don’t laugh, I painted her something. And I asked the curator for a favor. I’m gonna take her there and propose in front of the painting.”

My chest squeezed so tightly that I worried I wouldn’t be able to breathe.

“What do you think?” she asked nervously.

“You’re so fucking cheesy,” I whined, overwhelmed. “I said she was gonna cry before, but now? Jesus, Elliot, she might just have a full blown breakdown in public. Have you always been this romantic?”

“As long as that’s a good thing.” Elliot giggled shyly. “I think I’d probably die of embarrassment if she didn’t like it.”

“She’ll love whatever you do, El.” I chuckled. “Because it’s *you* and the two of you are so grossly in love. It’s both adorable and sickening.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Please just let me know when you do it,” I told her. “*I have* to see her reaction.”

Elliot’s smile was watery but Reid walked in before she could say anything.

I sent her a wink, the overwhelming joy for my dearest friend warming me from the inside out.

Elliot’s was a love that I’d never seen before; unquestioned and unabashed. She loved Cameron so much that even I often felt a little dumbstruck by it. It certainly explained Cam’s starry-eyed gaze when she arrived.

It made me think of Frankie, of how it might have felt to be loved like that by her.

“God, I have missed your face,” Alex said, swooping down to plant a sloppy, loud kiss on my cheek.

“It *is* a pretty amazing face,” I teased, but instead of the usual eye roll I would have gotten, Alex only beamed at me. “But I missed you guys too, I guess.”

Rather than pry and interrogate me, demanding to know what might have happened or why I hadn’t seen them in so long, they fell into a natural pattern, talking, laughing, and joking together. It eased the anxiety lingering in my gut.

“How did you find this place?” Taylor asked me, looking around at the decor much the same way I had when Frankie had brought me here. “You always find the most amazing food spots.”

“Actually, Frankie found it,” I admitted.

“Really?” Reid asked, impressed. “She’s got a good eye.”

“The food is incredible,” I went on, trying to steer the conversation away from questions about Frankie.

“Did Frankie tell you about this place or did she bring you here?”

I narrowed my eyes at Reid, who only smiled back at me, expectant.

“We had a business lunch here a little while back. She even paid for it, if you’ll believe that.”

“I’m glad the two of you are civil enough to have lunch together now,” Cam interjected, a brow raised at my slip-up. I hadn’t meant to tell them about Frankie paying for lunch.

She and Reid looked at me plainly, and I knew they could see right through me.

“It’s great,” I said, clearing my throat. “We’re moving forward with some of the proposed changes and she’s agreed to meet investors with me.”

A familiar red flashed in the corner of my eye and I whipped around, convinced Frankie had just walked by.

But it wasn’t her, and I couldn’t ignore the way my heart sank a little.

“Hayden?” Reid said, her hand reaching out to squeeze mine. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, too embarrassed to admit I’d thought I’d seen Frankie.

Even more embarrassed to admit that I was unhappy it wasn’t her.

I forced a laugh and turned around in my seat. “I completely forgot to tell you guys I ran into Nat a couple of days ago.”

Silence descended on our table, five pairs of eyes staring back at me.

Cam was the first to speak, and I was grateful for it. The silence was worse than anything they could say about it.

“Where?” she asked. “What happened?”

I lifted one shoulder, doing my best to appear indifferent despite the block of ice in my gut. “I was out for a walk after

work,” I told them. “With Frankie. She stopped to watch some buskers and that’s when I saw Nat. And her new wife.”

“Christ, she’s already married?” Alex spat, her lip curled in disgust.

I nodded, fighting to keep the rush of emotions from spilling over. “It’s not exactly a surprise.” I laughed, but it was forced, hollow. “She didn’t keep any of it a secret. But I didn’t take it so well, obviously.”

“Roll that back for a second; Frankie met Nat?” Reid clarified. “How did *that* go?”

“I think Frankie wanted to punch her,” I confessed, remembering that beautiful wildfire in her eyes as she stood in front of me.

Like she wanted to protect me.

Stupid, I thought. I was so hopelessly stupid for wishing I could even *want* a future with her when she’d leave me the same way Nat did.

“Have I mentioned that I already like her?” Reid breathed. “I really like her; when do we get to meet her officially?”

That snapped me back to the present instantly. “*Meet her?*” I echoed, confusion pinching my face. “Why would you want to meet her? You’ve never met anyone else from my previous acquisitions.”

“Come off it, Hayden,” Taylor scoffed. “Frankie is a lot more than just a part of an acquisition.”

“Not this again, please.” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I know you guys want me to settle down with someone and Frankie seems convenient, but it won’t happen.”

“Only because you’re so defiant,” Alex said evenly.

“No, it’s because I remember what it felt like when my whole world shattered,” I snapped, my patience wearing so thin, my body so tired of pretending that I didn’t care. “I remember what it felt like to have every tendril in my body go numb because I couldn’t stand thinking about her. It’s been ages and I still can’t form a complete sentence when she’s standing *right in front of me*. What if the next time, there’s no going back for me?”

My heart lodged itself into my throat, and my eyes burned with the confession I’d kept hidden for so, so long. “What if the next time, I don’t make it back?”

There.

It was out.

The deep-rooted terror that dogged my nightmares and hung over my head like a fucking guillotine. My lungs ached and every breath I took turned to ash on my tongue.

Cameron’s eyes glistened with tears I didn’t want to see. But it was Reid who stood up and walked over to me, hauling me out of my seat and crushing me in her arms.

She didn’t say anything for a long moment; she just held me tight and kept me from falling to pieces. I didn’t care that we were standing in the middle of a restaurant, or that people

might have been staring. I held onto Reid until I didn't feel like I'd fall off the face of the Earth.

Until my fists relaxed in her now-wrinkled shirt.

“There's nothing we can say that would ever make any of that okay,” Reid said softly, her hands running up and down my back. I focused on the gentle strokes, timing my breaths to each one. “But regardless of what happens, we'll always be here to make sure you do come back. Even if we have to crawl into whatever hole you disappear and pull you out ourselves.”

I nodded, willing away the sting in my eyes.

Later that day, when the wound in my chest was still fresh, I sat at my desk.

I read through the emails popping into my inbox, feeling a little like a marionette whose strings were cut.

And when Frankie's name lit up my phone screen, I didn't answer.

I turned my phone off.

Chapter Thirty-One

Hashing Things Out

Frankie

Hayden's sudden absence loomed over me. I scratched my head again and again, trying to figure out what the hell went wrong, but came up empty-handed.

“You look upset.”

I glanced up at Vanessa, whose brows pulled together in concern. I heaved a sigh and glanced back at the laptop screen in front of me.

“I wouldn't necessarily label it as ‘upset,’” I hedged, chewing the inside of my cheek. “More like annoyed and a little confused.”

“Hayden?” she guessed, and I nodded.

“She's disappeared again,” I said, desperately willing the dark thoughts to recede long enough for me to think clearly. “And I can't help but think it has nothing to do with business.”

“You mean, it's not because she runs an economic empire?” Vanessa clarified, but I was too worried to roll my eyes at her sarcasm.

“It’s bugging me,” I murmured, the discomfort in my chest twisting slightly. “I keep wishing she’d just walk through the door.”

“Why don’t you just go see her?”

I glared at Vanessa. “I’ve asked you and Joe to cover for me every time June’s needed help,” I deadpanned. “I can’t ask you to cover again when your kids have recitals coming up and Joe gets meaner in the fall.”

“We have to go through this shit every time.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead with the palm of her hand. “Listen, we’re family. You wanna go and confront your girlfriend about ghosting you? Go, I can handle the store for a few hours.”

“She’s not my- whatever, I can’t just leave, Vee,” I argued. “I have to help out at June’s tomorrow and it’s already cutting it close.”

Vanessa said nothing as she rummaged in her back pocket and fished out her car keys. She grabbed my hand and pressed the keys into my palm, all the while staring wide-eyed at me.

Daring me to argue.

“I don’t wanna hear it,” she whispered. “Just be back in time for closing because I need to feed the gremlins.”

I knew better than to argue, as much as I yearned to do it. I couldn’t shake the desperate urge to just see Hayden with my own eyes; see for myself that she was okay.

At least, as okay as she could be.

Vanessa saw the defeat cross my brow and beamed at me, triumph bright in her eyes. “Atta girl,” she said, giving me a gentle shove toward the door. “You can tell me all about your makeup when you get back.”

She paused and seemed to rethink her words. “On second thought,” she said, a slight frown marring her features, “don’t. I don’t wanna hear your sex stories.”

I laughed a little and left, my thoughts drifting to Hayden as I drove through the city.

As much as I tried, I couldn’t figure out why she’d pull away again unless there was something I’d said or done. Those thoughts chased me as I walked into the massive head office, grinning absently at the security guard as I passed him. He nodded, waving me on. I smiled at the memory of Hayden’s reaction the first time I’d visited her at her office.

The trip up to her office on the top floor was much the same. The elevator remained mercifully empty apart from a frazzled intern who’d muttered to himself all the way up to the sixth floor.

“Hello, Marina,” I greeted Hayden’s assistant, keeping my voice quiet because I didn’t want Hayden to know I was there just yet.

“Oh!” she glanced up, her pretty round eyes lighting up pleasantly. “Hi, Frankie. Here for Hayden, I’m guessing?”

“Is she free right now?”

Marina sighed, her lips tugging into a glum frown. “She’s been holed up in there all day,” she said. “Nothing will get her to come out except meetings.”

“Let me give it a try,” I said, the confidence in my voice ringing somewhat hollow. I swallowed. “I can’t promise she’ll come out though.”

Marina lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug. “Anything is better than her refusing coffee.” She pouted, glancing at the still-steaming mug on her desk.

“Is that for her?” I asked, pointing at the mug. Marina nodded. “I’ll take it to her.”

I picked up the mug and carefully carried it to the closed door, knocking on it twice.

“Not now, Marina,” came Hayden’s muffled voice. She sounded tired.

I ignored her and opened the door, walked in, and closed it behind me, my eyes on Hayden the entire time.

Pulled into a tight ponytail, her long curls brushed her shoulders as she worked, her eyes on the mass of documents in front of her.

“Marina, please,” she sighed, exasperation tinting her words. “I don’t have time for any impromptu meetings – anything, really.”

“Not even one cup of coffee?”

Her head shot up, wild eyes finding me and slowly focusing. “Frankie?” she murmured as if I’d disappear like a mirage in the desert.

“In the flesh,” I said, the barest hint of awkwardness prickling my skin.

“What are you doing here?”

There was no malice in her question, no irritation or anger. Just confusion.

“Marina said you weren’t drinking your coffee,” I answered, offering up a half-truth. I walked forward and set the coffee on her desk. “I had to see it for myself.”

The tips of her fingers circled the rim of the mug, her expression thoughtful.

“You came all the way here just to see if I was drinking coffee?” she joked.

“Well, it served as a nice excuse for security.” I chuckled. “But I really came here to ask if you were okay. If... if we were okay.”

Hayden’s hand retreated from the mug and hid in the cradle of her folded arms. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

I blew out a breath, searching for the words I needed. Words that wouldn’t push her further away. You haven’t been to the store in a while,” I said. “And after things between us got a little carried away, I wanted to come here and hash it out.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, wondering if saying what I really felt would do more harm than good.

To hell with it.

“And,” I added, meeting her solid gaze head-on, “I missed you.”

Hayden blinked in surprise, looking so disarmed for a moment, so unguarded, that I wanted to pull her into my arms.

We stared at each other for a breathless moment. I waited for her; waited for the surprise to fade from her eyes and the tension in her shoulders to melt away.

“Frankie,” she whispered, her eyes so, so bright. “We can’t.”

“It’s not about ‘can’ or ‘can’t’, Hayden,” I said calmly. “It’s about what we want. And I want you.”

But Hayden shook her head. “I can’t do this, Frankie,” she insisted, her eyes endlessly sad.

“Why?”

“Because I’m scared of you.”

My breath caught in my throat and came out as a weak choke. “Scared?” I asked weakly. “Of me?”

Hayden’s head dropped into her hands and she let loose a quiet, mirthless laugh. “Yeah.” She sighed. “Fuck. Look, I owe you an explanation, at least. Please sit down.”

Hesitantly, I did as she asked, taking the seat in front of her desk and waiting.

She dragged in a shaky breath and straightened her spine, her eyes focused on something behind me.

“The woman you met the other day,” she began, her voice drained of life. “Do you remember?”

“Natalie,” I answered instantly. “Your ex-girlfriend.”

Hayden’s grin was ruthless. “She was so much more than that once,” she breathed. “We were engaged.”

The new revelation hit me hard, and I fought to keep my expression neutral and open.

“For how long?”

“A year,” she answered. “Just long enough for her visa to be approved.”

The implication was clear.

And I hated Natalie even more, if possible.

To an extent.

“She broke things off once she’d gotten her green card approved?”

“And what a spectacular way she ended things,” Hayden scoffed. “Just weeks before the wedding she invited me to her final dress fitting. I was stupidly excited; I thought I’d have to wait until the day of the wedding to see her in her dress. But Selene was there. Holding her hand.”

Any neutrality I’d managed to hold onto slipped through my numb fingers.

“I won’t bore you with the melodrama,” she said, forcing a hollow laugh. “Suffice it to say that I swore off relationships months later. I thought I’d gotten over it, but obviously, it’s still... fresh.”

She glanced up at me, at the horror on my face, and managed a chuckle.

“Well, now you know,” she said with finality. “I can’t go through that again.”

It all fell into place; the pieces clicked together and, finally, I understood why she hated the very idea of long-term relationships.

I would have too.

And through the anguish in her voice, and the sadness in her eyes, I realized one very important thing. Hayden didn’t believe she was worth the fight.

My heart ached where it thudded in my chest.

“I understand,” I started, my voice rough with the tidal wave of emotion I fought to hold back. “Even though I’ve never had to experience anything like it. And I’m so grateful that you told me any of that, at all. But it doesn’t change the way I feel.”

“Oh yeah?” Hayden said, derision curling her upper lip. “How so?”

“I still know you’re worth fighting for.”

Hayden

Her confession clanged through me, words ringing like the peals of a million bells, and it was all I could do to stare at her. Frankie's mouth pressed into a defiant line, her eyes clear and unwavering.

Not a flicker of doubt in her gaze.

And suddenly, it was too much. The walls I'd hauled up time and again slipped from my grasp, my defenses laughably feeble.

And it was all because of this woman. The only person who'd managed to pole vault herself over those walls. Perhaps the only person who'd wanted to do it.

But what if I couldn't give her what she wanted?

"I- Frankie, I suck at relationships," I argued, weak and reluctant.

Because I wanted her to love me. I wanted her to care about me.

As much as I cared about her.

"So?" she countered. "I suck at playing the tuba, but we can learn."

And despite the weight pressing into my gut, despite the fresh wave of tears threatening to spill down my cheeks...

I giggled.

“Only you would crack a joke right now,” I murmured.

She shrugged innocently, the smirk on her full lips betraying her guilt.

“I’m not kidding,” she insisted. “I really suck at tuba. But if you’re willing to learn, so am I.”

“You’re sure about this?” I asked warily, my heartbeat speeding up. “You’re not just saying all of this?”

Frankie got to her feet and walked around my desk, one hand turning my chair so she could stand between my knees. I looked up at her, helpless, feeling more vulnerable than I had in my entire life.

Because I wanted a future with her.

Her fingertips grazed the arch of my cheekbone, gently enough that it hurt.

“I’m pretty stubborn,” she said quietly. “And I’m very sure of this; of you.”

Without any order from me, my hands drifted up along the outsides of her thighs, my palms coming to rest on her hips.

An odd ache writhed in my chest; longing and terror, yearning and hesitation.

“So,” she prompted, her voice so much softer. “Can we give this a shot?”

The fire burning behind her eyes left me speechless. I nodded, my fingers flexing in the softness of her denim.

Joy broke across her face like a fucking sunrise, her smile holding the warmth of daybreak, her fingers weightless on my skin. She tilted my face up, leaning down until less than an inch separated her lips from mine, and I was breathless.

She paused there, her eyes on mine as if she could hear the frantic drum of my heart.

Without hesitation, without a single ‘what if’ or ‘maybe we shouldn’t’, I closed the gap and pressed her lips to mine.

And in that simple touch, warm and impossibly soft, every emotion I’d fought came barreling down until I tasted the tang of my own tears. She hummed into the kiss, her palms holding my face as if I might break, but her hands shook as much as mine did. I slipped into the sweetness of it, let myself float in the safety of her hold, my mind quiet for the first time in years.

It was bliss.

Frankie pulled away too quickly, but I silenced my complaints, blinking blearily up at her.

Her cheeks glowed rose pink, her eyes shimmering. “Don’t cry,” she whispered, her thumbs wiping away the tears slipping down my cheeks.

I sniffled, looking for the embarrassment of crying in front of someone else but finding nothing.

“Sorry,” I breathed, unable to tear my gaze away from the serenity in her eyes. “I haven’t felt this much in forever. I’ll be a little rusty.”

She kissed my forehead, and on instinct my eyes closed, savoring the sweet gesture.

“You’ll get used to it- oh, hold on.”

She frowned, pulling her phone out of her back pocket. “It’s my dad,” she said, sliding her finger across the screen to answer. I looped my hands around the backs of her knees, thumbs caressing her thighs. “Hi, Dad, what’s up?”

A rushed garble echoed from her phone, and her brows pulled together. “Wait, slow down,” she said, panic edging her voice. “What did you say?”

Another warbled reply and Frankie’s knees went limp in my hold. “I’ll be right there.”

She hung up, her hands shaking violently.

“Frankie? What happened?”

Blood thundered in my ears, the sudden swing from happiness to fear jarring.

“My mom is in the ICU,” she said, fighting to get the words out. “She- Dad says she might not-”

Without a word, I got up and laced my fingers through hers. I grabbed my car keys and guided her out of the office.

“Marina, send Kelly with the rest of my things to the hospital, please,” I said as we passed her. She jumped but immediately picked up her phone to call Kelly.

Once in the elevator, I pulled Frankie into the circle of my arms, my heart quaking. “It’s gonna be okay.”

My voice rang hollow even in my own ears.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Other Side of Loneliness

Hayden

My feet burned inside my red bottomed heels. Not that I could complain, wearing heels to a hospital was hardly a smart move.

But for Frankie? The pain could take a back seat. All I cared about was making it right.

The wariness in her body after the hours-long wait to hear her mom was going to be okay seemed to seep into me too. I just wanted to hold her.

“I feel like I don’t have feet anymore,” she mumbled from behind me, shuffling along, her fingers pinching the hem of my jacket. “Where are we?”

“My place,” I said, keying the passcode into the keypad and opening the door. “Let’s get you out of your shoes, okay?”

She yawned as she crossed the threshold, tiny teardrops clinging to the corners of her eyes.

“I’ll call a cab,” she said, palming at her pockets in search of her phone.

“What the hell for?”

She looked up at me then, her face blank. “To go... home?”

“Absolutely not.” I snorted and shut the door behind her. She frowned at me quizzically and I sighed. “My place is closer to the hospital. And, maybe I wanna keep you close for a little while longer. Sue me.”

Her expression softened and she reached out to squeeze my hand. “Thank you,” she said. “Not just for, you know, letting me stay. But for everything else.”

I’d hardly done anything else worth thanking, but I loved hearing her sound even just a little less burdened.

“I ordered food,” I said and led her into the kitchen, where Pascal had set out our own little feast.

“All of this is for us?” She gaped, staring bug-eyed at the countertop that was so laden with food it looked like it might buckle.

“Pascal may have gone a little overboard.” I chuckled. “I did tell him to get some of everything; I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer to eat.”

Frankie blinked at me, her stomach grumbling quietly.

“Sounds like you might eat just about everything,” I teased, sliding the first plate of spring rolls toward her.

Her cheeks turned bright pink but she picked up a spring roll anyway, wolfing it down in an instant.

“That tastes amazing,” she whined, her eyes closed and her cheeks full. “Where did you get these from?”

“They’re brand new menu items for a franchise that I’m testing out,” I explained, grabbing a spring roll for myself and eating it.

It did taste amazing, obviously.

She was halfway through her third spring roll, some of the color returning to her pallid skin.

“Wine?” I offered, pushing myself off the edge of the counter and walking toward the wine cupboard.

“I’d kill for some right now, please,” she mumbled, and I grinned as she hopped up onto one of the barstools.

“Red, white, any preference?”

“Whatever’s tastiest.”

“That narrows it down,” I teased, but I opened the cupboard anyway, searching the racks of wines.

“You have a whole pantry for just wine?”

I glanced around to find her gaping at me. “These are just my favorites,” I explained. I pulled out a rich red and closed the door. “The rest are kept in the cellar downstairs.”

“Ah yes, silly me.” She nodded sarcastically. “How could I forget the entire cellar just downstairs?”

“If you’re energetic enough to talk smack,” I crooned, pouring her a glass and handing it to her, “then you can shovel a bit more food onto your plate. Go on.”

She'd already cleared the spring rolls and was eyeing the next dish hopefully. "What about you?" she asked, but I waved her off.

"I'll eat, don't you worry about me."

I watched her scarf down more food, the knot in my gut loosening with each bite she took.

We'd spent the better part of the day at the hospital. I knew that Frankie hadn't eaten anything since breakfast; I could see it in the slope of her spine, in the exhaustion dragging on her eyelids.

Once she claimed she was too full to even move, we sat together on the sofa. Frankie's head flopped back, resting on the back of the sofa, her eyelids fluttering.

"Are you sure you've eaten enough?" I pressed.

Blindly, she reached out and patted my thigh. "If I eat anything else," she panted. "I'm gonna ruin your expensive rugs."

I smiled at her little jab. "Hey," I said, prompting her to look at me. "What happened today – if you wanna talk, I'm here to listen."

She smiled tiredly and leaned forward, her lips brushing mine.

Almost instantly my heart rate doubled, slamming into my ribcage like it wanted to escape.

“What was that for?” I asked, a little embarrassed that I was already breathless.

Frankie shrugged and kissed me again. “Because,” she mumbled, teeth tugging gently on my lower lip, “I wanted to.” A kiss. “Because you look good.” Another kiss. “Because you’re always doing so much for everyone else.”

My heart fluttered hopelessly. My body turned pliable in her arms.

“Hard to argue with that,” I murmured, somehow managing to find a sliver of mischief while her hands explored the length of my body.

“Always so snarky,” she tsked. “Just shut up and let me kiss you.”

“Whatever you want.” I chuckled, losing grip on my composure the longer she swallowed my breaths.

“Finally,” she sighed, one of her hands looping around the back of my neck so she could deepen the kiss. Her other hand wandered around my waist, pushing at the restriction of my jacket.

Wordlessly, I shrugged it off, refusing to break away from her for even a second.

Despite the chill of the air-conditioned room heat spilled into my skin, burning where the tips of her fingers grazed my body.

“This is nice,” she purred, hooking her leg over my knee. “I could stay like this forever, I’d be happy.”

“This couch would get uncomfortable.” I chuckled, curling my fingers in her hair. “I bought it for the aesthetic; not comfort.”

“Then we can go someplace else,” she said simply, her fingertips brushing the line of my bra. “Somewhere cozy and comfy.”

I giggled into her lips. “Are you asking me to take you to bed, Frankie?” I whispered, enjoying the little tremble that skittered through her body. “Because my bed is quite possibly the comfiest place on this planet.”

Briefly, traitorously, my mind wondered if her thighs might be the comfiest spot, but I shoved the thoughts aside, my cheeks already warm.

“I didn’t know I had to spell it out,” she teased, her tongue snaking out to trace the space between my parted lips. My thoughts turned liquid for a minute.

“Then let’s go.”

I pulled her to her feet, swooping down to kiss her again as I awkwardly walked us backward toward the staircase on the far left.

“Do you intend to lead me there blind?”

“I don’t feel like stopping right now,” I murmured, the back of my left heel hooking the first step and almost sending me sprawling. “I know the layout of my own house.”

As it turned out, I may not have been in the best frame of mind. My feet repeatedly snagged on the glass steps and

Frankie's hold tightened with each stumble. We were a mess of giggles and whispers, our feet shuffling close together until finally, finally, my hand found the familiar handle of my bedroom door.

I didn't bother with the light switch. I didn't care to open my eyes just then, too wrapped up in the soft push and pull of her lips on mine. We shuffled until the backs of my knees hit the bed.

I sat down, pulling her down with me, enjoying the warm weight of her body on top of mine.

"Better?" I asked, though it was all my muddled mind could articulate in the moment. With my upper back against the plush headboard, I sprawled out underneath her.

She sighed contently, her body slowly relaxing into mine as she did. "Getting there." She groaned. Her fingertips trailed down the sides of my waist, her touch hot even through the silk of my shirt. "Could be a little better."

"How so?"

As if in answer, her fingers slipped under the soft fabric, white-hot against my skin.

"If you were wearing less," she purred, and the words sent heat pooling low in my gut, my thighs tensing with a sudden need.

"Well," I gasped, my back arching a little at the brush of her lips along my neck, "I aim to please."

She giggled softly, the sound lethal in its own way.

It was its own agony, watching her pull back and slowly undo the buttons of my shirt. She kissed each small patch of skin she undressed, her breath hot and her fingers lazy.

She started at the base of my throat, and kissed a slow trail down between my breasts, over my sternum, and down to my navel. She left my shirt open, the fabric splayed on either side of my body, and turned her attention to my bra.

Her index finger toyed with the hook that held my bra together, a satisfied hum slipping through her nose.

“Thank God for these bras,” she murmured, effortlessly unhooking my bra and freeing my breasts. A puff of relief zipped through me at the sudden lack of tension, like I could breathe easier.

Only for my breath to punch out of my lungs when Frankie bent down and pulled one of my nipples into her mouth.

“Fucking hell, Frankie,” I gasped, my muscles going loose with the soft, wet heat of her mouth on me. She hummed in response, one of her hands drifting to my other breast.

She wedged a knee between my thighs and pressed hard enough against my clit that I bucked into the friction.

And somewhere in the lust-fueled haze, a small, logical part of my brain recalled the exhaustion in her eyes.

“Frankie, hold on,” I said weakly, my fingers curling around her arm.

She pulled away, sitting back on her haunches and looking at me. “Are you okay?” she asked, her eyes a little wild.

“Fine,” I said, my laugh breathless. “But you’ve been on your feet all day; you should get some rest.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I balked at the mere thought of it, and she giggled.

“Me neither,” she murmured, her thumbs caressing the stiffened peaks of my nipples. “So why don’t you do us both a favor, and let someone else take care of you for once, hm?”

I pressed my lips together.

“Thank you,” she purred, kissing me once more before turning her attention back to my body.

She laved her tongue over one of my nipples while she pried my slacks off, moving between my breasts with a smattering of featherlight kisses.

I’d lost track of my own heartbeat; the rapid thud had turned to a steady hum, something I could scarcely hold onto for longer than a few breaths.

When her fingers curled around the waistband of my underwear, tugging them down my thighs and off my legs, my lungs shuddered.

“Don’t crush my head, okay?” she teased, her lips dragging across my lower abdomen, from one hip bone to the other. “On second thought... that’s not a bad way to go.”

A startled chuckle flew from my lips as her tongue flicked out over my clit. “I can’t say I’ll have any control once you

stop talking,” I panted, every nerve in my body keyed to the maximum.

The only warning she offered was a smug little hum before she closed her mouth around me.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned, my spine curving up and off the bed.

In the intoxicating heat of her mouth, her tongue slid between my folds, the tip teasing my entrance before sweeping back up to my clit. She repeated the same movement in little figure eights that had me seeing the very first steps to nirvana.

Her arms wrapped around my hips, her fingertips coming around to pull my folds apart.

All the easier for her tongue to dip inside me, teasing, hellishly slow, until I was whining.

“Frankie, that’s en- oh, shit!”

She dropped her weight onto the bed, fully relaxed while she drove me to the very edge of my own senses.

“I’m only just getting started,” she murmured, lifting her burning gaze to mine. Her chin was slick with my arousal, her tongue sweeping out over her bottom lip in satisfaction. “Don’t spoil my fun.”

I let my head fall back against the headboard, forced to watch as she maneuvered my body to her liking.

She bent one of my legs and pushed my thigh to my stomach, a hand braced against the back of that thigh while the other traced shapeless designs toward my soaking flesh.

She hollowed out her cheeks, the sudden pressure on my clit almost blinding and I scrambled for the surface, dragged under again and again with the force of the pleasure.

Her free hand caressed the curve of my ass, and her middle and ring fingers pressed inside me at an excruciating pace. And she pillowed her face on my thigh, getting comfortable as if she'd spend all night between my legs.

Part of me didn't doubt that she'd try, if she could.

If I was coherent enough, I might have complained. I might have pulled some sarcastic comment out to egg her on.

But my mouth only widened around a silent cry as the pressure built, the slow drag of her fingertips achingly delicious, her tongue relentless as it swirled around my abused clit.

I wouldn't- couldn't take much more.

My hips bucked up but she only hummed, pleased by the desperation searing through me.

Her fingers turned in me, the pads of her fingers pressed into my g spot and I lost a shattered breath.

I was there and not, solid yet not, the effervescent pleasure turning molten.

Consuming.

My breaths turned shallow and hitched in my throat, the muscles in my abdomen so tight I could barely breathe.

Ecstasy crackled through my veins, electric where it singed my nerves, bowing my back off the bed.

Stars burst behind my eyes, my fingers fisted in the sheets around me, Frankie's mouth coaxing more and more and more-

"Frankie, oh my God," I cried, my voice broken, rough with the force of my orgasm, my body loose and taut all at once.

She softened her grip on my body, her hold turning to caresses, the overwhelming thrust of her fingers now a comforting push and pull, drawing the last shudders from my trembling body.

But her mouth continued its assault on me, on the swollen bud of my clit, my spit-slick folds, and quivering thighs.

I lifted a shaky hand and threaded disoriented fingers through her curls.

"Please, Frankie," I whined, so far into overstimulation that my body fought to wriggle out of her hold. "Enough, enough."

She released me with a 'pop', kissing her way up to my lips.

"You're delicious," she purred, her voice low and gravelly. Her hands rubbed slow, comforting caresses into my skin, along my ribs, over my breasts, and down my stomach. "You look so sleepy now."

"Whatever you just wrung out of me was the very last of my energy," I gasped, my chest heaving. Indeed, my eyelids grew heavier with each blink.

“Then sleep,” she said, pressing her lips to mine, licking into my mouth lazily. It was heady, the taste of me heavy on her tongue. “I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

“You’d better be,” I mumbled, unconsciousness fighting to claim me. “But I wanna-”

“No,” she said, wrapping a hand around my outstretched wrist. “Sleep. Tomorrow is another day.”

None too pleased but too tired to argue, I relented, wrapping myself around her and letting sleep take me.

“Why are you ordering breakfast?”

I threw Frankie a confused look, holding my phone up as if in answer. “You said you were hungry,” I said as if it was the simplest thing. Because it was.

But Frankie pointedly looked around my kitchen before turning that same pointed gaze at me. “I’m sure you have food in the massive kitchen, yes?”

I chewed on the tip of my tongue, a little ashamed. “Of course I do,” I hedged. “I just... don’t usually cook.”

Frankie cocked her head, her curls like wildfire falling over her shoulder.

Dressed in one of my oversized T-shirts.

My stomach tightened.

“Do you not enjoy cooking?”

I frowned because there was no judgment in her tone. No ‘of course, rich people don’t cook their own food’.

Just curiosity.

And because it was Frankie, because it was so terrifyingly easy to be honest with her, I told her the truth. “I’ve never been that great at cooking.”

She snorted, the smile that formed on her lips freezing when she realized I wasn’t kidding.

“Wait, seriously?” She giggled. “You own, like, most of the restaurants in the city. You can immediately tell the difference in Michelin stars but you... can’t cook?”

The irony wasn’t lost on me.

“Imagine how upset I was when I learned that, despite my refined palate, I couldn’t even cook a basic dish.”

“Oh, baby.” She chuckled, slipping off the countertop and pulling me into her arms. “You get more endearing every single day.”

“And you find more reasons to tease me,” I pointed out, but let her kiss me senseless anyway. I wouldn’t complain.

“But I make up for it,” she countered.

“Yeah?” I chuckled, my hands roaming down to her lower back. “How do you figure?”

“By cooking you breakfast, duh.”

“Seems like a sweet deal to me,” I said, stealing another kiss before she stormed the pantry.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Change

Frankie

I'd begun to hate the sting of chemicals that clung to the walls of the hospital. The scent shoved itself up my nose, the endless white halls becoming bleaker and longer. Mom had been stuck there for far too long, and after her latest attack...

Who knew how much longer she'd have to stay here?

I ignored the barbed fear, trying to untangle myself from the mess it had already made in my head.

I found Dad in the cafeteria, hunched over a Styrofoam cup and staring at nothing.

"Is that black coffee?" I asked instead of greeting him.

He lifted gaunt, haunted eyes to me and my heart ached. "Hey, kiddo," he said, gruff and tired. "Nah, I was just about to order a sandwich."

I pulled out a chair and sat down opposite him, setting my keys and phone on the table between us.

“What did you have for breakfast?” I asked, not believing his feeble lie for a second.

He shrugged. “This and that.” He sighed. “Some cereal, I guess.”

“I almost don’t want to ask if you slept at all.”

“Good, because I really don’t wanna tell you.”

“I said ‘almost’, Dad.”

He heaved another sigh. I changed the topic.

“Have you seen Mom yet?”

He shook his head, his fingernails leaving crescent-shaped dents in the Styrofoam.

“The ICU visiting times are different,” he said. “Only once per day, and only one person at a time. I can’t remember the last time we’ve been apart this long.”

“I know, Dad,” I murmured, squeezing his hand gently. He squeezed my hand in return, but it was lifeless. “Let’s go up so that we can spend every available second with her; what do you think?”

He brightened a little, his chair scraping loudly as he pushed back to get to his feet.

“C’mere,” he said, sticking his elbow out. I looped my arm through his and walked beside him, his hand patting mine soothingly. “What about you, hm?”

“What about me?”

“How are you doing?”

“I have half a mind to move back in with you until Mom is out of this place,” I told him honestly. He scoffed and I nudged him. “Seriously, Dad. We keep having this conversation. At this point, I’m more worried about you than I am Mom.”

He glared at me, his eyes brimming with reproach but I didn’t back down.

“Yeah, at least Mom has people taking care of her day and night,” I explained. “While you’re losing sleep and refusing to eat. Should I book you in here too?”

“Ha, we could never afford it,” he said bitterly, and a glimmer of understanding flashed in his eyes. I quickly steered the conversation elsewhere, not wanting him to ask about how we were able to afford as much as we did just then.

“Exactly, and you’d both just stress even more instead of getting better,” I said archly. “So do me a favor and at least try to eat two meals a day, and get six hours of sleep.”

“That’s a lot.”

“It’s the bare minimum, Dad.”

We bickered all the way up to the ICU; our voices hushed but fervent.

The ICU had an entire floor to itself, sealed at every point of entry and exit by electronic doors that required staff access cards. There was a waiting room just outside. Well, it would be more apt to describe it as a few chairs that once belonged to different wings of the hospital huddled together in an empty corner.

Dad and I sat down, him on a squishy-looking maroon chair and me on a blue, plastic-covered chair. The protective plastic, unfortunately, had already begun to peel off, and the loose bits stabbed at my legs.

Only two other people sat with us, and I recognized both of them from the last time I'd visited.

The first was an elderly woman whose son had been terribly injured in a football accident. She brought him flowers every day, or so the nurses had told me. In one of her hands she clutched an ornate, pearl rosary.

I'd never heard her speak, but her whispered prayers shoved icy knives into my gut.

The other person was a man, his head shaved and covered with tattoos. His round shoulders hunched in, and he stared at the ground, his blue eyes vacant.

The nurses hadn't told me much about him, save for his sister's frail condition.

"They're all they have left," one of the nurses had mentioned, and some part of me, long lost to my inner child, wondered at the bond between siblings.

Of just how deep the pain ran.

When the nurse finally came out, I nudged Dad forward.

"Go see her," I whispered, nodding at the waiting nurse. "I don't mind waiting."

His frown deepened but he kissed my temple, getting up to see Mom.

The minutes ticked by as I waited by myself, thoughts churning relentlessly. I hadn't been kidding when I told Dad I'd move back in with him. Panic-stricken and utterly terrified, I'd already wandered down a rabbit hole, the 'what if' of losing, not just one, but both of my parents. It was a possibility that grew each day, with each hour Dad didn't sleep, and each meal he skipped.

I wondered idly if I shouldn't move him into my apartment; it was closer to the hospital, and it was closer to the store.

Meaning I could keep an eye on him.

But then he'd likely find out about my second job at June's...

"Frankie," Dad said, slicing through my spiraling thoughts. "She's waiting for you."

I hopped to my feet, my joints popping and groaning in response, and followed the nurse inside.

The process of sanitizing and putting on a mask was as thorough as it was long, but soon enough, the nurse led me through another set of sliding doors. The temperature dropped, making me wish I'd brought a sweater.

The ICU itself was large, each bed sectioned off by frosted glass panels and individual doors. I was grateful for it. I didn't want to imagine what other horrors slept in the ICU, how

many patients were likely taking their final breaths as I walked by.

“Look at you, my darling girl.”

Mom’s voice, so much weaker than it once was, weaved through the incessant beeping and humming of the machines. She lifted her arms a few inches off the bed and I wanted to burst into tears at the sight. Tubes, drips, and needles, wire of all colors, all hooked up to Mom, whose smile didn’t dim.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” the nurse said politely, giving Mom a little wave as she left.

“You haven’t been sleeping,” Mom said. Her eyes narrowed. “And you’ve lost weight.”

“It’s just my insomnia acting up,” I lied, sitting in the chair next to her bed. I wrapped her hand up in both of mine, relief crashing through me at the warmth in her fingers.

“You’re as bad as your father.” She sighed. “He tried to tell me he was getting three square meals a day and balked when I told him cereal wasn’t a meal.”

“It so is a meal,” I argued reflexively, after years of the same daily fight in our home.

“Just like him.” She chuckled. Her laugh turned to a hacking cough and I reached for the panic button before she waved me off. “Sorry, just a little weak is all.”

My shoulders drooped. “What did the doctor say?”

“Same thing he usually does,” she huffed, her indignation unfettered by her health. “I have to take it easy and rest, let the hospital treat me like a lab rat-”

“He does not say that,” I countered. “They’re running the tests they need to in order to find out what’s causing this. Have any of the results come back?”

“More questions than answers,” she grumbled. “But he’s coming to see me again this afternoon. I’ll find out more then, I suppose.”

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my cheek in thought. At least they were still actively running tests. I’d been thrown from sleep so many nights after nightmares of negligence and misdiagnoses.

“I’m so bored in here,” she complained, and I couldn’t blame her. “Tell me about the shop; how is everyone doing?”

“They’re all good,” I said, a genuine smile pulling my lips. “Vee says hi and Joe told me to tell you to remember your bet, whatever that means. They miss you.”

“I miss them,” she said wistfully. “What about Hayden? How is the store coming along under her ownership?”

I hesitated, long enough for Mom to notice.

“Has something happened?”

“No,” I assured her. “I’m working hard to keep it just the way you and Dad wanted. Nothing has changed.”

Mom looked at me for a long, long moment, her eyes dark with concern.

“You know, Frankie,” she began, her thumb running over the back of my hand. “Change isn’t as bad as you think. Personally, I think it’s great. If it hadn’t been for me leaving my hometown, I never would have met your father.”

“But the store works fine as it is,” I told her, even though the fight in my voice had long ago left me.

“It may be fine now,” she said. “But it needs to adapt so that it can keep helping people. If the store can keep up with all the new technology that’s coming out, then it may just stick around for longer than your father and I thought it would.”

I stared at our hands, her knuckles knotted with arthritis.

From years of unloading crates alongside Dad. Of building what might become their legacy.

If only I allowed it to.

“Okay, who are you and what have you done with my precious Frankie?”

I rolled my eyes at Vanessa, whose sly smirk gave her insincerity away.

Because, of course, I couldn’t just change my mind.

“Don’t be dramatic, Vee.” I pouted, handing her the list of actionable tasks I’d printed that morning. I gave a copy to Joe,

Dean, and Blanca respectively as well. “I just... had a change of heart, thanks to Mom.”

“A mighty woman, she is.” Joe whistled low, reading over the list I’d handed him.

“Okay, yuck it up.” I chuckled, setting my copy on the table in the staff room. “But I’m taking this as seriously as you all are. You know how I felt, but now I want to know how you feel.”

“About Hayden’s trailblazing?” Vanessa clarified.

I smiled. “That’s one way to describe it.”

“I think it’s great.” She shrugged. “We could use a little sprucing, splash some of our fabulousness on social media. A lot of potential customers might not even know we exist, let alone that we’re downtown.”

Dean nodded. “Blanca and I really liked Hayden’s idea of personalizing the customer experience.”

“It’ll be trial and error,” Joe grouched, scratching the coarse little hairs on his chin. “Some of this will work for us, and some of it might not. It’s important to go into it with that in mind.”

“I’ll remember that, thanks, Joe.”

“And not all of these are ninety-day goals,” Vanessa added, reading through the list again. “We can split them up into time-specific goals and work on them from there.”

I nodded.

“The only goal I’m bringing forward,” I said, pulling my phone out, “is franchising and expansion.”

I dialed Hayden’s number and waited only two rings before she answered.

“Calling me during work hours?” she said, mock scandal in her words. I could almost see her gasp, a hand at the base of her throat in disbelief. “Don’t tell me: you can’t stop thinking about me and had to call me because you can’t focus.”

“Scale it back.” I chuckled. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

A Little Awkward, A Lotta Wholesome

Hayden

Frankie stood in front of me, her arms folded across her chest and her mouth turned down in defiance.

“Hayden,” she said, sounding out each syllable in my name. “This is too much.”

“I disagree,” I told her, and it was probably the even tone in my voice that irritated her most.

“Well, you would.” She sighed, her feet planted. “But I’m telling you that all of this? It’s way too much. Too much money, and too much effort.”

On any other day, I might have agreed.

But the circles under Frankie’s eyes were dark enough to look like permanent bruises, and if her cheeks sunk any more, I might scream.

“First of all,” I clarified, stepping around her and reaching into the refrigerator behind her. “There is no such thing as ‘too much effort’. There can only be what is done, and what is *not* done.”

She opened her mouth to retort but I brushed a stray curl behind her ear and she fell silent.

“Secondly,” I continued, grabbing one of the glass water bottles and closing the refrigerator door, “while I understand that it *is* a lot of money; it’s not ‘too much’.”

“You moved my mom into a private wing,” Frankie deadpanned as if she still couldn’t believe it.

I was still a little surprised, myself.

“Not just a private room, no,” she continued. “But a whole wing. *Wing!*”

“Yes, wing.” I laughed, grabbing the back of her neck and kissing her just below the ear.

Because I wanted to. Because I was finally allowed to.

“You don’t need to bother doing all of this for my family,” she finished.

I set the bottle on the counter and turned my full attention to her. The hospital cafeteria fell away, and in that moment, only she existed.

“You once told me that sometimes people do things because they want to, right?” She nodded. “Why can’t this be one of those times?”

She opened and closed her mouth, her cheeks growing pinker the longer her words failed her.

Adorable, I thought.

“Because it’s so much money, Hayden!”

I laughed. “It’s your mom’s health, Frankie,” I countered, unscrewing the cap and taking a sip. “Besides, I saw your dad the last time I was there; the private wing allows him to stay with her. Plus, he gets treated like a patient, too. Food, sleep, the works.”

“But you don’t have to go so far.” She frowned, despite the gratitude shining in her eyes.

If I were vainer, I’d have been fixated on it, on the little glimmer of thanks lighting up her eyes.

But it was the sag in her shoulders and the smoothed-out bit of skin between her brows that had been dented for weeks. Months, actually.

I kissed her, kissed either corner of her mouth, kissed her jutted-out bottom lip. I kissed her until the tension left her face.

“I need my favorite manager to be on top of her game,” I told her quietly, watching her lashes flutter over her freckled cheeks. “And she can’t do that when she’s juggling two jobs and stressing about both of her parents.”

She curled her body into mine, her arms wound tight around my waist and her face hidden in the crook of my neck.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, her voice shaking with the sincerity of her words. I wondered how much more she wanted to say, but her exhaustion was a weight in my own arms.

“We’ll talk more about it tonight, okay?” I said, and she nodded against my shoulder.

With an indulgent smile, I sank into the soft warmth of her arms for just a few extra heartbeats before I pried myself away.

“Dinner tonight,” she said, wiping at her pink nose. “My treat.”

“It’s always a treat when it’s you,” I teased, and she swatted at me with a sweater paw.

“Marina is gonna be mad if you don’t drink the coffee she made,” Frankie scolded, gathering her things and shouldering her bag.

“Tell Vee I said Marina’s jealous of her coffee.”

“Oh God, no.” Frankie laughed, the tinkling sound lighter than it had been in all the time I’d known her. “She doesn’t need the compliment, *trust me*.”

She waved as she left, and I stood in the cafeteria for a little while, staring at the doors she’d walked out of.

It had been sheer luck that landed in my lap when I talked to Reid about Frankie’s mom. Reid’s oldest client, one of her closest friends in the industry, was married to the chairman of the board at the hospital. It was easy to get Frankie’s mom moved after that.

All that was left, I thought, eyeing the small flower shop beside the gift shop, was explaining it all to Frankie’s parents.

Something that would have been a lot easier if Frankie and I were officially together.

I shook my head clear of the thought and fought the urge to buy, well, *all* the bouquets in the shop.

“Hayden,” Mrs. Ivey said, sitting up a little straighter in her bed. “What a surprise.”

“Please,” I told her, stepping inside with a grimace. “Don’t sit up on my account. You should be resting.”

“It’s because of you that I *can* rest,” she said, and I froze in the act of placing the flowers in the empty vase. “I may be getting on in age, but I can see just as well as I always have.”

The stems slipped into the water and I let out a breathless laugh. “I guess I owe you an explanation,” I said, rubbing my palms on my pants.

She waved her hand toward the empty sofa next to her bed, the one I assumed her husband practically slept in.

“I wanted to help wherever I could,” I explained, sitting down and folding my hands in my lap. “Ivey’s has become very dear to me, and I had no idea that you were in the hospital until Frankie told me a little while ago. I would have helped sooner had I known. And because of the nature of our transaction, I couldn’t help but feel... responsible.”

“How so?”

“When I bought your shares, I wasn’t aware of the reason you were selling them. I’d had my eye on the store for a long

time, and when I found out you were selling, I jumped. I had no idea you'd lose more than you'd gain out of the sale."

"I understand that," she said, smiling ruefully. "I take it you go this far for all your employees then?"

I stared at her, too shell-shocked to form a verbal response. She smiled knowingly.

"That's-," I paused, wilting a little under her gaze. "I mean, *no*. But I've never really been personally involved until now."

"Personally involved?" she echoed, and I wanted to punch myself for my very, *very* poor choice of words.

"What I mean is, Ivey's has been a very different acquisition," I said, desperately trying to cover my slip-up. "And with Frankie at the helm, fighting me tooth and nail to keep the essence of her family alive and well, it was difficult not to feel involved."

"She's my fighter," she said, a quiet pride in her words. "I'm surprised she didn't send you running for the hills."

"Oh, it would take a lot more to get me to give up." I laughed. "She was never unpleasant, just vehemently against everything I suggested."

"I may owe you an apology for that." She chuckled. "My husband and I asked her to take care of the store and keep our vision for it alive. She may have taken it a little too far."

"No apology necessary. She showed me the true value of the store and its potential. Any success we have from now on rests largely on her stubborn shoulders."

Mrs. Ivey smiled to herself, her fingers toying with her wedding band.

“It makes me very happy to hear you say that,” she confessed. “I know that a lot of people won’t see my daughter for what she is, or what she tries to do. She can come across as a difficult woman, but she’s loyal to a fault. Sometimes too loyal.”

“Loyalty is certainly something I could get used to,” I admitted. “And, after fighting old white guys over business ideals, Frankie’s as difficult as a kitten. She is, however, terrifying when she’s mad.”

Mrs. Ivey laughed out loud, the sound so strikingly similar to Frankie’s that my stomach squeezed.

“That,” she said, chuckling to herself, “she gets from me, I’m afraid. Her father is the softer of the two of us. She got his heart and my temper.”

“Which of you is the cook?” I joked. “Because she clearly inherited that as well.”

“Me, actually,” she replied. “Although, I don’t think I’ve cooked in ages.”

“Why not?”

“My husband loves to cook for me,” she said sweetly like it was a secret of sorts. “From the moment we met, he insisted on making sure I always ate. So he taught himself to cook all my favorite dishes; even if he was terrible at them.”

Warmth fluttered in my chest, at the sudden need to experience a love like theirs for myself.

“At least he improved, right?”

She chuckled again, lifting her clear eyes to mine. “Not at all,” she said, her smile wide. “But I eat whatever he cooks, and he sings his own praises.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Making Music

Frankie

My fingers trembled on my guitar strings, the silence in the music store yawning wide like a chasm. “I haven’t really, uh,” I paused, and swallowed, unable to meet Hayden’s soft gaze for longer than a second. “Never really played for anyone outside my family.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she said, her smile warm and open. “It’s not like this will be the only opportunity for me to hear you play.”

She said it so easily, as if she really believed there would be ample time in the future.

As if she’d still be around for it.

The nerves shaking my bones apart slowed, giving me a little more control over my hands again. I took a breath and settled on the floor. As if her movements were tied to mine, Hayden followed, sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of me. I plucked at the strings, one at a time, searching for the familiar tune that had nestled along my bones for weeks now.

Hayden's tune.

The steady *twang* of the strings flowed into a softer melody, and I kept my eyes on my hands, watching my fingers stretch between the frets. A small part of me was still too nervous, or shy, to meet Hayden's eyes just yet.

Almost as soon as I started, my fingers slowed to a halt, and I cleared my throat before lifting my gaze to Hayden. Her eyes shone with wonder, her lips parted slightly, tugging up into a smile.

"You're beautiful," she said, and all the blood in my body shot up into my face.

"Is my playing so bad that you have to compliment something else?" I coughed, casting about for something, *anything*, to distract from the intensity in Hayden's green eyes.

"It was beautiful." She chuckled, her elbows resting on her knees. "Just like you."

"Thank you," I murmured, and cleared my throat. "For more than just the compliment."

"What more do you have to thank me for?"

"A lot." I sighed, setting the guitar on the floor beside me. "For taking care of my family. I don't think I could ever tell you how grateful I am for that."

"You don't need to tell me," Hayden said. "I did what I could because I was able to."

I nodded a little jerkily, my throat thick with emotion. “I promise I’ll pay you back.”

“I don’t want your money,” Hayden said, her expression clear. “I’m all in if you are.”

I blinked, my breath leaving me in a flutter. “All in?” I repeated, my voice barely a whisper.

She nodded. “I hated seeing you burn out.” She sighed. “I know how stressed out you were, and I know the transition of the store didn’t make it any easier.”

I chuckled a little hysterically. “So, I don’t have to pull double shifts anymore?” I asked. It felt too good to be true.

“I should fucking hope not, Frankie.” Hayden blinked at me, her voice stern, the cutthroat businesswoman peeking out for just a second. “And, in the future, I hope you tell me when things get tough again. I want to help because I care about you.”

Tears stung my eyes, and I tried to blink them away. “I’ll have so much free time,” I mused, my voice thick and shaky. “I won’t even know what to do with myself.”

Hayden’s eyes flicked over to the guitar on the floor next to me, and then back at me.

“Use it for yourself,” she suggested. “For your music. Maybe get some tuba lessons.”

I giggled wetly, the tears slipping free and scorching my cheeks. Hayden cooed and crawled forward, taking my face in her hands and kissing away the tears.

“I could definitely use some lessons.” I sniffled.

Hayden hummed, kissing the corner of my mouth. “Your fingers, however,” she crooned suggestively, lacing hers with mine. “They’re exceptionally skilled.”

She pressed her lips to the back of my hand, her eyes dark with want. Lust sparked low in my abdomen, a delicious shiver skittering down my spine.

“I’m glad you seem to think so,” I murmured, my cheeks aflame.

“Oh, I hold your fingers in high esteem.” She grinned. “Almost as high as your tongue.”

“Is that so?” I purred, gladly slipping into the heat of her breath on my lips.

“Your tongue is a national treasure,” she said, cocking a perfect brow. She pressed her lips to mine, humming into my mouth. “It’s a shame, really.”

“What is?”

“That I can’t spend all my time savoring it.”

I giggled headily. “I think it’s a shame I can’t spend my days eating you out, too,” I teased.

“I mean, I won’t be the one to stop you,” she joked, climbing on top of me. Her thighs braced on either side of my hips, my fingers at her waist. “In fact, I’d love for you to play me like one of your instruments.”

I devolved into a mess of giggles and buried my face in the crook of her neck.

“You’re so cheesy, oh my God.” I chuckled.

She shrugged, her frown brimming with mischief. “I find it works to my advantage.”

I unbuttoned her jeans and slid the zipper down. “Hm, mine as well,” I said, capturing her lips as my fingers slid into her underwear.

Her breath caught in her throat, her body locking up at the first brush of my fingertips over her.

Her hands fluttered over my torso, her palms hot through the thin fabric of my dress, her fingers searching for something to hold onto.

I kissed my way to her jaw, suckling gently on the heat of her neck, right above her pulse point. Her breaths turned soft, her hips bucking into the palm of my hand, begging me for more.

“You’re stunning,” I murmured, the tip of my middle finger pressed against her entrance. “But someone might walk in and interrupt us.”

Her laughter left her in a breathless rush, her fingers curled into my shoulders. “And yet,” she gasped, “you show no signs of taking your hand out of my pants.”

I smirked. “I don’t mind.” I chuckled. “It’s a slow day, and I don’t have any lessons. Unless we get the rare straggler we’ve got the whole place to ourselves.”

“Such dirty talk.”

I threw my head back with a full-bellied laugh. “The only dirty thing here is how wet you’re getting while I’m talking about maybe getting caught fucking you.”

“Guilty,” she murmured, her lips searing against mine.

I sighed into her, finally pushing my finger in to the knuckle. Her body shattered around me, her shivers delicious on my tongue.

There was something so disarming about Hayden’s pleasure.

Something intoxicating in the undulation of her hips, rocking forward over my hand and pushing down, down, down.

My lips latched onto the side of her neck, my fingers slick where they slid between her folds, dipping into her wet heat and out again, forcing her breaths to hitch.

“Those fingers really are something,” she moaned quietly, her hands knotting in the curls at the nape of my neck. “But there’s something you need to do for me.”

I squinted up at her, confusion blanketing my senses. She wrapped a hand around my wrist and slowly pulled my hand away.

“What are you doing?” I asked, following her when she pulled me to my feet.

“You’re wearing such a pretty dress,” she said, her eyes dragging down my body appreciatively. “And since we have the store to ourselves...”

She walked me over to the checkout counter, slipping behind me. Her touch was a brand on my body, her hands burning on my waist and down over my hips. She kissed my neck, her teeth catching here and there and driving me further into delirium.

“What do you have in mind?” I murmured, my eyes already closed, lost in the heat of her touch.

She flattened a hand on the middle of my back and pushed me forward until my upper body lay flat on the counter.

Her fingernails raked up the backs of my thighs, and I ached inside at the promise in her chuckle. It rippled down my spine, settling in my gut.

“A little game,” she whispered, flipping the hem of my dress over my hips. She palmed at the flesh of my thighs, at my ass, her thumbs hooked under the lace of my underwear.

“Are there rules?” I gasped, my thighs threatening to close around her wrist as she thumbed over my clit.

“Rules are no fun,” she tutted, leaning down to press a chaste kiss to my lower back. “I want to tongue-fuck you until you can’t stand anymore, and I want you to face the door. Think you can do that?”

I took it as a challenge, pushing my ass back into her hands, almost in a dare.

“I’ll be standing around all day until you stop talking,” I taunted, eager to feel the writhing length of her tongue inside me.

I would beg for it.

Not that she needed to know just yet.

With a self-satisfied hum, she tugged my underwear down my legs, her lips trailing along the skin. A soft, cool breath ghosted over my vagina and I *squeaked* in surprise, before it was replaced by a long, languorous lick and a chuckle.

“Knee up on the countertop,” she instructed, her hands still massaging my skin, my muscles going loose with pleasure under her touch.

I did as I was told, keenly aware of what someone would see if they happened to walk in at that moment.

A single glance down revealed the square neckline of my dress, loose enough that in this position, it would take very little for my tits to spill out.

Yet the thought of it sent a thrill through me, just as Hayden’s thumbs parted my folds and her tongue flicked over my clit.

“Jesus,” I breathed, already so far gone at the barest of touches.

“You doing all right up there?” she teased. But there was true concern in her voice, an assurance that she’d stop the moment I told her to.

“You’re talking, so I could be doing a lot bet- oh, *fuck!*”

She licked into me, her tongue thrusting lazily, soft little noises of contentment slipping out between each thrust.

“Better?” she murmured against my vagina, teeth gently scraping over my clit and making me jump in surprise.

I opened my mouth to respond, but my words slurred into a long, desperate moan, and my hands latched onto the counter like I might fall off the face of the Earth.

Liquid heat flooded my body like molten lava, filling every crevice until I was boneless with pleasure. She caressed me so gently, all the while fucking her tongue inside me like she might never get the chance again.

“Hayden, shit, wait,” I cried, the pressure building into something I wasn’t sure I could handle. With my thighs splayed wide, the foot that was still on the floor shook with the effort of keeping me upright.

But Hayden groaned, the subtle vibration zinging right to my core. Her thumb circled my clit, barely touching it, the distance maddening and all at once, too much.

I threw out a hand, desperately looking for hers, but solid wood clanged against my wrist and three guitars crashed to the floor just as the pleasure dragged me under.

I might have cried out, might have yelled, or screamed, but my mind went foggy, latching onto the sensation of Hayden’s dripping lips sucking my clit.

My thighs trembled as I wrestled air back into my lungs, while Hayden slowly kissed my shivering vagina.

She finally straightened up, fixing my dress with a single pat on my ass, her lips gleaming.

“Need a hand?”

I scoffed but took the hand she offered anyway, not ready to trust my legs just yet.

I was unsteady on my feet, and her gaze trailed down to the neckline of my dress that no longer served its purpose.

She fixed it with a hungry smirk.

“The guitars,” I remembered suddenly, looking around to find them in a heap on the floor. “They were brand new.”

Hayden kissed me deeply, my chin pinched between her thumb and forefinger. “I’ll buy the whole damn store if you let me do that again sometime.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Another Step Forward

Hayden

“You can back out if you want to,” I told Frankie, my anxiety riding me hard.

Frankie giggled beside me, the midday sun glinting off her curls. “If you would rather I not meet your friends just yet, then we can always wait.”

I shook my head, clearing my throat. “If I show up by myself, they won’t let me live it down.” I laughed. “As long as you’re okay, then we can walk in.”

I said that even though I lingered on the sidewalk outside our usual haunt, my feet plastered to the stone. I knew how my friends would take this; how they would see my bringing Frankie to brunch. It was the same with Elliot when Cameron finally accepted that she was head-over-heels for Elliot.

I wasn’t sure I was there just yet.

I wasn’t sure if I was ready to have the whole world know just how hard I’d fallen.

“Do we need to do this like a Band-Aid?” she teased, her thumb brushing along the outside of my hand. I took a deep breath and walked forward, not allowing myself a moment to second-guess it any longer.

I nodded at the waitrons, nerves coiling in my gut, leading Frankie to the table where everyone was already seated.

Waiting.

“Well, well, well,” Reid announced, her expression brightening at the sight of Frankie. “Isn’t this a pleasant treat?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, pulling my seat out. “She’s here. Don’t chase her off.”

“Never,” Cameron chuckled. “Hi Frankie, I’m Cameron.”

“Hello,” Frankie said, her smile as bright as Cameron’s.

“Take a seat,” I murmured to her. We sat down, and I tried not to pay too much attention to their intense gazes.

“Shall we do a quick roll call?” I suggested, my breaths high and thin. “I don’t expect Frankie to remember all your names, so-”

I pointed at each of my friends as I called their names out. “Cameron, her girlfriend, Elliot, Reid, Taylor, and Alex.”

Alex rolled her eyes at me. “As eloquent as Cameron was when we first met Elliot,” she mocked, earning a vulgar gesture in return. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Frankie.”

“It’s great to meet you all, too,” Frankie said. Her gaze drifted to Elliot, who smiled at her.

“Hayden has told us *all* about you.” Elliot giggled.

Frankie shot me a surprised look. “Oh?” she asked. “I’m dying to know what she told you.”

“That you were a spitfire who refused to allow her to do anything she wanted,” Reid mused, her eyes glinting with intrigue. “We’ve been your biggest fans for a while now.”

Frankie laughed, a little embarrassed, and I fought the urge to hold her hand under the table.

“See, Hayden is so used to getting her way,” Taylor chimed in, leaning forward on her elbows. “She uses that charm and gets everything her heart desires. So when she met you, and you pushed back, it was the most fun we’ve had in ages.”

Elliot cleared her throat, everyone’s attention turning to her.

“I’d love it if you *didn’t* scare my new best friend off before we even get to order,” she teased, earning a round of laughter from the table.

I frowned. “I thought I was your best friend,” I said, indignant, but my smile gave me away.

Elliot shrugged, her fingers laced with Cam’s on the table. “You were,” she said. “But then you told me about Frankie. You already have Cam and the girls, let me have my fun.”

Cameron lifted their twined hands to kiss Elliot’s knuckles, a soft, lovesick grin on her face.

The happiest I’d seen her in years.

Maybe ever.

I raised my hands in surrender, watching as Elliot switched seats with Cam so she could sit next to Frankie. Almost immediately, they fell into their own conversation, their heads close together.

Reid nudged my leg with her shoe and I looked over at her.

“You’ve got that look,” she murmured, that self-satisfied smirk wider than ever.

“What look?” I asked defensively.

She snorted. “The same one Cam is wearing right now.”

My gaze shot to Cam, where she sat watching Elliot talk animatedly about God knows what. Her eyes were soft, and just a little dazed. Like she couldn’t quite believe that Elliot was sitting there with her.

“No one is as lovestruck as Cam,” I scoffed, while a small, hopeful part of me wondered if maybe I *could* look like that.

If maybe Frankie would be the one I would look at like that.

Some day, maybe.

“So, are you planning on taking her upstate to meet the rest of the Jones brood?” Taylor cut in, keeping her voice low enough that Frankie wouldn’t hear.

I was grateful. “If all goes well today,” I said, a smile spreading across my face. “Maybe I will. Sometime in the future.”

A snuffle caught our attention and we turned to find a teary Alex dabbing at her glossy eyes.

“Sorry,” she said, swallowing thickly. “Just got a little emotional, is all.”

“I’m surprised to see the two of you in the same room.”

My face *burned* at the implication, but I followed Frankie into her mother’s private room nonetheless.

“Hello, Mrs. Ivey,” I said to her and turned to her husband. “Mr. Ivey.”

Frankie’s arms wrapped around her dad’s waist and she squeezed tight.

“I missed you guys,” she said, walking over to her mom and hugging her gently.

“We missed you,” Mrs. Ivey said with a smile. “But it’s the weekend. Why aren’t you out having fun?”

“Yeah, I thought Nikkie would be dragging you around the city,” Mr. Ivey added.

Frankie flopped into the sofa with a scoff. “Nikkie is exploring Japan,” she muttered through a pout. “She got a gig there last week and left immediately. She didn’t even invite me.”

Her parents laughed while I pocketed this latest gem of information. Maybe a trip to Japan would be in the cards for us.

“She never was a one-town kinda gal,” Mr. Ivey lamented. He turned to his wife. “Do you remember when she called us from Singapore to ask what currency they used?”

Mrs. Ivey chuckled lightly, a hand over her mouth.

But Frankie stuck up for her friend. “She’d been on three flights back to back and didn’t even know what country she was in,” she defended, and I couldn’t help but reach out and brush my thumb along the apple of her cheek.

Her spine stiffened and she glanced at me, surprise widening her eyes.

I realized what I’d done and cast a nervous glance at her parents, both of whom wore matching expressions. Expressions that knew too much.

I cleared my throat and forced out a laugh. “Sorry,” I tried to cover up, snatching my hand to my chest. “You, uh, had a piece of fluff.”

“Thanks,” she said, her cheeks bright red.

I caught Mr. Ivey elbowing his wife with a knowing grin. She swatted his hand away and I bit down my own grin.

“How have you been doing, Mrs. Ivey?” I asked, trying to draw the attention away from my slip-up.

“Much better, dear,” she said kindly. “The doctors have been almost annoyingly present. And my treatment is going well.”

“And she’s able to eat my cooking again,” Mr. Ivey added, his chest puffing up proudly, and I shared a secret glance with Mrs. Ivey, biting down a smile.

“Have you at least been eating as well?” Frankie asked, her voice taking on a stern edge, as it often did when she talked to her dad about his wellbeing.

“Scouts honor,” he teased, holding up a hand. “I’ve been eating everything on my plate now that your mom is on the mend.”

Frankie’s eyes narrowed but she relented, nodding in satisfaction. “Good,” she breathed. “I don’t need to be worrying about your appetite, too.”

“How are things back at the store?” Mrs. Ivey asked, and Frankie and I exchanged glances.

“Better,” Frankie confessed. “I’m glad you asked.”

She turned to me and my brows crept up toward my hairline.

“Yes?”

“You’ve been bugging me about the investors coming to meet with us,” she began, steeling herself with a deep breath. “And I told you a little while ago that I was open to talking about it.”

“I remember,” I told her, my voice quiet. I remembered it in detail, particularly the pulse of excitement and sheer relief that shot through me when she’d told me.

Not because it meant I'd gotten my way.

But because it meant she was willing to trust me with something as precious to her as her family's store.

"Well, I called Marina." She smiled. "And we're meeting with the investors next week on the first phase of franchising."

I stared at her blankly for ten long seconds, her parents' cheers muted by the rush in my ears.

Confirmation.

It was the confirmation I didn't know I'd needed, the solid proof that she *did* trust me.

A startled gasp leaped off my tongue and I grinned. "So you're stealing my assistant now?"

She broke into a fit of giggles, but all I could do was stare at her, at how much she'd changed.

No.

Not changed.

Trusted me enough to be herself.

As I was learning to do with her.

"I've just remembered something," I said suddenly, my palms stinging, burning with the need to hold her.

"What's going on?" she asked.

I jumped to my feet, hauling her with me, and sent profuse apologies and vague excuses to her parents as I dragged her out with me.

Frankie called out her farewell, and as soon as the door shut behind her, I whirled around and slanted my lips on hers. She let out a muffled squeak but melted into the kiss anyway, her hands gentle where they held my face.

“What was that for?” she asked, a little dazed when I finally pulled away.

My breaths punched through my lungs, my heart hammering hard enough that I thought it might fracture my rib cage. “You’re phenomenal,” was all I could manage.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Who Needs Netflix?

Frankie

“Is that...” Hayden paused, bending down and studying the small bookshelf I’d shoved in the corner of my tiny living room. “A Pokemon snow globe?”

I buried my face in my hands, my cheeks burning. “This was a bad idea,” I said, dropping my hands and pointing at the door. “Get out, I changed my mind.”

Hayden’s laughter was a soft melody that wreathed itself through the small space between us, her eyes sparkling. “No, don’t kick me out.” She giggled, walking over to me and lacing her fingers through mine. “I’ll be good, I promise. I just haven’t seen, well, *most* of this stuff before.”

“You’ve never seen a Bulbasaur snow globe but you somehow knew it was a Pokemon thing?” I questioned, and she pressed her lips together pointedly.

“I’ve never seen one in a snow globe,” she clarified with a wink. “Nor have I seen-”

She twisted around again, examining the cluttered shelves. “Is that a mini Elvis figurine?” she cackled. “On a *golden toilet?*”

“Hayden,” I warned, but there was no heat in the threat. I couldn’t deny it was a lot like watching a kid run around a toy store.

Really cute.

Even if it was at my expense.

“I know that it’s not what you’re used to,” I said awkwardly. “And it’s shabby because I haven’t had much time to make it more homey-”

“It’s perfect, Frankie,” she said, cutting me off with a grin. “It’s exactly what I thought it would be.”

“I don’t really know how to take that.”

“It means that it’s as unique and pretty as you are.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away, ignoring the flip in my gut.

“And you have *so many plants*,” she deadpanned. “How do you keep them all alive?”

I shrugged. “Green thumb?”

“Oh my God, please tell me that isn’t what I think it is,” she gasped, leaving me in the middle of the living room and darting back to the bookshelf.

“What?” I asked hesitantly, trying to peer around her to see what she was looking at.

She spun around, holding a picture frame with two very young girls in the photo.

I lunged forward to snatch the photo out of her hand, my cheeks hotter than the sun, but she dodged out of my hold.

“Uh-uh,” she giggled, holding the frame above her head. “Were you in *band*?”

I sank to the floor, utterly mortified and wishing the floor would swallow me whole.

“Oh, look how adorable you were,” Hayden cooed. She squatted on the floor next to me. “Is this Nikkie?”

I nodded without looking up. “Don’t be ashamed, love.” Hayden chuckled, her free hand on my back. “It’s so endearing.”

My heart fluttered at her words, at the soft ‘love’ she’d almost whispered.

“I was in band, yes.” I sighed, amusement curling my lips. “Ugh, it was such a typical high school schtick.”

“Let me guess,” Hayden cut in, grabbing my arm and pulling me to the couch. “You were in band and Nikkie was a cheerleader?”

“Nikkie was *the* cheerleader.” I laughed. “I had such a massive crush on her, but she only had eyes for this kid on the baseball team.”

“Ew, the baseball team?” Hayden sniffed in distaste. “I’m beginning to think Nikkie has terrible taste.”

“He *was* a douche,” I conceded. “And so was the guy she dated after him. She’s not that great at seeing the blatant red flags they wave in front of her face.”

“At least she has a good friend,” Hayden added, nudging my shoulder gently.

“Would you like to meet her?” I asked, before adding, “Whenever she decides to come home, obviously.”

Hayden sat back, curling her bare feet under her. “Do you want me to meet her?”

I nodded with a smile. “I think you’d both get along really well.”

“Then, I’d love to.”

I lay my head on her shoulder, wrapping my arms around hers.

“What is this show?” Hayden snorted. “Are they... hunting ghosts?”

“Kind of.” I giggled. “They’re brothers, and they travel around the country helping people by, you know, hunting monsters. I’ve watched it since I was a kid, and sometimes I like to just put it on for nostalgia’s sake.”

Hayden hummed, watching one of the lead characters sprinkle salt around the doors and windows. Her fingers trailed along the bare skin of my shin, her breaths slow and deep.

It lulled me into a sense of serenity I’d never experienced. I wanted to hold onto it, cherish it and hide it from the world. To

float in the gentle domesticity of our afternoon.

“The tall one has great hair,” Hayden murmured, and I chuckled.

“He does,” I agreed. “And his brother teases him about it all the time.”

“Christ, did that thing just shed its *skin*?!”

I pressed my palm to my mouth to smother my giggles, sinking into her side.

“You watch this to unwind?” Hayden cackled, turning her face to look at me. I let my head fall back, my nose brushing the tip of hers.

“It makes me feel comfy,” I murmured, my gaze drifting to her lips.

She smirked, her breath warm and minty. “On this couch?”

“Oh!” I jumped to my feet, holding both hands out to Hayden. She took them, confusion quirking her brow as I lifted her back to her feet. “We can do this.”

She watched, rapt with attention, as I pulled the couch out and turned it into a sleeper.

“Shut up, this is perfect,” she said, climbing back onto the couch and stretching her body out. She patted the spot beside her expectantly.

I followed her onto the couch and she grabbed me by the waist, dragging me down on top of her.

“Hm, much better,” she groaned. “Now *this* is comfy.”

My cheeks ached from smiling and I pressed my lips to hers, slotting my thigh between hers and trying to get as close as I could.

Her hands hooked under my ass, squeezing my thighs as she arched into my kiss.

“I’d even wager that it’s comfier than your luxurious sofa back home,” I teased, pulling back to kiss her dimples, the corners of her eyes, her jaw.

Her hum turned to a soft giggle, and I’d never been more grateful for the thin material of my shorts.

“If I could, I’d sell my own bed,” she murmured. “Why bother with all that memory foam when you’re so soft and delicious?”

She dragged the tip of her tongue along my bottom lip and I sucked on it, sending a lovely little shiver through her body.

“You don’t have to go that far.” I snickered. “Just... stay here and watch some shitty TV shows with me.”

“I would,” she breathed. “I am, and I plan on staying right here for the foreseeable future.”

We kissed slowly, giggles intermingling with low moans, our hands roaming freely because we could.

There was no rush, no end goal.

The heat in my gut simmered, my hips rocking forward over the tightness of her thigh.

Slow, lazy.

Perfect.

“We should order food,” I mumbled, minutes later. Maybe hours. I didn’t care.

Hayden’s hands roamed beneath my shirt, her nails trailing along my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“You’re not gonna let me treat you to some fantastic snacks a la Hayden?”

“After you refused to explain why your address is on the fire department’s shortcut list,” I teased. “I’d rather we just get pizza.”

“As you wish.” She chuckled. She hitched up her knee, her thigh burning against my core.

I sat up, wriggling my hips to find the perfect spot-

“Ah, fuck,” I sighed, a smirk tugging on my lips. The angle of my hips allowed her vagina to rub against mine, the rush of heat suddenly sweltering and yet not enough.

“Does food really excite you that much?” Hayden joked, her brows tugging together on a particularly slow grind.

“You do,” I murmured, rolling my hips forward again. “All the time.”

“Ditto,” she breathed, her fingers tugging at my shorts. “Off, take ‘em off.”

We wriggled our way out of our clothes, hushed, excited giggles filling the room as one episode ended and another began.

The moment I was out of my shorts, Hayden grabbed my hips, crushing her lips to mine and resuming our position on the couch. Her leg hooked around my hip, her back bowing with each circle of my hips over hers.

We were messy and uncoordinated, no rhythm or rhyme to our movements.

I only cared that her hands scrabbled for purchase on my own as we both tipped over the edge, our breaths mingling as pleasure hummed through our sweaty bodies.

“Now,” Hayden panted, licking her lips and squeezing her eyes shut, “we definitely need that pizza.”

I huffed a laugh, kissing her hard before dropping my head onto her heaving chest.

The scene on the TV echoed dully while we caught our breath, Hayden’s fingers drawing little shapes on my bare back for a few sweet moments.

“Frankie,” she said finally, her voice a little rough, “I need to tell you something.”

Her heart thudded against my cheek, and I lifted my head to look at her.

“Tell me.”

She swallowed, her eyes searching my face before her lips tugged into a smile. “Your freckles are so beautiful.” She smirked, and I rolled my eyes at her.

“That’s it?” I laughed.

“They’re irresistible,” she confessed. “As are you. And I think... I think I’ve fallen a lot harder for you than I ever thought I would. Harder than I thought I could.”

My breath left me in a quiet rush, and Hayden squirmed a little beneath me.

“I tried to stop, believe me,” she continued. “I tried to ignore how you made me feel, and how you consistently whittled away at my defenses no matter what I threw your way.”

Any words I might have had turned to dust on my tongue, my cheeks unbelievably warm.

“I wanted to keep things professional but you just *had* to prance in with your freckles and your smiles, and that gorgeous temperament of yours... And I was helpless to it. To you.”

“Well, there’s nothing professional about our current situation,” I teased softly, and Hayden pressed a little kiss to the tip of my nose. An effervescent warmth spread through my chest, pouring out into my arms and legs, leaving me weightless and deliriously happy.

“Smart ass,” she scolded with a smirk. “I think that’s part of it. That, and I’m pretty sure I fell for you the moment I saw you sitting in that restaurant looking so bored. I almost felt bad for your date.”

“Almost?”

“You looked like you wanted to crawl out of your own skin,” Hayden clarified. “That’s unforgivable.”

“How noble of you,” I murmured, kissing her temple. “And I think I fell for you back then too. When you walked in like an unstoppable force and sent my bad date running. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you ever since.”

“Don’t tell me that,” Hayden whined through a giggle. “My ego can’t take it.”

“It’s true.” I laughed along with her. “I think I fought you even harder because of it. Because I’m hopelessly into you.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Expanding and Other Business Items

Hayden

I shuffled my weight from one foot to the other, doing my best to ignore the twitter of nerves in my gut.

“Do you want me to get you some coffee while you wait, Hayden?”

I looked over at Marina, her face poking around the threshold of my door.

“No, that’s okay,” I said distractedly. “Thanks, Marina.”

“I’ll just send Frankie in when she gets here?”

“Please.”

I shuffled through the documents on my desk, wondering why the hell *I* was nervous when it was just a presentation.

And I wasn’t even the one giving the presentation.

“Coffee?”

My head snapped up, relief curling along my shoulders as Frankie swept in and set a cup on my desk.

“Vanessa is truly a godsend,” I chuckled, taking a grateful sip. “Thank you.”

She shrugged it off and sat down, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Nervous?” I asked.

She smiled. “Can’t really blame me,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I’ve never gone into one of these things with any kind of hope, and I don’t know what to expect.”

I checked the time on my watch and got to my feet. “It’ll be great,” I assured her, my own nerves quieting when Frankie’s knee bounced anxiously. “Let’s get going?”

She hopped to her feet, smoothing out her shirt.

“You look perfect.” I chuckled, grabbing her hand in mine and dragging her along.

Now that Frankie had arrived, my excitement brimmed over and I couldn’t wait for this brand new chapter to begin.

“We’ll begin with a state franchise,” Jonathan said, flipping through his own presentation. “Just one store in major cities so we can measure our sales and demand.”

“What would the roll out phase look like?” I asked. “Would you open these flagship stores simultaneously?”

“That would depend on the results of the testing phase,” he answered. “We could potentially test one or two flagships in

major cities and use a structured test and measure to determine how, when, and where we launch the next stores.”

I nodded.

“Frankie, what are your thoughts?”

Frankie dragged in a long breath, her notepad almost black with the notes she’d been taking.

“What would the stores look like in terms of offering?” she asked. “There are many areas that would need to cater more to a certain demographic because of the population density. Plus, there would be the point of suppliers to get in fresh produce in cities that are too far from farms. What would the contingency be?”

My chest swelled with pride and I leaned back in my seat, resisting the urge to smirk at Jonathan. It’s not that I wanted to poke holes in his presentation, but I wanted to make sure everything was watertight. If it meant letting Frankie tear his presentation to shreds, so be it.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “That would factor into our test and measure phase,” he explained. “We want to collect enough data from each of our potential locations to determine whether or not the store would be a feasible route there.”

“What do you propose for the staff that would be hired?” I added. “The true gem of Ivey’s is the aspect it was founded upon, the sense of family and community. This is non-negotiable. We need our staff members to be cared for as well as hold the same dedication as the current staff at Ivey’s.”

I could feel Frankie's gaze on the side of my face but I kept my eyes forward, swallowing as blood rushed to my cheeks.

"Of course," Jonathan said, nodding at his assistant who quickly jotted it down. "We'll take these notes into consideration and reconvene at a time most convenient for you and Ms. Ivey."

I nodded and they filed out, leaving Frankie and me alone in the icy conference room.

"Well?" I asked, and Frankie blew out a breath.

"It's a lot," she admitted, looking a little sheepish. "I would prefer to talk things over with everyone else at Ivey's before we move on this. But..."

"But?" I asked, hopeful.

"I'm excited to do this." She smiled.

"Yeah?"

"It's scary and might totally blow up in our faces, but," she giggled, "it's like a brand new adventure."

A surge of emotion rose inside me, threatening to burst, and I squeezed her hand to keep myself from kissing her senseless.

"I am *so* happy to hear that," I said breathlessly. "And you're right; it might fail and end up being a waste of time, but you took a chance, and I don't think that's ever a waste."

She smiled at me, her eyes almost disappearing. "Should we go and tell everyone else?" she asked, hopping to her feet. I followed.

“After you, love.”

“I hear that you actually managed to get Frankie to sit through an entire meeting without her setting something on fire.”

I was beginning to learn that Vanessa could always be counted on to alleviate the tensest situations. Or inject a bit of humor wherever she felt was necessary.

Frankie puffed up like an offended cat, her freckles disappearing under her flush. “I’ve never set anything on fire,” she said defensively. “And *I* was the one who asked for the meeting, remember?”

“Eh, semantics,” Vanessa teased, waving Frankie’s argument away like it was a cloud of smoke. “I just love to see you sweat.”

Frankie

I rolled my eyes at Vanessa, who called me over while Hayden talked business with Joe.

“Please don’t say ‘I told you so’,” I practically begged her.

“Come on,” she groaned. “You know me better than that.”

“Right.”

“Anyway,” she said, casually brushing me off, “I noticed that Hayden has eased up on a few of the changes. A lot. You wouldn’t happen to have something to do with that, would you?”

I sucked on the inside of my cheek to smother my grin but ultimately failed.

“You could say we came to an agreement,” I hedged, my gaze drifting back to where Hayden stood, talking animatedly to Joe, Dean, and Blanca. “And I know you want all the saucy details, but I’m not going to give them to you. At least, not until I’ve had my time to properly freak out about them.”

Vanessa chuckled under her breath. “Look, I just want to say that Hayden has changed a lot since the day she first walked in here,” she said. “I never expected her to be this hands on, or even to care this much about us or the store. I thought we’d be another little side project until she got bored and moved on.”

I blinked at Vanessa. “You told me to look at the bright side.” I gasped in disbelief. “And all the while you thought the absolute *worst* of Hayden! Do your kids know you lie, Vanessa?”

Vanessa artfully slipped away just as Hayden walked up to us, talking about how badly she needed to clean her coffee machine.

“Liar!” I called after her, but I laughed anyway.

“Hey,” Hayden murmured, her hand gentle on my lower back. “I have the initial contracts, wanna go over them together?”

I nodded and followed her into the staff room, where she produced said contracts and a bottle of champagne I hadn’t noticed.

“What’s all this?” I asked, holding up the obviously expensive champagne.

“I thought we could sign the contracts and cap off a successful day with celebratory drinks,” she announced, setting two glasses from Blanca’s green juice section on the table between us.

“Hayden,” I chuckled, “it’s eleven in the morning.”

“And it’s happy hour somewhere in the world,” she said, filling both glasses and handing me one. “What’s your point?”

“I don’t even remember.” I relented, taking the glass from her. “Do you always carry around a bottle of bubbly or was this a special occasion?”

Hayden laughed, the sound as rich as the champagne that tickled my nose. “I’d love to be the kind of person who carries champagne with her wherever she goes,” she lamented, clinking her glass to mine. “But this is only for special occasions, and I’d say your first successful investor meeting definitely calls for celebration.”

“It was only successful because you were there,” I admitted, the nerves still jangling loosely in my limbs. “I don’t think I would have listened to a word he said if I didn’t think you had the store’s back, or mine.”

“I’ll always have your back,” she said, a playful smile gracing her lips. “And this store is going to make me a very rich woman.”

The jeer in her words pulled a scoff from me, and I leveled a dead stare at her.

“You hardly need the extra money,” I pointed out. She considered it with a thoughtful frown and shrugged.

“Then it’ll make *you* a very rich woman,” she conceded. “A rich woman with enough time to catch up on some actual sleep.”

I glanced away from the intensity of her gaze, those piercing eyes still slightly unnerving, even if they held me captive.

“If I let you have your way,” I said, “you’d chain me to the bed until I caught up on all thirty years’ worth of missed sleep.”

“Love, if I chained you to the bed, sleep would be the last thing on my mind.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Get The Label-Maker!

Frankie

“Congratulations on being a free woman, Mom,” I cheered, tossing confetti over her head as she stepped out of the hospital for the first time since she’d been admitted.

The sound of a bottle popping startled me, and I spun around to find Hayden looking at me sheepishly, a bottle of champagne in her hands.

“I thought you weren’t the kind of person to keep emergency champagne on hand?” I poked, teasing her just a little.

I knew she’d been preparing for the day of Mom’s official release from the hospital because I’d been so obscenely excited about it.

“Special occasion,” she said by way of explanation, throwing me a wink. “Now, I know the doc said no alcohol, so this is alcohol-free, but we won’t let that sad little fact ruin a fantastic bottle of bubbly.”

She handed Mom a plastic cup filled with strawberry-flavored bubbly before handing Dad his.

“And we can always pretend,” Dad said, nodding his thanks.

“Cheers,” Hayden agreed, raising her cup.

We lifted ours as well, echoing her sentiments.

“No more surprises, right?” I asked, turning my attention to Mom.

“I can’t promise anything,” she deadpanned, her face so much brighter, so full of color.

“But *I* can promise that you’ll never strain yourself ever again,” Dad chimed in, taking her empty cup from her hands and grabbing her luggage. He loaded her bags into the trunk of the car, dusting his hands off proudly.

Mom threw Hayden and me a knowing look. “He’s going to milk this for the rest of our lives,” she mumbled.

“Say goodbye to doing anything for yourself ever again,” I whispered, and we snickered together.

Hayden frowned. “I think it’s sweet,” she argued.

“You would, you cheesy romantic,” I teased.

She winked at me and I felt Mom’s gaze boring into my face.

I cleared my throat and tore my attention away from the adorable little pout on Hayden’s face. “Will you guys be okay getting home?”

“Of course,” Dad called from inside the car. “We’ll be right as rain.”

“What about the two of you?” Mom asked, and all that her question implied was laid bare in her eyes.

I was about to answer, to tell her we’d probably take a taxi back to our separate homes, when Hayden’s hand slipped into mine.

A gesture that did not go unnoticed by my mother’s keen eyes.

“We’ll take a walk before we head back,” she said. “It’s still early and I want to stretch my legs a little before I go home.”

Mom and Dad left, and I didn’t miss the triumphant grin on Mom’s face as Dad pulled out of the parking lot.

I turned to Hayden, the question loaded and ready, waiting on my tongue. The question of what we were, if there even *was* an us to begin with.

But Hayden took a deep breath and lightly tugged me into a walk beside her.

And I stowed the question away.

The late afternoon air turned chilly as we walked along the sidewalk, the hospital growing smaller behind us. I dragged in lungfuls of the crisp air, the taste of fall intermingling with the brown leaves and yellowed grass.

“I love fall,” I said suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Hayden grinned. “You play guitar and have a green thumb, you *despise* the sun and you have a Bulbasaur snow globe on your bookshelf.”

“What does Bulbasaur have to do with any of it?” I giggled.

Our hands swung between us, our fingers laced together.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “From what Reid has forced down my throat, Bulbasaur and the dragon seem like they’d fit into the fall season.”

“Reid is the one who taught you about Pokemon?”

“Oh yeah,” she scoffed. “Reid’s entire empire is built on that genre of media. Pokemon, fantasy, anime, anything that can be turned into a marketable video game. Pokemon was the only thing I was ever really able to remember, so...”

A laugh bubbled up my throat, and Hayden laughed along with me.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “I spent my childhood watching it and I still only know a handful of them by name.”

“Watching it?” She frowned. “I thought it was a game.”

I laughed, and we bickered while the sun crept below the horizon, the sky turning a sparkling indigo.

“Okay, but the bottom line is that Pokemon *did*, in fact, originate as a game, correct?”

“I guess so,” I grumbled, glaring at the results on my phone from my quick search. “It was a video game.”

“Whew, I thought I was gonna have to chew Reid out for feeding me lies,” she joked.

I shook my head and slid my phone back inside my pocket. My thoughts turned to more serious matters, my heart a weight pressing down on my chest.

We were nearing the park, the roads turning to pretty cobblestone paths lined with golden streetlamps and food vendors.

“I’ve never been here at this time of the evening,” Hayden mused, her gaze on the bustling lines crowding the food vendors. “Is it always this busy?”

“Hm?” I asked, distracted by my train of thought. “Oh, I think so. It could also just be a weekend thing.”

“You’re distracted.”

I grimaced. “Sorry,” I mumbled, not bothering to lie. I didn’t have to with Hayden.

“Tell me about it.”

“I was thinking about us,” I told her, my breath thin with a sudden pulse of anxiety.

“Us?”

“Yeah. I was wondering... what we are, if we had a label.”

Hayden was quiet, so I continued, “Or if we even need a label.”

Hayden hummed in thought, her eyes focused on the path ahead of us.

“I know you’ve given this a lot of thought,” she told me, her voice gentle. “I want you to tell me everything.”

I chuckled a little. “We’ve been unofficially a *thing* for a while now,” I began, my cheeks heating up almost instantly. “And the longer we spend time together, the less inclined I am to think I might want anything else. Or anyone else.”

Hayden’s pensive frown turned to a rueful smirk. “I’m inclined to agree with you,” she said. She halted and I did too, waiting as she turned her head this way and that. “Follow me.”

She led me further along the path, under a quiet archway a little way away from the crowded park.

In the sudden silence, I became keenly aware of Hayden’s perfume, of the lingering scent of strawberries on her tongue as she spoke.

“That’s better,” she murmured, brushing a few stray curls from my face. “To be honest with you, I’ve never really cared about labels, even before all that bullshit with my ex. It wasn’t something I ever thought about when I was with someone.”

I nodded in understanding, even if my heart wilted just a little.

“However,” she emphasized, cupping my face in her palms, “if it means something to you, anything at all, I’d ask you out in a heartbeat. We can even change our online relationship status.”

“You don’t even do social media.” I chuckled.

“I would, though.” She shrugged. “For you.”

Her eyes shone with sincerity, even in the darkness of the archway, and I knew she wasn't kidding around. And she wasn't just saying it to end the conversation. Hayden meant every word she said. I felt it in the softness of her fingertips along the apples of my cheeks, and in the gentle, steady pulse of her heartbeat under my palm.

"I believe you," I said truthfully, hoping she understood how much I meant it. Every word. "And I think that's why as long as you're mine, and as long as I'm yours, nothing else really matters to me."

Hayden's hands slid from my face to my shoulders and pulled me in for a bone-crushing hug.

"Can you stop?" she breathed into the shell of my ear, a little shaky. "I can't think straight when you're saying things like that."

"It's just the truth," I mumbled from the spot my face was mashed between her neck and shoulder.

"I know." She laughed. "That's the problem. You're so honest that I can't help but wonder if you're real. If you're really mine."

I pulled away to see the glimmer in her bright green eyes, burning despite the lack of light in our little archway.

Our own little world.

"I am."

And that was that.

She kissed me sweetly before we left our little bubble and joined the real world again, her hand somehow a little warmer in mine.

We bought food from every single stall and every single truck, gorging ourselves on what was probably the unhealthiest dinner possible. But, as we walked back to the main street to call a cab, and Hayden smiled at me under the clear moonlight, it wasn't the food that filled me up.

I snickered to myself, internally scolding my own thoughts for being as cheesy as Hayden.

We spent the night at Hayden's place, wrapped up in each other's arms.

We'd let the future come, and we'd grow with it. With each other.

But we'd be together, and that was all that mattered to me as I fell asleep with my head pillowed on Hayden's chest.

Yes! There will be more from this group of friends. Reid's story is up next. While you're waiting, I've got an exciting offer for you!

Not over Hayden and Frankie? Want a glimpse into their future as they meet Hayden's family? Pick up their bonus epilogue here: <https://geni.us/Excl>

Don't forget to catch up on the series before Reid's story is out:

Not On The Resume (Cameron & Elliot's Story):
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Not On The Agenda (Hayden & Frankie's Story)

About Author

Chloe Peterson is the author of heartfelt women-loving women fiction. She loves writing stories that celebrate the diversity of the LGBT community. Chloe relaxes by watching home building shows and reading fan fiction.

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