

Not Quite a *Beast*



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Not Quite a Beast

Her Happily Ever After
Book 4

Karly Stratford

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Chapter 1

-Leona-

The car lurched as James hit the brakes, and the tip of my stylus went careening across the cartoon face on my tablet. I scowled down at it.

“Apologies, ma’am,” James said from the driver’s seat.

“Thank goodness for the undo button,” I muttered as I deleted the line.

“Indeed. We’re five minutes away.” The car slowed again, and James let out a grunt. He winced, peering at me in the rear-view mirror with his blue eyes. “Perhaps ten, considering traffic.”

I put my tablet down and glanced out the window. Heat shimmered off the buildings of downtown Chicago. An unexpected heat wave had hit the city, and even with the a/c in the car on max, I could still feel the heavy moisture hanging in the air. Unconsciously, I reached up and checked my face prosthetics.

James, ever observant, caught me. “Everything alright, ma’am?”

I lowered my hand and nodded. “Humidity makes me paranoid. And don’t call me ma’am.”

He tilted his hat at me.

I think he wore the suit and chauffeur’s hat just to annoy me.

How many times had I asked him not to be so formal when we were alone? The man was twice my age, had been my father’s driver before he’d died, and had probably seen me

running around in diapers at some point. He could have retired years ago, but he'd stuck with me.

He was the only person who'd stuck with me.

“Are you prepared to find voice actors for your series?” James asked.

I nodded. “Among other things.”

“Like?” He raised an eyebrow.

My father had brought James in on his business dealings because the man was part genius. Like a real live Alfred from Batman, only he didn't have to deal with a vigilante. Just me. He always asked about everything. Which I appreciated.

I swiped to another screen on my tablet where I'd made a list of things I needed to do at the All the Voices conference. “I need to talk to a man named Eddie Kahn about the MaxMart project.”

“He's the last voice you need?”

“Yes.”

As if summoned by the mention of MaxMart, my phone rang. The caller ID displayed the name Juliana Fisher. The woman in charge of the project had been nothing but a giant pain in my back side.

Two could play at that game, and since our first meeting, I'd been returning the favor. I grinned wickedly, donned my Leona persona, and picked up. “Leona Ward,” I said in a voice slightly sharper than my normal speaking tone.

“Miss Ward. This is Juliana Fisher.”

No one called me miss. I wasn't a “Miss” kind of a woman. No part of me resembled an elementary school teacher or a southern girl with braids. It was Ms.

“Mrs. Fisher.” I used Mrs. on purpose with her. She'd been through an ugly divorce six months ago. *Oops*. “What can I do for you?”

Silence reigned on the line for a few seconds, and I imagined Julianna sitting up in her leather office chair and straightening her designer suit. Probably complete with pinstripes. “Miss Ward, the deadline for our e-learning videos is rapidly approaching.”

She said it like I didn’t know. Like I hadn’t signed my name on the dotted line of a contract with a ridiculously short lead time for an even more ridiculous amount of money. I decided not to reply.

After another stint of silence, Julianna spoke. “I need a progress update for my management staff meeting this afternoon.”

I’d emailed her an update the night before. I almost told her to refer to it, but I hadn’t gotten this far in the business world by being petulant to those who held my paycheck. Well, not too petulant.

The car slowed drastically, and I threw my hand out to brace on the seat in front of me.

Sorry, James mouthed in the mirror.

I shrugged and spoke into my phone. “As we discussed the last time we spoke, I’ll be on sight in a week. The team needs that time to set up the recording studios.”

“Because you refuse to use an existing studio.” Julianna practically ran over me with her words.

I gritted my teeth. That hadn’t been my decision. “Your superiors were very specific in their request to make sure that no inkling of this made it into the public eye. The best way to do that is to have the entirety of the project done remotely.”

Julianna knew this, of course, but insisted I rehash it every few phone calls.

“I have concerns,” Julianna said.

She always had concerns.

I shifted on the leather seat and noticed my tablet. It had flipped back to my character. A little girl with red pigtails wearing overalls. A hero in her own right, only without superpowers.

That little girl, fictional though she was, was my reason for doing this project for MaxMart. If it got finished fast enough, I'd be able to fund my cartoon series. The one that would help little girls and boys know their worth. The one I wished I could have had growing up.

MaxMart had called me because I was one of the best producers in the business and had a reputation for getting results under pressure. Time to remind this woman of that.

"Juliana." I decided to go with her first name so I'd seem more friendly. "I know the company is anxious about the timeframe on this project, but I can assure you that the schedule I laid out will work. I'll have everyone in Maryland before we start, and barring a disaster, we'll finish on time."

"We can't afford any slip ups." Her voice held a hint of panic.

Enough of this. I didn't have time to hold Juliana's hand. "I'll update you at the end of each day after we begin production. As agreed. That way you can see for yourself that we're on schedule."

"I have concerns," she said again.

James turned into the pull-out where he planned to drop me off. The small conference center sat half a block away.

"Juliana, I'm going to have to let you go."

She went on as if I hadn't spoken. "We agreed to a diverse cast. I need to see and hear them before you start."

That hadn't been in the contract, and I wasn't about to start giving her wiggle room. "That isn't part of our agreement."

"I don't care." Her calm façade slipped. "I have to be in every detail of this project."

MaxMart had given me the basics on why they needed the entirety of their online training videos redone. Not a small task with over two million employees worldwide and hundreds of positions within the company.

The Vice President, Eric Tyler, had confided in me that the man who had voiced the old videos had been arrested for child trafficking. There were plenty of disgusting details, and suffice it to say, that he was never getting out of prison.

Six months before that, MaxMart's CEO had been forced to resign after dozens of sexual harassment charges had been filed by former employees and customers. The new CEO didn't want another scandal yoked to the company, so they'd hired me to redo all of their training videos. I was to include two male and two female voice actors, all of different ethnicities. That way they could say the reason for the new videos was that they'd wanted to be inclusive in their training. It didn't even matter that no one would see these people, just that they were diverse. A feather in MaxMart's cap, so to speak.

The reasoning didn't concern me. They'd offered enough money that if we hit the stretch goal, I would be able to do my own thing and not have to be profitable for several years. If we hit the main goal, I'd be able to fund my cartoon, but I'd still have to work. Either way, things were moving forward.

However, they hadn't offered me enough to let Mrs. Needy breathe down my neck the whole time. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Fischer, but nothing in our contract gives you the right to be involved in every detail of this project."

James moved us into the drop-off spot, and the car behind us honked.

She started to speak, but I cut her off as I shoved my tablet into my purse and opened the door. "Your Vice President hired me. He trusts me to take care of this for the company. You're going to have to do the same."

A wave of heat and humidity hit me. I exited and stretched to my full height. A single drop of sweat ran down my back.

“This needs to happen,” Juliana spoke through what sounded like gritted teeth. Now I pictured her hunched over her desk with a sneer on her face.

“It will,” I said in an annoyingly calm tone.

“If you miss a single update, I’ll come to Maryland and supervise this myself.”

The car honked again.

I slammed the door and waved to James. He’d find a place to park, get some food, walk until he discovered a nice spot to read, and wait for me to text him. He slowly pulled away from the curb.

“It won’t come to that,” I told Julianna.

“One misstep and your personal payout goes down.”

“I am aware.” I’d fought against that, but MaxMart had insisted. It shouldn’t matter. People worked hard when I was in charge. This thing would be out on time. I’d seen most of the videos without the voice-overs, and they looked good.

The impatient vehicle behind us—a big SUV with spinning rims so shiny that they could probably be seen from space—zoomed into the spot James had just occupied and came to a screeching halt.

I moved away but bumped into the front wave of a crowd of people. People with their phone cameras aimed right at me.

Time stopped. For a moment I was in another place, surrounded by angry people all filming me. I could hear their yells and smell their sweat. My heart leapt and started pounding in my throat. Did they know who I was? I touched my nose. Had it come off?

No, the prosthetic was still in place.

A car door clicked behind me, and everyone started screaming.

I glanced over my shoulder, and a string of impressive profanity marched through my mind.

Dwayne Ford, winner of the first season of *Outlast*, and now the host of the fifth season of the reality TV show, stepped out of the gleaming black SUV.

He'd put on a good twenty pounds of muscle. His already olive skin was tanned to a perfect glow, and he surveyed his raving fans from behind aviator sunglasses.

My breath caught in my throat.

Not because he was handsome—he was—but because he and I had sort of had a thing going on in the first season of *Outlast*. He was the bad boy. I was the bad girl. The producers had asked us to play it up...none of it had been real, which is where all of my problems had started. He'd been one of the first to criticize me after I'd given my interview about the show.

What was he doing at All the Voices? Was he trying to become a voice artist? I stepped back, trying to put space between myself and him. Between myself and my past.

Dwayne looked right at me, and I froze. His grin widened as he took me in from head to toe.

Could he see through my disguise?

In the years since the show, I'd grown out my blond pixie cut and dyed it brown. The overly skinny body I'd had during *Outlast* had filled out in all the right places. Perfect makeup covered my face, including bright red lipstick. Back then, I'd barely put concealer on.

Not to mention the additions to my nose and cheekbones.

Dwayne took a step toward me.

I pushed back into the crowd. The last thing I needed today was to deal with *Outlast*.

The wall of adoring fans surged forward, engulfing me like a wave of water. I slipped between two people. Then two

more. The press of bodies combined with the shock of seeing Dwayne made me want to throw up, but I breathed through it.

In moments, I'd been shuffled to the back of the mob. When they spit me out the other side, I stumbled.

Where the sidewalk should have been I caught air.

The curb.

I'd managed to end up along the road.

No, not along the road, but almost *in* the road.

An oncoming red sports car honked as I fell toward it.

Then, as if I was in a movie, a pair of strong hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me back from a certain squishing. Suddenly, I found my back pressed up against a tall man's chest, which was saying something considering I was five-nine before my sky-high heels.

"Easy, you okay?" The man's voice rumbled through my body.

I'd had to take self-defense classes after *Outlast*, and the moves were still in there. With someone holding me from behind, my elbow reacted of its own accord. I shot it back into the man's stomach.

The man grunted and let me go.

Only then did I realize I knew the owner of the voice.

Tanner Harris.

Chapter 2

-Tanner-

“What’s this?” Eddie pointed as we stopped at the cross walk.

I followed the gesture and found a blinged out SUV in the drop-off area across the street. Eddie, who stood more than a head shorter than me, went on tip toe to try to see the man getting out of the vehicle. When I saw the guy, I shrugged. “It’s just Dwayne Ford.”

“Why is he here?” Eddie asked.

“No idea.”

The light changed and we took off. A surge of people came from behind, trying to catch a glimpse of Dwayne.

“There he is!” one girl squealed.

“I love you, Dwayne!” another shouted.

Eddie and I slowed to let the foaming fan girls past. I had no desire to get caught up in that throng.

“Why doesn’t anyone love us?” Eddie asked. “We’re a big deal.”

I snorted. “Voicing a couple of video game characters doesn’t make you a big deal.”

“More like a dozen of the most popular video games of all time.”

I opened my mouth to answer when Eddie grabbed me and yanked me in front of him. “Crap.”

For a short, scrawny, Asian guy he was freakishly strong.

“What?” As the word fell from my lips, I saw the fan girls combine with the original mob to create a super-sized crowd. It reminded me of the old movies of cells splitting that we’d had to watch in science class, only in reverse.

Eddie pointed to a woman who had just been squeezed from the back of the crowd a few feet away from us, as if being birthed.

That was a really gross analogy.

They’d ejected her near the edge of the sidewalk. She had her head down and obviously didn’t know she was about to step into the road.

Thousands of hours of volleyball practice kicked in, and I was next to her before I realized I’d made the decision to move. Just as she was about to fall face-first into the path of a red sports car, I grabbed her by the shoulders from behind and pulled her against me hard.

Long brown curls cascaded halfway down her back. She wore a crisp business pant suit and smelled slightly of coconut. Everything about her was...familiar. I felt her muscles tense under my hands, so I said, “Easy, you okay?”

Right after I got the words out, she drilled her left elbow into my stomach.

I’d taken plenty of hits on and off the volleyball court, as evidenced by several fake teeth in my mouth, but it had been a while since I’d been attacked with anything resembling an elbow to the gut. I let out a grunt and let her go.

Then, as if she’d never been there, she bolted through a throng of oncoming people and disappeared. An impressive feat in the heels she was wearing.

“Dwayne!” The newly arrived fans joined the others. Maybe they’d merge into one giant megafan and go on a rampage.

“Do you know who you just rescued?” Eddie asked.

I’d almost forgotten about him. “Nope.”

He pointed. “That was Leona Ward.”

That’s why she seemed so familiar. The heels had given her extra height, and she’d grown her hair out even longer than the last time I’d seen her. “Huh.”

“That’s all you’ve got to say?” Eddie demanded.

“What should I say?” I raised my hands as we squeezed between even more yelling fans to get to the safety of the conference center.

“You just saved her life. You need to hold that over her head.” Eddie arrived at the door first and opened it.

“Why?” I let out a relieved breath as the cool air practically froze the sweat on my skin.

“For me.”

“What are you talking about?” I waved my badge at the guy sitting at the registration table. We joined more voice actors coming back from lunch heading for the vendor floor which was in the ballroom of the hotel.

Booths and tables sat in lines, contrasting the huge white, blue, and brown swirls in the carpet. Each one contained a different opportunity: voice acting for cartoons or video games, e-learning projects, television and online commercials, audio books, and more. I could probably walk up to any one of them and book a job.

“Leona wants to talk to me today,” Eddie said.

“For a job?” I asked.

“Yup.”

I thought back to the project I’d done with Leona the previous fall. She’d made us work through Thanksgiving weekend in order to meet a deadline. The thing is, she’d done me a favor because I’d been able to avoid my dysfunctional family and enjoy the opportunity to spend the holiday with my friend Dakota and all of the other people I’d met while in New York.

Everyone else had been angry about Leona's demand for perfection, and by the time we'd finished the project, everyone avoided her. Still, she had plenty of good qualities, like persistence, drive, and an ear for voice acting. "She's not that bad," I said to Eddie.

He stopped in the middle of the vendor floor and pointed at me. "Stop that Pollyanna attitude right now. She's a monster."

"Nah, she just expects a high standard." I had to admit, she did have the reputation of being the toughest producer in the business, which she deserved.

Eddie wagged his finger. "You just saved her life. Maybe I can use that to leverage some privileges on this job."

We reached the table we'd agreed to man for an hour so a couple of people from our voice acting agency could go to lunch. "Did you tell her to find you here?"

"Sure did." Eddie spoke to the other two as he waved them out. "Be warned—Leona is in the house."

They both rolled their eyes and left.

I settled into the stylish but terribly uncomfortable chair and leaned back. "What's the job?" I asked Eddie.

He blinked.

"For Leona."

"Oh. I can't say. NDA."

"Seriously?" My curiosity piqued; I stared hard at him. "Will this make you as big a deal as Dwayne?"

Eddie laughed. "Nah, it's e-learning stuff."

Non-disclosure clauses were normal for voice-overs of corporate training videos. They didn't want you spreading the secret of their success to the whole world. Secrets that often included stapler protocol and the polite request to flush the toilet after you finished your business.

Eddie picked up one of the free pens and started twirling it. “Any luck finding a video company to do your thing?”

“My thing?” I asked, even though I knew what he meant.

“You know, the old people thing.”

“You mean the anti-scammer campaign I want to start?”

Eddie nodded. “For the old people.”

“No luck yet.”

“Why are you sitting here? Go talk to people.” Eddie waved his hand.

“I will as soon as they get back.”

I’d approached two companies about doing the videos, but neither of them was interested in producing what amounted to charity work. I’d saved some money but needed more if I wanted quality. Or I could learn to do it myself, but I’d rather stick with my strength, which was my voice. If I did the visual presentation, it would either be super boring or psychedelic.

“It’s a good cause,” Eddie said. “Someone will take it.”

“I hope so.”

A handful of voice artists dropped by, asked us about the agency, and took cards. When the last set left, Eddie groaned.

I didn’t have to look up to know Leona was approaching.

Now that I knew she was close, I could feel her magnetism. She was ambitious, talented, smart, savvy, and beautiful.

Although, there was something about her that felt off. Like when you see a Hollywood actor without their makeup or wearing a false nose. I sensed a depth to Leona that I couldn’t explain.

It helped that she reminded me of a Rosemary Bellemore.

Rosemary had been on the first season of *Outlast*—the reality show Dwayne now hosted—and I’d had a huge crush on her. I hadn’t been surprised when she’d told the world that

the network had asked her to play the part of a bad girl, because I'd felt the same thing about her then as I did about Leona now. Like the man behind the curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*.

It had taken me weeks during the project I'd worked on with Leona for me to figure out why she reminded me of Rosemary. When she put a hand on her hip, she only left her index finger in the front. She'd tuck the others behind with her thumb. It wasn't totally uncommon, but the way she stood was the spitting image of Rosemary. She only did it when she was distracted and thought she was alone

Too bad the public backlash from Rosemary's ill-fated interview about *Outlast* had forced her from acting and into hiding. I hadn't heard her name in years.

"Eddie Kahn?"

Eddie glanced up and made a show of jumping to his feet and pointing at himself. "That's me."

They shook hands. Eddie looked like he wanted to bolt.

Even without the heels, Leona was tall. Her high cheekbones looked as if they could cut a man just as well as one of her scolding sessions. The cream blouse under a perfectly pressed blue pantsuit might have looked more casual if Leona ever let her posture sag, which she didn't. The blood red lipstick completed her "stay out of my way" look.

Leona turned her brown eyes to me and held out her hand. "Tanner, nice to see you again."

I stood and clasped her hand. Was she not going to mention the rescue earlier? Probably not. That would make her look weak, and Leona Ward never looked weak. Which I took as a challenge and gave her a dazzling smile. "It's nice to be seen."

Leona's lips pressed together so slightly I barely caught it, and her nostrils flared.

That might be the biggest reaction, besides anger, I'd ever seen her give.

She let go of my hand and turned back to Eddie. "Can we talk in private?"

Eddie looked at me. "Will you be okay by yourself?"

"I'll do my best to carry on without you." I put my hand on my heart. I couldn't help but watch Leona and rejoiced at the minuscular eyebrow raise my words produced.

"Shut up." Eddie shook his head followed Leona, who was already walking away. He stopped for a second. "Was that flirting? Are you crazy?"

"Just trying to get a reaction out of her. You know how I feel about people who don't smile."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, man. Trust me."

"Maybe."

Eddie rolled his eyes and jogged after Leona.

I watched the two of them until they exited the ballroom.

Leona Ward. Yes, she was a tyrant. In the twelve weeks we'd worked together last fall, I'd never gotten so much as a twitch from her with one of my jokes. Now I had, and a part of me wanted more.

What *was* I thinking?

Maybe I was crazy. My brain reminded me that while I didn't usually say bad things about people, Leona had been awful to everyone on the project. Including me. Plus, she hadn't even mentioned me saving her life.

Still, people could change, right? There was something more to her, and I kind of wanted to find out what.

Chapter 3

-Leona-

In the short walk from Tanner's booth to the doors that led from the ballroom, I pulled the character of Leona tighter around me. I wasn't sure why, but I'd almost smiled at Tanner's stupid joke. Leona didn't smile at jokes. She only had an evil smirk which was reserved for special occasions that involved besting someone in negotiations or terrorizing people into getting their jobs done.

Dwayne must have set me off. I'd been playing the part of Leona for so long that I rarely broke character, but seeing Dwayne and being swarmed by fans had rattled something loose.

By the time Eddie and I reached the hallway, I'd regained my emotional balance. I stopped and turned, finding Eddie a few feet behind me. He came to an immediate halt then took two steps back. The trepidation in his light brown eyes filled me with a sick sort of satisfaction. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

In my heels, I stood taller than Eddie. His mixed ethnicity made it easy to see he was from Asia, but difficult to pinpoint the country. Not Korea—he wasn't pretty enough for that—but his features could put him from Japan or Mongolia. According to his file, he was a mixture of both. Which made him perfect for this project.

I had a lot of people to talk to, so I decided to make it quick. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, Eddie."

He nodded. "No problem, ma'am."

I internally winced at the ma'am but kept my face neutral. I automatically noticed the slight accent of his voice, along

with the smooth sound and pleasing cadence. He would make an excellent addition to the team. Eddie had sent me an email, and I took a second to recall his points in it. “You said you had concerns about the location.”

“Yes.” He left off the ma’am this time. I raised an eyebrow, and he went on. “My sister is in the middle of cancer treatments. I need to be able to check in on her, and if anything happens, I’ll need to be able to communicate with the rest of my family.”

I’d wanted voice artists who didn’t have families to join this project so I could avoid things like this, but almost everyone had somebody to worry about. There were two other Asian voice actors that I could call, but Eddie was the best among them. I allowed a tiny amount of concern to creep into my voice. “Eddie, if you believe there will be medical complications with a family member in the next five weeks, then I’d advise you to drop the project.”

He ran a hand through his thick black hair. “I don’t expect there to be a problem, but I’d feel pretty bad if something happened and my family couldn’t get a hold of me.”

My team had brought this up too. I sighed. “We’ll have limited internet access and phone availability. Your cell phones will, per the contract, need to be shut off, but we can make it so you can check messages each day for a few hours in the evening.” It would be impossible to keep everyone isolated with the technology we had at our disposal; my hope was that we could mitigate exposure about where we were and what we were doing.

Eddie glanced behind me, thinking.

I willed him to accept my offer. The other voice actors I had picked didn’t have the experience Eddie did, and I wanted the best. Not to mention that everyone I’d talked to said he was easy to work with.

Not as easy as Tanner, but who was?

I pushed that thought aside and stared at Eddie. Eventually his gaze came back to me, and he nodded. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent.” I pulled out my phone and sent him an email, which I’d had in a draft ready to go. “The contract is on its way. Please sign it and get it back to me today if possible. Send your current address and we’ll arrange travel for you.”

“Okay,” Eddie said.

A roar of noise came from my right, and a single glance told me Dwayne and his entourage had entered the building.

“Is he going into voice acting?” Eddie asked.

“I have no idea.” Now wasn’t the time for me to find out. “Thank you for talking to me. I’ll see you next Saturday.”

Before Eddie could answer or Dwayne spotted me, I turned and strode back onto the vendor floor.

I didn’t have a destination in mind but planned to get lost in the crowd. The classes that started at the top of each hour had just gotten out, releasing a flood of people into the ballroom.

Those with their heads down looking at the schedule ignored me. They were likely new to the industry and were still working on honing their skills and finding jobs. Anyone who’d been around for a while knew who I was. When they saw me, their eyes would go wide, and they’d move closer to whomever they were walking with. They’d drop their gaze, and almost all of them jumped aside as I approached.

It had taken five years of nonstop productions for me to gain a reputation for being an excellent project manager. In that time, I’d cultivated Leona. People feared her.

Me.

Not the real me, but the fake me.

Dwayne and his posse came in through the far entrance, and I repressed a sigh. I needed to avoid him at all costs. With that in mind, I spotted the table of a company I’d worked with

a few times. It never hurt to gather a few more names for voice actors for the MaxMart project, just in case Eddie changed his mind or one of them had something come up.

Enough people had filled the aisles that there wasn't room for those in front of me to jump out of the way. Instead, they pushed back, only to be rebutted by the crowds. Most looked mortified that I had to stop for them. Others muttered a quick apology. I ignored them and cut a swath through the ocean of bodies. A tall, round man with his back to me had to be reading my mind, because each time I went to dart around him he drifted into my path. The noise level tripled, and I clenched my teeth.

Crowds weren't my thing, and after the crazed fans outside, my brain was throwing up red flags. The last time I'd been mobbed by this big of a press had been right after the *Outlast* scandal, and I'd ended up with bruises and broken bones. Why was everyone in here? Most of the classrooms were out in the hallway.

"There he is!" someone shouted.

Were they talking about Dwayne? I made the mistake of inhaling and caught a whiff of a second-day attendee who had decided that personal hygiene was more a guideline rather than a rule of society.

One of the conference organizers had more sense than the rest and had made it to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, please let the cast from *Phoenix High* through. I promise they'll be available after their panel for several hours to sign autographs and answer questions."

That made sense. *Phoenix High* was the hottest show for kids at the moment. You'd think it would be about a bunch of teenagers from Arizona, but instead it was a high school where superheroes sent their wayward kids for a bit of reform. It was surprisingly good. I'd watched every episode and had considered attending this panel. However, if everyone from out here was going to be in the main meeting room, I'd watch the replay.

I elbowed my way to a table, forcing myself not to start gulping in oxygen. When I arrived, the space around me cleared, and it became possible to breathe again. I shivered as the back of my neck tingled, and I turned my head and caught a glimpse of a familiar face through a gap in the mob. I hadn't realized I was directly across from Tanner. Our eyes met and he gave me a "what's up" head jerk.

I blinked and turned away.

No way was I going to give him more reaction than that. I'd already slipped up with him earlier.

"Ca—can I help you?" a wobbly voice asked from behind me.

I turned and found a skinny blond man who looked like a deer caught in headlights. I quickly took stock of the sign behind him and the pamphlets on the table. The small company worked to match book narrators and authors. They also had a note on their banner that they worked in children's animation as well.

The tingle on the back of my neck hadn't stopped, which meant Tanner was still watching. I picked up a card and looked at it for a moment before giving my attention to the blond man. "What makes your services better than going through a platform for an author?" Authors could practically throw a rock out their front door and hit a voice actor. How were these guys making money matching the two?

The man stood. "Well, we actually have authors contact us before they're finished with their books. At that point, we pair them with one of our narrators."

I raised an eyebrow. This wasn't new.

He cleared his throat. "Our unique feature is that our team looks at the book and helps the author up its potential to be successful. Then we put the project on a crowdfunding website."

The very word crowdfunding made me feel dirty. Why would anyone rely on the public to help them in their

endeavors? I'd tried that once and had been burned up like Gollum in Mount Doom.

The man went on. "We use every aspect of social media to promote the book and get it funded." He grinned, as if proud of himself. "We've successfully funded all but three projects."

I didn't care, but I automatically asked a question. "Three out of how many?"

He pointed at the banner. "Almost five hundred. All have gone on to be profitable for everyone involved." The glow on his face made me want to sneer at him. Didn't he know that at some point the crowd would turn against him? One wrong move and they'd be at his throat.

"Do you have any other questions?"

My face had drawn into a sour expression, and I forced it to relax. "Yes, actually, I was wondering about your connections to cartoon voice actors."

The volume of noise around us didn't change, but the air suddenly felt silent. Like I could have heard a pin drop on the table in front of me. The man sputtered as he spoke. "I—I didn't realize you took on cartoons."

I'd spent so long making Leona into an overly strong female character that people found it impossible that she might be interested in producing projects other than e-learning and internet commercials. I dredged up a smile and said, "I have an associate that couldn't make it today who was interested."

The man relaxed. "I see. Well, I have a pamphlet that explains everything." He handed me one. "And here's my card with my phone number on it for your associate."

The number obviously wasn't for me. No one slipped me their information; I asked for it. "Is your cartoon model consistent with your books?"

"You mean the crowdfunding?" He nodded. "Yes. We're just getting started but have already had five projects reach their financial stretch goals. Two are in production."

“I see.” I made a mental note to throw the card away as soon as possible. There was no way Rosemary would be talking to them about her cartoon. Not if it meant trusting the public.

A buzz sounded from my purse. I drew my phone out and saw the message icon. I held it up and said, “I need to take this.”

The man nodded, visibly relieved that I was leaving, and sat.

A voice boomed from the microphone again. “Panels are about to start, everyone. Panels are about to start.”

I wondered if there was any space left in the main room. It wouldn’t hurt to look, and if there wasn’t, I’d come back in here and terrorize a few more people.

I made my way out into the hall and into the room. A raised stage stood at the front of the space, with several hundred chairs between here and there. Only a handful of them were empty, and all of those were in the middle of the rows. I was not going to crawl over people, so I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall.

The message on my phone was from Remmy Jones, the African American voice actor for the MaxMart project. I’d been expecting his signed contract, not a text.

Remmy: Ms. Ward, I’m sorry to inform you that my mother fell last night and broke her leg. I’m going to have to pass on the project because I need to take care of her.

There was more, but I stopped reading. I’d already slotted him into the lineup. He had a great voice and an even better work ethic. Although he could be a little forward with the ladies, there wouldn’t be time for him to get in trouble in Maryland. Also, he knew better than to cross me.

A shadow passed between the gaudy chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and me. “Leona?”

My eyes snapped up at the use of my first name, and I found Tanner standing before me. Tanner, the nicest guy on

the planet, and the only voice actor I'd ever forbidden myself to work with again. Not because I didn't like him. On the contrary, I found myself attracted to him. Something I'd avoided thinking about until right now.

He was everything I needed for MaxMart, but I'd told myself I hadn't contacted him because he didn't usually go for big money projects. In fact, he generally took on underdog work. Also, the fact that I found him charming, funny, interesting, and super-hot kept him off the list. Except here he was for the second time this morning, appearing out of nowhere just when I needed him.

He grinned. "I've got an extra spot up here. Do you want to sit?"

Chapter 4

-Tanner-

Leona's eyebrows lifted and her lips parted for a split second. She'd been looking at her phone and hadn't seen me approach. Which meant I'd caught her off-guard. Score one for me.

I kept my winning smile in place and gestured toward where Eddie and I had an extra seat. Eddie wasn't happy about the prospect of Leona Ward sitting with us, but he'd get over it. "It's on the end," I said, hoping to entice her.

Leona's dark eyes met mine, and I saw a thin ring of light blue around her irises. I hadn't realized she wore contacts. Her expression had returned to her normal resting you-know-what face and she arched an eyebrow.

"Or not." I shrugged. "I'm sure someone else will want it." I turned to walk away. It was no skin off my knees or whatever if she didn't want to join us.

"Wait." Her voice was quiet. Soft. Very un-Leona like. I stopped and looked over my shoulder.

Leona had straightened and managed to look down her nose at me even though I was taller. "On the end?"

I'd noticed she often chose the seat closest to a door or on the edge of an aisle. One with an easy escape route. It made sense, considering she usually had multiple projects going on and she would get calls she had to take right away, but I'd always wondered if there was more to it. I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "You want it?"

"I suppose." She made a show of sighing before following me.

“Great.” I waited and walked next to her. Most people we passed noticed Leona and looked away like she was a pariah. A few gave us a second glance and raised eyebrows. I ignored them and spoke to Leona. “I saw you talking to the guys at Vocalo.”

She made a delicate noise at the back of her throat. Was it supposed to be a snort? Like a really posh snort? Not even my sister did that.

“I was gathering information.”

The only thing she could learn from them was how to weaponize crowdfunding for her evil plans. “Looking at a new strategy for raising money?” We got to our row, and I waved Eddie all the way in. He gave me a glare—he liked the end too—and sat.

Leona eyed me, then the chair.

“I’m not going to bite.” I patted the cushion, which I was sure was going to make her not want to sit down. Sure enough, she pursed her blood red lips. I drew an X over my heart. “Promise.”

“Very well.” In one painfully graceful motion she sat, crossed her legs, and settled her purse onto her lap.

I knew from personal experience that Leona had great legs. She had great everything. I spent a lot of time working out to stay in the shape I liked to be in, and she must do the same. I’d have to remember that. Back to her legs. Unfortunately, today she’d decided to wear a pant suit. My eyes drifted toward the floor.

“How do your feet not hate you?” I pointed at her cream heels, which added at least four inches to her stature.

“My feet are not the boss of me.” She spoke without moving any other muscles. No shrug. No smirk. No weird snort in the back of her throat.

I blinked. Had that been a joke? I opened my mouth to say as much, but an ear-splitting shriek came from the speakers.

“Come on!” someone behind me yelled. “We’re all audio experts!”

Everyone around us laughed.

Leona shifted ever so slightly, but it was only to improve her already practically-perfect-in-every-way posture. Audrey Hepburn had nothing on this woman’s long neck. If Leona ever pulled her hair up, something I’d never seen her do, she might be darn near irresistible.

I had a thing for delicate necks. The guys from college had always teased me about it, asking if I was a vampire or something. Nope, it was just one of the aspects of the feminine frame that I appreciated.

The voice actors for *Phoenix High* came on stage, and applause exploded around us. I stood and pulled out my camera to take some pictures. Leona didn’t speak. She didn’t so much as breath heavier, but I could tell she wanted to say something. The air felt like it was vibrating around her and seeping onto me. After a few shots of the cast, I sat and leaned over to talk near Leona’s ear. I’d never presume to whisper sweet nothings to her or touch her. Instead, I hovered oh-so close, but initiated zero contact. “I promised a few friends I’d get pictures.”

“How nice of you,” Leona droned.

I grinned and swiped to a photo of Myrtle and Rodney. The newlyweds, who were each in their eighties, were attempting to reenact that iconic scene from *Titanic* where Rose is flying at the bow of their cruise ship. It looked like they’d talked the crew into tying safety ropes onto them. Or maybe that was the only way the crew would let the two of them anywhere near the front of the ship. I hadn’t asked. They were due back from their honeymoon the next week. “These two are big fans of the show.”

Leona’s eyebrow raised a measurable amount.

“Aren’t they adorable?” I grinned and looked at the photo. “I met them while we were working in New York.”

The crowd was still cheering and whooping, and Leona leaned a little closer to me. Not quite close enough to touch. “You hung out with old people in New York?”

“It’s a long story, but I like them better than most of my own family.”

Leona returned to her upright position and said nothing more.

The panel finally started, and I snapped a few more pictures. I’d contacted the lead actor, whom I’d met a few times, and had asked if I could get autographs and photos later. He’d agreed, so I was here to write down anything funny they said.

I’d had no idea Myrtle and Rodney would get sucked into a kids show when I put on the first episode after Thanksgiving dinner. Now they were practically super fans. They were talking about getting matching tattoos of their favorite character, and I wouldn’t put it past them. I also wouldn’t put it past them to show everyone, even if the tattoos were in unmentionable places.

The panel was interesting but nothing I hadn’t heard before, so instead of paying super close attention, I kept one eye on Leona.

As usual, she didn’t have on heavy perfume. I caught a hint of coconut again, but I was pretty sure it was coming from her hair. My last year of college I’d been roped into the theater company, so I’d learned a little about stage makeup. Leona didn’t have a ton of makeup on, but what was there was flawless. She had high, sharp cheekbones and did a good job of softening them. Her lipstick probably didn’t dare smear for fear of being put on a blacklist.

Leona and I had spent a little time together in New York, but it was all work. At one point, the entire production team had been ready to walk out, but I’d talked them down, then I’d gone to Leona and suggested that she should ease up on the pressure. She’d listened with the same focused look she wore

now, then she'd nodded and dismissed me. I had to assume she'd agreed with my assessment because she'd softened up a bit after that. Just on pressuring people.

One of the voice actors on stage started talking about their favorite cartoons. When she mentioned *Kim Possible*, Leona leaned forward a degree or two and inclined her head.

Whoa, Leona liked *Kim Possible*? It certainly seemed like it. She was squeezing her bag and might not notice if an air horn sounded in her ear.

So, Miss Grumpy Pants had a weakness. I'd never imagined it would be a cartoon, but it was something to think about. I sat back and folded my arms across my chest to better observe her. Her eyes had both softened and gotten brighter. I could hear her breathing, and her fingers curled tighter around her purse.

This was a mystery I had to solve.

I jumped when my phone buzzed from my pocket.

Eddie shot me an annoyed look. It was just a text, and this wasn't a formal setting, so I pulled it out and swiped it to life.

The message was from my friend Bryan. We'd played volleyball together during college and I'd told him we should hang out while I was in Chicago.

Bryan: You still up for a match?

Tanner: 1 on 1?

Bryan: Nope. Josh and Justin are in town.

That surprised me. The twins were a professional sand volleyball team. Weren't they still in the middle of their season?

Tanner: Are you sure they're not in Greece?

Three dots appeared as Bryan sent a reply. Instead of a text, a picture appeared. Bryan, Josh, and Justin were making weird faces at the camera.

Bryan: We're at lunch.

Bryan: Hi Tanner! I've decided Josh is my favorite.

Bryan: No! Justin!

I rolled my eyes and imagined Bryan trying to wrestle his phone back from the two most rambunctious people I'd ever met, and that included toddlers. They were surely making a scene and loving every minute of it. They'd be a while, so I went to put my phone back when it buzzed again. I expected another message from Bryan, but instead, another name appeared.

Dad.

I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath.

Leona turned her head to look at me.

I shoved the phone into my pocket and gave her an apologetic smile. I needed a minute before I could deal with my family.

The voice actors were sharing stories about working in sound studios and the best bloopers they'd ever done. Leona's softened look had melted away, but she was still clutching her bag.

Not even the story of bottling a fart and then releasing it into the sound booth when someone else was in there could keep me from thinking about my phone.

There was only one reason my dad would be contacting me. He knew I wanted nothing to do with it, but he'd invite me anyway, I'd refuse, then he'd whine and say I didn't love him until I agreed to at least stop by sometime over the weekend of the so-called celebration.

I really didn't want to. Especially after the dramafest that last year had turned into. I hadn't spoken to him or my brother since I'd walked out. My sister never called, so that wasn't an issue.

My phone buzzed again. I could silence it all the way. I wasn't expecting any important communications in the next few hours, especially if I sent a quick text to Bryan. I took it

out and my dad's text came up first. He'd used our family chat.

Dad: Tanner, I was wondering if you were going to join us for FRAB this year?

He usually made some sort of demand that I spend at least a day with my family over the weekend. My brother, Kyle, had sent a reply.

Kyle: Yeah, loser, when are you going to grace us with your presence?

There was more, but I put my phone on do not disturb, sent a quick message to Bryan about tonight, and shoved it back into my pocket. Unfortunately, I didn't have any plans that weekend. I might actively look for a rush job at the conference just to say I was working. It's the only excuse my dad would take.

Leona leaned toward me again. "Problem?"

I shook my head. "Just my family."

She made that snorting noise again. "I completely understand."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

Well, well, well, it looked like we had something in common.

Chapter 5

-Leona-

Why couldn't I stop engaging with Tanner? Why had my mouth decided to betray me by letting a joke slip out? My feet are not the boss of me? Seriously? What was my problem?

Tanner leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees.

Oh, right, *he* was the problem. It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to admire the muscles in his arms and back as he stretched. He generally wore t-shirts, which only accentuated the fact that he had put in more time at the gym than I did.

However, it wasn't just his fair-to-look-upon body that had me distracted. He'd offered me a seat with no strings attached. At least none that I could see. No one had done that for years. Not since I'd donned the Leona persona. People did things for Leona because they wanted or needed something from her.

Not Tanner. Apparently, he hung with old people who looked like they were having the time of their life. The picture of them had shaken me. Partly because I was worried they were going to fly off the ship, but more because that's the kind of relationship I'd always wanted. Somewhere, deep in a storage unit, I still had notebooks from school that had snippets of love stories that I was secretly hoping would be my future: food fights while making cookies, walks in the rain, kids at the park. Reenacting Titanic in my eighties hadn't been on the list, but now it was.

The list that would never get checked off because I doubted any man would accept me. I'd been lying to the world about who I was for five years—who would trust me after that?

My eyes darted to Tanner, and I wondered what he would do if he knew that Leona Ward was a façade I'd created to keep out of the public eye. Would he understand? He was legitimately one of the nicest guys I'd met, but I wasn't sure even his kindness could stretch that far.

"Leona Ward, is that you out there?"

I jumped as my name blared from the speakers. A man from the stage pointed at me, and everyone around us turned to look.

My lungs constricted, and my fingers sunk even deeper into my purse.

"Were you spacing out?" Tanner's voice purred right next to my ear. He'd sat up and leaned toward me again.

"Maybe," I said out of the corner of my mouth.

"They're looking for volunteers."

"For what?" My heart slammed in my chest. I did *not* want to be in front of everyone.

"To read some lines."

"Tanner, is that you next to Leona?" the man asked. "Both of you, get up here."

"No way," I said.

Tanner put his hand on my back and gave me a little push to my feet. "Come on, it will be good publicity."

For the first time in years, I wobbled in my heels. "I don't need publicity."

"Any publicity is good publicity, right?"

Eddie began clapping. Tanner waved his hands encouraging everyone else to do the same. It didn't take much before applause and whooping filled the room and threatened to raise the roof.

Tanner's fingers brushed my arm as he moved past. "You aren't going to chicken out on me just because you'll be in

front of a few hundred people, are you?”

If he only knew.

The problem was Rosemary—I—was terrified of crowds, but Leona wasn't. Which meant I was going to have to put on my big girl panties and follow Tanner onto that stage. Like a boss.

Did people even say that anymore? I pictured myself shaking my head, but kept myself ramrod straight as I walked behind Tanner. He slowed, like he had a gentlemanly second sense that could tell there was a woman nearby, and waved me to go first.

The big jerk. While Tanner was reserved, there was nothing shy about him. He'd have the crowd eating out of the palm of his hand in seconds.

Heck, if he offered me a snack, I'd totally eat it out of his hand.

No, no, no. I could *not* think like a love-sick teenager. Even if Tanner was tall, dark, handsome, driven, kind, funny, competitive, and hung out with stinking old people like a saint.

Time to really become Leona. Hundreds of hours of therapy after *Outlast* had given me a few coping mechanisms. Creating an alternate personality hadn't been among them, but that was beside the point. I exhaled, pushing everything I didn't need right then out of my mind. That included thoughts of Tanner, fear of the public, and self-doubt. Then I took a deep breath and only let in the things I needed: strength, stamina, confidence, and a knowledge that I was good at what I did.

The crowd was still clapping when we got to the stairs. I walked up them like a supermodel, using every inch of my body and hours of acting practice to ooze beauty. The slack jaws in the front row told me I'd done it right.

Two long tables stretched across the front of the stage. Behind one sat the four actors from *Phoenix High*. The moderator, Donald Muster, a tall, skinny man who'd voiced

more cartoons than almost anyone else alive, pointed at the far table. “Leona.” He smiled. “Can I call you Leona?”

No, that wouldn’t do.

“It’s Ms. Ward,” I said.

He gave the audience a wink but spoke to me. “Very well, Ms. Ward, will you take the far seat on the second table?”

I didn’t answer, just sashayed across the stage and sat. I cursed myself for not wearing a pencil skirt. If I’d known I would be the focus of a bunch people, I would have planned accordingly. Leona liked to show off her shapely legs. She also liked to command attention.

Tanner, of course, got seated right next to me. Two newbie voice actors took the other spots.

Donald handed us each several pages of a script. Mine had the name Chuck highlighted in yellow. I glanced at Tanner and found Iris in orange. He looked over at me and grinned.

“I think they got us mixed up.” He handed me his paper.

“Don’t you dare trade parts,” Donald said.

We froze.

“You think I made a mistake?” Donald raised a white eyebrow.

“No, sir,” Tanner said loudly as he pulled his papers back.

I gave the old man a flat stare.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Ward, you’re going to love this.” He then turned to the audience and explained that we were going to read a mash-up scene from two shows.

“This is your fault,” I muttered to Tanner.

“Relax, how bad can it be? You can do voices, right?”

Yes, I could do a few voices, but that was because I’d been practicing for my show, not because I wanted the world to know about it. I glanced over my lines, trying to get a feel for the character. It seemed Chuck was the token chubby kid who

wanted to be a ghost hunter, but he was too afraid to actually go into a haunted house.

Iris, Tanner's character, was the cliché tough girl who seemed like a boy with boobs. I inwardly rolled my eyes at the writing.

Donald interrupted my musings. "Let's have our guests try out their voices, shall we?"

The crowd cheered.

"Ms. Ward, will you start us off with the first line of your dialogue?"

Of course he'd begin with me. For a moment my mouth wouldn't open. I'd spent years staying out of the public spotlight. Board meetings, team meetings, even meeting heads of Fortune 500 companies weren't intimidating. This was. If I failed to entertain, the hundreds of people in the room would transform into an angry mob and rip me to shreds.

Tanner nudged me with his elbow and muttered. "I believe in you."

How four words spurred me into action, I'll never know. It was like a challenge, but in the nicest way possible.

I'd crafted Leona's personality with care, but there was always room for improvement. Why not let these people see that I had some talent in the area of voice acting? It would give me more street cred.

For the first time in a long time, I lowered my Leona persona and brought a bit of Rosemary to life. She loved stuff like this. *I* loved stuff like this. I took a breath and spoke in as low a voice as I could muster. "Golly, Iris, I think we need someone to stay in the van just in case we need a quick getaway."

Silence filled the room. I refused to look up from my page, afraid I'd seen a pack of monsters waiting to pounce.

Then a wave of laughter rolled over me and I was almost knocked back.

Tanner stared at me with his jaw hanging open.

Relief kept me from being swept away, and I turned Leona back on. “How was that?” I asked in an innocent voice.

Donald, who had doubled over, waved a hand and managed to speak into his microphone. “Next.”

“How am I supposed to follow that?” Tanner asked me.

I shrugged and gave him a wicked smile. “You’re a talented guy, I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

His grin widened.

Dang it, I’d engaged with him again. Why couldn’t I keep my mouth shut?

Tanner cleared his throat, then spoke in a classic valley-girl voice. “There is no way you’re staying out here, Chuck. Grab that equipment and follow me.”

The line itself was mundane, but Tanner swung his shoulders and tossed imaginary hair over his shoulder as he spoke.

The crowd cracked up.

Just as I’d predicted, he had the room eating out of his hand.

The other two needed a few adjustments. By the time that was finished, Donald decided we were all going to get up and act the scene out.

I did my best to walk like a fat kid, which got everyone laughing. Tanner continued with his valley-girl impersonation. A few minutes later, we were all in a haunted house. Half of us were trying to find the ghosts to prove they existed, and the other half wanted to kill the ghosts. I hadn’t had fun in a while, and it felt good.

For the final scene, Chuck was supposed to save Iris from falling off a balcony. I figured Tanner would just pretend, but he dragged me to the edge of the stage and grabbed my hand as he leaned over the edge. “Chuck, like, save me!”

I worked out, but holding someone as tall and muscular as Tanner up wasn't an easy task. I could have done it with my legs, but his fingers instantly began slipping out of mine. I had to make this fast. "Hold on, Iris!" I threw my paper down and grabbed Tanner with both hands.

On the other side of the stage, the characters were battling with monsters.

Tanner leaned farther.

"I can't hold you," I said through gritted teeth.

"I'm falling!" he squealed.

If you've ever tried to run up the stairs while laughing hysterically, then you know that your legs turn to jelly and breathing becomes impossible. That's what happened to me right then. Tanner sounded so much like a teenage girl that I giggled. I didn't remember the last time I'd giggled. The emotion sapped the strength out of my legs, arms, and hands. My grip slipped.

His eyes went wide.

I commanded my muscles to obey, but I got distracted by a fake scream from the other side of the stage. The man playing the ghost ran by me with his hands in the air wailing. "The humans are coming, the humans are coming!"

Tanner met my gaze. His brown eyes sparkled, and the wry grin on his lips pulled another giggle from me. He laughed and raised his eyebrows as if to ask if I was actually enjoying this.

Which is when his hand slipped again. My fingers desperately tried to tighten around his, but they found a way to escape.

The stage was only two feet from the ground, but it still felt like he fell for forever. Probably because he was so tall.

I stayed in character used my Chuck voice to yell, "Iris!"

Tanner kept my gaze and shook his head as if to say I owed him for this.

I shrugged. He was the one who'd decided to dangle over the edge of the stage. Tanner hit the ground hard but didn't seem phased.

Then the ghost man came behind me, still screaming that the humans were coming, and hit me with a flailing arm.

If I had anything to say about it, the guy would never work in voice acting again. I wobbled. The top half of me hovered over the edge of the stage while my arms tried to use the air to push me back.

No luck.

I was going to destroy that ghost. Leona Ward did not pinwheel her arms, look alarmed, or fall off stages.

My body's center of gravity went past the tipping point. The audience let out an appropriate gasp. No amount of Pilates could save me now.

I glared at Tanner as I fell toward his rock-hard abs.

Chapter 6

-Tanner-

“Wait, then she landed on you?” Josh put his hands on his hips as I prepared to serve the ball.

Bryan, Josh, Justin, and I had rented a racquetball court in a nearby rec center, put up a volleyball net, and were in the middle of our second game.

I pointed at my sternum. “I have a bruise where she tried to catch herself with her elbow.”

The twins howled with laughter.

The four of us had been part of a championship volleyball team in college. Since then, the twins, Josh and Justin, had been the only ones to stay in professional sports. They now constituted one of the best two-man sand volleyball teams in the world. Their almost identical tanned skin, blond hair, and hyper attitudes had won them fans from Europe to South America. Partly because they still harbored the small-town Texan charm they grew up with.

I ignored their laughing and served the ball.

I may not have stayed in sports, but I stayed in shape and kept up with my skills.

Josh uttered a curse as he threw himself to the floor to keep the ball from hitting the ground. He got underneath it, and the ball popped up so Justin could set it.

Bryan and I went to the net. I watched Josh, who leapt up off the floor, knowing he'd probably be the one to spike it.

To my surprise, Justin tapped the ball so it hit the wall and ricocheted toward the back of the court.

“Crap,” Bryan said as he followed it with his eyes.

The only thing out of bounds in this room was the floor, and we’d all taken advantage of it.

Josh reset. “This is the crazy, grouchy boss you had last Thanksgiving, right?”

Bryan, who looked more like a football player than a volleyball player, stretched his long arms—covered with a ridiculous amount of ginger hair—and managed to tap the ball toward me.

“That’s her,” I said as I leaped up for a spike.

“Got him,” Justin said.

I grinned, and instead of hitting the ball down, I whacked it toward the ceiling.

“Jerk!” Josh yelled as he ran to the end of the court.

Just as I had planned, the ball hit the ceiling near the far wall and came straight down. Josh dove but smacked into wall as he got the ball. They both hit the floor hard.

“Yay!” Bryan waved his hands in the air. “Match point!”

“That was cheating,” Justin said.

I shook my head as I used my shirt to wipe sweat from my face. “You wish.”

Everyone laughed and we moved to the door. We still had the room for another hour, but I needed a drink. It was too dangerous to leave anything inside with us, so all of our stuff lay on a shelf in the hall.

Josh, who at this point had longer hair than Justin, grabbed a towel and used it on his head. “That floor sucks.”

“Sand sucks,” Bryan muttered.

“I agree,” I said right before I took a huge swallow from my water bottle.

“You haven’t finished your story about the monster woman,” Justin said.

The monster woman. Leona. I might never forget the way she felt lying on top of me. Heat rose up my neck at the briefest recollection.

I also may never recover from the laser-focused death glare she'd given me. Like it had been my fault that she'd fallen off the stage. Okay, fine, it might have been my fault, but I'd never admit it. "There isn't much more to tell. She was bright red and sputtering mad. I tried to help her off of me, but she jumped up and left."

"She walked out?" Bryan asked.

"The announcer guy covered for it and dismissed us all, asking for applause from the audience. By the time I got back to our seats, Leona was gone."

"Our seats?" Josh wiggled his eyebrows.

"The row we happen to be sitting in," I said in a flat voice. These three were way too curious about this incident for my comfort. As a matter of fact, I felt the need to change the subject. "How are things with Amber?" I asked Justin. The two of them had been on-and-off-again since our friend's bachelor party the summer before.

Justin scowled. "I saw her a few weeks ago. We had dinner. That was it."

Josh put a hand to the side of his mouth and pretended to whisper. "He was so depressed we almost lost a match."

"Not true." Justin shot his brother a dirty look. "The sun was in a bad spot that day."

"You mean the sky?" Josh asked.

Justin had been tortured enough, so I turned to his brother. "What about you? Any ladies in your life?"

"Plenty. One in each city." Josh grinned, but I could tell his heart wasn't in it.

Justin chimed in. "He met someone in Rome."

Bryan raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah?"

Josh rolled his eyes. “I met her, and then I found her with another guy two weeks later. Story of my life.”

Justin put his hand up. “We’ve declared ourselves forever bachelors.”

Josh high-fived it. “Yup.”

All eyes turned to Bryan, who was in mid-chew of an energy bar. He shook his head.

“Come on, Bryan, there are a lot of women in Chicago.”

He held up a finger and swallowed. “There are a lot of *crazy* women in Chicago.”

“Fair,” Josh said.

We all looked at one another. Since our friends Tyler, Royce, and then Dakota had gotten engaged or married, there seemed to be more pressure on the rest of us. Mostly I ignored it, but seeing Dakota fall in love with Fredi—not to mention Myrtle and Rodney—had done something to my biological clock.

That thought led straight to Leona. She hadn’t been on my radar until today. I’d barely survived working with her last fall and had no desire to get into a relationship with someone as controlling and severe as she seemed to be.

However, there were a few times during the cartoon reading we’d done when I’d seen her eyes gleaming with excitement. She’d been having fun. She’d grumbled and glared about it the whole time, but she’d done it and she’d done a good job.

I kept coming back to her first and only joke. “My feet are not the boss of me.” I hadn’t realized she could be funny until that moment.

Leona’s indestructible exterior had cracked, and I’d been there to see it. Or maybe she’d let me see it, although I doubted that. Usually, Leona planned every move of her day and executed it with precision. This had been a deviation. I wondered how far she was willing to go off course.

“He’s making that face,” Bryan said.

“He is,” Josh said.

I blinked and found my friends staring at me. “What?”

The twins looked at one another and shook their heads.

Bryan pointed at me. “You like this woman.”

“Leona?” I cursed myself for saying her name instead of denying everything. I blamed the possible concussion from earlier.

“Yup, he likes her.” Justin tossed his water bottle back on the shelf. “We can tease him about it inside. It will throw his game off.”

“Will not,” I said.

“Put your money where your mouth is.” Bryan pulled the door open. “I get Justin this time.”

“Works for me.” I turned to follow, but a buzz came from my bag. I frowned because I thought I’d turned my phone off.

I was still ignoring my family and planned to look at the messages when I got home, where I could throw it on my bed as hard as I could and not damage it.

The continued buzz meant it was a call. My dad might call, but it could also be Myrtle or Rodney. They liked to tell me all about their day. I’d sent them the pictures of the *Phoenix High* panel, along with the autographs I’d procured.

Josh stopped and looked at me.

I held up a finger. “I should probably take this. Two minutes.”

“Don’t worry, I can beat them by myself.” With that, he walked into the court. The door slammed behind him.

I dug my phone out of the side pocket of my bag and swiped it to life before I saw the caller ID.

It was like typing a text and taking the time to re-read it but sending it before you got to the end and noticing a bad

typo.

Instead of Myrtle's name, or even my dad's, the letters spelled out Leona (Ms.) Ward. By the time my brain processed that, the phone was to my ear and I'd said hello. Only my voice had stopped before the O.

"Hell...o" I quickly added it, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Tanner?"

It was Leona alright. She sounded tired.

Why was she calling me? Maybe to apologize for trying to skewer me with her elbow? How should I answer? I glanced at the door to the court to ensure my friends weren't anywhere close, before taking a step away. "This is Tanner."

"This is Leona Ward. I had your number from last fall." She moved into her no-nonsense voice.

This was business then. "What can I do for you?"

She cleared her throat. I'd noticed she only did that when she was nervous, which was hardly ever. "I have a proposition for you."

"You do?" I knew she probably meant a business proposition, but I couldn't help teasing her. "Exactly what kind of proposition?"

"A *business* deal." Her words bit at me through the phone.

I grinned, glad to see I'd gotten to her. "I guess that's acceptable."

She ignored my jab. "Did Eddie tell you about the job he's doing for me?"

Now I frowned. Was this some sort of trick? Did she have some problem with Eddie and was trying to get him off the project? I spoke carefully. "Just a little."

"I had all four people I needed lined up, but someone canceled at the last minute."

"Eddie?" He hadn't said anything.

“No.” She paused. “The reasons for this project are complicated and confidential, but I can tell you a few things. It will involve hundreds of hours of e-learning voice-over in a short time. They requested a diverse cast. I could use you to fill in the gap.”

“I see.” Now I understood why she’d called me.

“The money is excellent, but you’ll be required to be isolated for about a month.”

“How isolated?”

“Very limited contact with the outside world. The reason for it is that the client requires a great deal of discretion.”

I leaned a shoulder against the wall. “This sounds like a ploy to get me into the woods so you can kill me.”

Leona said nothing.

“I’m joking.”

“Ah. I see.” She sounded breathless. Maybe I’d stumbled onto her secret plan.

That thought made me smile. “What are the dates?”

“Everyone will be on site in a week. We’ll be there for a minimum of three weeks, it could be closer to five, but I’m hoping not.”

I had a few things going on in that time frame, but nothing that I couldn’t push back. The most attractive thing about the project was that it covered the weekend my dad wanted to get together for FRAB.

“I know you usually don’t take big jobs like this, and I understand if you already have commitments, but I wanted to offer it to you.” She hesitated. “I think you’d be a good addition to the team.”

My smile widened at the compliment. “Can you send me a little more information?”

“I can, but I need your answer before tomorrow night.”

“Okay, get me the info, I’ll look at my calendar and make sure there are no conflicts and get back to you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Excellent. Although I have one question.”

“Shoot.”

“Do you have anyone in your family who’s in the middle of a medical emergency?”

I laughed. “Not at all.” And if they were, I *might* send flowers. It’s more than they’d done for me when I’d lost three teeth.

“Good. I look forward to your answer.”

She was looking forward to hearing from me? That sounded good. “Me too.”

Chapter 7

-Leona-

I paced my hotel suite as I spoke to Tanner, afraid if I sat down my voice would relax. “I know you usually don’t take big jobs like this, and I understand if you already have commitments, but I wanted to offer it to you.”

The entire spiel sounded exceptionally lame. As far as I knew, Tanner had never taken a gig that paid as much as this one did, and when he found out it was for MaxMart, he might refuse outright. His strange ethics were something I’d always wanted to ask him about but had never felt comfortable doing so.

He hadn’t said anything, which meant he was waiting for more from me. “I think you’d be a good addition to the team.” I winced, knowing the comment bordered on too close to nice for Leona.

“Can you send me a little more information?”

I scowled at the smile in his words. He’d noticed the nice comment. I had to get this back on track. “I can, but I need your answer before tomorrow night.”

“Okay, get me the info, I’ll look at my calendar and make sure there are no conflicts and get back to you tomorrow afternoon.”

I’d expected an immediate no and was surprised he was considering my offer. The reason for me having to invite him came back to my mind, and I added one more thing. “Excellent. Although I have one question.”

“Shoot.”

Why did I imagine him leaning one shoulder against the wall, acting all cool and casual, smiling at pretty girls walking by, and in general, being his charming self? Why did I like that image so much? I really had to get myself together. The whole falling on top of him thing had thrown me off, and I was having a hard time not thinking about him as more than a voice actor.

Ugh. Back to my question, which was, in fact, very important. “Do you have anyone in your family who’s in the middle of a medical emergency?”

Tanner’s booming laugh came through the phone. “Not at all.”

For the first time, I heard a hint of cruelty in his voice. Interesting. He’d said something about his family earlier. Maybe he’d had the same luck as I’d had with my mother. I forced a smile. “Good. I look forward to your answer.”

“Me too.” His voice purred. I shivered, imagining the air from his lips tickling the hair around my ear like he’d done during the panel.

Seriously, a shiver? What was I, fifteen?

I hung up without saying goodbye. It was something Leona would do. The stress of the day had crammed into my upper back and shoulders, so I tossed my phone on the couch, kicked off my shoes, and rolled my neck a few times. Most women put their hair down to relax, but I put mine up. I only wore it up when I was alone or exercising, which I usually did alone.

Twisting my long brown hair into a messy bun was part of my routine. It signaled to my body and brain that it was time to shed Leona and allow Rosemary to emerge. I wiggled my toes in the plush carpet, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. One of my many therapists had suggested that I ground myself each day. I did this when it was time to turn Leona off. In my mind, it meant I knew that Leona was just a character I played. The real me didn’t wear super high heels or sexy

business attire. The real me preferred to hang out in yoga pants and off the shoulder t shirts with my hair up and fuzzy slippers on my feet.

Speaking of, where were those slippers? I spotted the bag I kept them in—not even the hotel staff got to see what lay beneath the surface of Leona—and pulled it out of the closet. I carefully put my heels away, then stripped out of my business suit, hung it up, and encased my body in stretchy pants and a graphic t-shirt. The teal fuzzy slippers went on next. I sighed and let the rest of my tension drain away.

Next, I moved to the bathroom. Each morning, I took the time to pack up my entire toiletry bag. Again, so not even the hotel staff would see a hint of who I really was.

At first, I'd been so paranoid people might find out that I had started to leave a string hanging on the bag in such a way that if someone opened it, I would know. I'd since relaxed. A little.

Whoever had invented the toiletry kit that unrolled and then hung on the back of the door had been a certified genius. I'd paid a pretty penny for this one, but it was totally worth it.

Like taking off my shoes, this process grounded me. I used a headband to keep stray hairs away from my forehead and cheeks, then I retrieved a small bottle of solvent and used the brush in the lid to dab a tiny amount of the substance around the edge of my prosthetic cheekbone.

Fair skin had guaranteed that I got plenty of sunburns as a kid. Removing the fake skin was even more satisfying than peeling my shoulders after a bad sunburn. It made the same sort of hissing papery sound that I never grew tired of.

With a great deal of care, I removed one cheekbone, then the other. Without them the sharp nose looked more than a little ridiculous. I smiled at what I considered my clown face before doing the same with the nose.

I carefully set the pieces into what looked like a retainer case to let them dry. Then I used special soap to clean my face.

By the time I finished, I'd wiped Leona away to reveal Rosemary. My softer features looked more home-town farm girl than successful project manager that made six figures a year. I gave myself a smile. "Hi."

Yes, it was weird, but it worked. The lingering effects of Leona fell away, and I walked to the fridge to see what James had left me for dinner.

The man was a saint. I paid him more than a chauffeur and personal assistant combined, and I'd gladly pay him more, but he wouldn't let me. Little did he know that I had trust funds set up for his grandkids.

He was the only person I needed in this world.

The cool air poured out, caressing my bare feet and hands. I grinned when I saw a mango chicken salad—extra chicken—from my favorite fast-food place. Next to it sat a small piece of New York cheesecake with a side of raspberries.

He knew me too well.

I'd already slaved the television to my laptop so I could watch what I wanted or use the bigger screen as I worked, so I grabbed the food and settled cross-legged on the couch. Now that I was free from project managing, I would dive into my cartoon.

When I'd decided I wanted to make a cartoon series for kids that would empower them without having the kids be superheroes or secretly royalty, I had no idea how much work it would be.

Sure, I'd been in the acting world my whole life and voice acting for the past five years. I knew about filming, editing, producing, and more. What I didn't have a clue about was writing, character design, junior high kids, or how much trouble it would be to find cartoonist/illustrators.

After four years, I was pretty sure I had a solid story. I was in love with most of my character designs. However, the one thing I really couldn't do was illustrate the whole thing. I'd

used a bunch of online assets to build my characters, but that's where my ability ended.

A few weeks before, I'd paid an editor to look at my screenplay. Through an anonymous name, of course. I was still waiting for her feedback, and each time I thought about it, my stomach curled in on itself.

There was nothing for me to do between now and then except find illustrators. I knew who I wanted to use, but the cost was more than even my bank account could take. With a sigh, I pulled up a streaming service to find something to watch.

When I saw the screen, I winced. *Outlast* appeared at the top of the page with a preview for the latest season.

Between Dwayne and this, I knew I was going to have to take something to sleep. The backlash from *Outlast* had left me with nightmares that I still woke screaming from. They mostly involved being trampled by a mob of angry fans or getting dropped off on a deserted island and left to die.

I scowled at the screen, noticing that in the newest season the cast had to deal with living in a high desert, and swiped it to the internet. Maybe I could find a podcast to listen to.

Just as I began the search my phone rang.

My finger froze and I looked toward the device. No one called after ten. They knew Leona wouldn't answer.

Maybe James needed something. I grabbed the phone and looked at the caller ID.

Juliana Fisher.

"Nope." I tossed the phone away and ignored it. Whatever she needed could wait until morning. Besides, I'd told her I wouldn't be available after nine.

Each ring, which I had set to the most boring tone available, sent a pulse of dread through me.

We'd talked this morning, and I'd sent my update. What could she possibly need now that she couldn't send in an email?

What if someone else had cancelled? Or they'd decided to pull the plug on the project?

I needed the money from this for my cartoon. It was the only way I was going to get the funding in a timely manner.

The ringing stopped.

I had strict rules for myself after I took Leona off. No work. Time for fun. Time for me.

The chiming started again.

I jumped and felt like the heroine of a horror movie. Juliana Fisher was stalking me. Instead of reaching for the phone, I took a bite of salad and clenched the container with both hands. I would not give in.

Juliana Fisher went to voice mail.

A few seconds later the room started to spin, and I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out.

My phone buzzed with a message notification.

I jumped and cursed.

This was silly. I grabbed the phone and navigated to the voice mail. I didn't need to be in full Leona mode to listen, so I typed in my code.

"Miss Ward, I just received a message from the hospitality company that arranged all of the travel accommodations for the project."

"Random," I muttered. Why would she be calling so late to tell me about the cabin? Unless something had gone wrong.

"It turns out the hotel you had booked has bedbugs. They're going to fumigate, but they decided since they had to shut down anyway that they would remodel."

“Of course they did.” I’d gotten me a room at a nearby—nearby being relative—hotel so I could avoid anyone possibly seeing me out of makeup. I opened a browser on my computer and started to type.

Juliana Fisher went on. “Everything else within a hundred miles is booked. It looks like you’re going to have to stay with the rest of the team in the cabins.”

“The cabins?” I said. “You aren’t serious.” My voice lowered into Leona’s as I spoke, even though no one was around to hear me.

“The board feels more comfortable with this anyway. We’ve informed the team on site, and they said they’d figure it out for you.”

“No, no, no.” I hit return on my search for hotels and found that they were all booked or closed for the season.

“Please call if you have any concerns.” Juliana drew out the word concerns, and I knew if I called, I’d get nothing but another lecture from her about how she didn’t think I could do this project in the timeframe they needed it.

I could do it. Having to hide my identity would be troublesome, but I could stay in the smaller cabin with the editors. Those guys basically spent their whole lives staring at computer screens. They probably wouldn’t notice if I walked through the building in nothing but my underwear.

In a huge betrayal, my mind popped Tanner into the scene where I walked through the cabin wearing practically nothing. Heat rose to my neck, and I slammed the door on that thought process.

Tanner and I would be working together, but I’d still have a place to retreat to. I could keep things professional. There wouldn’t be time for anything else.

You keep telling yourself that.

I told my brain to shut up. Then I put the salad down and got my dessert out of the fridge. I had a week to figure out

how to be that close to Tanner and not lose my mind.

My cheeks burned at the thought of being so near him. I glared at the takeout box.

This problem might require more than one piece of cheesecake.

Chapter 8

-Tanner-

“So let me get this straight,” Eddie said around a bite of peach pie, “Leona called you and offered you a job?”

“Correct.” I stabbed my strawberry rhubarb pie, added some vanilla ice cream, and chewed. Bryan, Josh, and Justin had all gone out dancing. I’d declined because I had to work the table at the conference in the morning. Plus, I wasn’t much of a dancer and wasn’t in the mood to flirt with women I’d never see again.

If I was going to flirt, it had to mean something. Leona’s piercing eyes came to mind, but I sniffed and ignored them.

Curse my friends who had just gotten married; they were ruining my bachelor life.

“How much did she tell you?” Eddie asked.

The diner, situated close to the hotel, smelled of fried food and eggs and was surprisingly packed at midnight. I recognized several clumps of voice actors talking shop along with tables crammed with what had to be the locals. This place reminded me of a restaurant the guys and I had hung out at during college. We’d go there after hard practices or lost games and console ourselves with copious amounts of food. Or we’d go after wins to celebrate. Pretty sure the team singlehandedly kept that place open for four years.

I wrangled my thoughts back into the present. “She sent me an email explaining most of it,” I told Eddie.

“And?”

“And what?” I knew what he meant but wanted to stall. I didn’t know what to think or do about any of this.

“And are you going to do it?”

That was an excellent question.

Leona had said she knew I usually didn't take jobs like this, and she was right. When my dad had lost everything, and my family had become all but homeless, we'd needed help. Generous people stepped forward and had gotten us a place to stay and my dad a job. Others had anonymously sponsored me in high school and had encouraged me to apply for a volleyball scholarship to pay for college. I couldn't remember the number of times people had left food at our apartment door when things were tight.

All of this had given me the urge to help others. I tended to gravitate toward upstarts. People who could use a good voice actor but didn't have the money for a big name. I was a mid-lister and often took less money if I liked the producers or believed in the job.

Working for MaxMart went against several of my internal mandates.

Not that the mega corporation was dirty like my dad's business had been, but they did exploit cheap labor in other countries and had more money and employees than they knew what to do with. Why did they need me?

Leona said it was for diversity. I could believe that.

I'd worked with her before, and while she'd made things difficult, I knew she'd saved several projects from total failure. Plus, she didn't treat a few select people poorly, she treated everyone poorly. It's like she hated all people equally. I could respect that. Sort of.

Eddie took another bite of pie, which gave me time to think.

The pros of working this job would be getting away from my family during their FRAB celebration. I'd do just about anything to get out of it, and this was a perfect excuse. It paid well, which my dad would love, and because of that, he

wouldn't bug me about not coming to sail on his new yacht or whatever.

That alone was enticing enough for me to agree to work with Leona.

The other aspect to think about was Leona herself. She'd been all business in New York, and I'd sworn I'd never work with her again, but I'd seen a few cracks in her chilly exterior today, and I wanted to know more. Like what's her deal with *Kim Possible*, and what would it take to get her to joke around with me again?

"You're thinking about her," Eddie said.

"I am," I admitted.

"You worried about working with her again?"

I rocked my head back and forth as I gathered more pie and ice cream. "I know what to expect, so that's not really the problem. Although being trapped with her might not be pleasant."

Eddie laughed. "You think Ms. Monster will deign to sleep in the same hovel we do? I bet she's got a suite in the nearest five-star hotel."

"Good point." Before I shoved the massive pile of food into my mouth, I decided to ask Eddie a few things. "How do you feel about it?"

"I'm not super excited about it, but I also know that the sacrifice should be worth the money. I know you're not all about the dough, but Sarah wants the kitchen remodeled, and this would both pay off our minivan and do the kitchen with a little leftover for a vacation or something."

Sarah, Eddie's wife, was one of the best women I'd ever met. She'd basically adopted me as a younger brother the first time Eddie had brought me home for dinner. They had four kids with the older two into their teens and causing all kinds of drama. "Sarah's okay with the time away?"

"I'm gone a lot."

“Not for five weeks at a time,” I pointed out.

Eddie shrugged. “I told her if I took this then I could probably work out of the house for the rest of the year. I also had to promise to teach Alyssa to drive.”

“So, Sarah is getting the better end of the deal?”

“Yup.” Eddie sat back. “You don’t have a problem with the time away, do you?”

“Nah. I’ve still got someone who can watch my apartment. There’s not much to tie me to Atlanta. This will actually be shorter than the job in New York.”

“Then is it the money that’s bugging you?” Eddie asked. “Or working for one of the most powerful companies in existence?”

“I’m not sure,” I lied. I didn’t need the money—I’d learned to live the spartan life after my dad had lost his fortune—and I certainly didn’t have a burning desire to work for MaxMart. Something else was drawing me into the job.

Not something, but someone.

Leona.

Not only did I find her attractive and mysterious, but she’d almost sounded desperate on the phone. Like she actually needed me. Not anyone else, but me.

Which was, of course, ludicrous. She could walk up to any dark-skinned voice actor at the conference and offer them this job, and they’d jump on it so fast she wouldn’t even get a chance to give her whole spiel.

Even with that option open, she’d called me.

Not a text or an email, but a call.

I hadn’t realized it when I’d picked up, but it had been after nine. Leona had strict rules that no one was to contact her after nine at night. If they did, they should expect to go to voice mail, and she’d get back to them in the morning.

And yet, she'd called me. I couldn't shake the feeling that she needed me.

Or maybe I wanted her to need me so I could justify taking this job.

"Something is bugging you," Eddie said.

"Yeah." Now I sat back, rubbing my stomach. "I'm just wondering why she asked me when there are dozens of voice actors at the conference that meet her criteria."

Eddie smirked. "I don't want to overstep here."

The look on his face told me that's exactly what he planned to do, and he had no qualms about it.

"But you didn't see the way she was looking at you when you weren't paying attention."

"What are you talking about?" I glared at him.

"I caught her giving you several side-long glances, and they weren't the normal, irritated kind. I think she was watching you."

"You're out of your mind," I said even as my brain began to buzz.

"I may be old and married, but I still recognize the look a woman gives a man when she's interested in him."

I held up a hand. "Stop right there. This is a job. If I know anything about Leona, it's that she's painfully professional."

"True," Eddie said. "However, I'd bet fifty bucks that I'm not wrong."

"Big spender." I rolled my eyes to cover up for my racing mind.

Could Eddie be right?

Leona was attractive, very much so, actually. But why would she be interested in me? Sure, I'd enjoyed pushing her buttons earlier, but that was all in fun. I hadn't been flirting.

Had I?

Bryan and the other guys from college had always said I was the sunshine of the group, thus my dwarven nickname of Happy, and that if I saw anyone having a bad day, I'd be along shortly to cheer them up. It had felt like that with Leona. She'd seemed pretty freaked out about Dwayne, or maybe the crowd she'd gotten stuck in, and that had turned on my desire to help her have a better day.

Not to mention push her buttons just to see her reactions.

It was a fault of mine to harass grouchy people until I figured out how to make them smile.

"Do you like this woman?" Eddie asked.

I blinked and realized I'd spaced out. "No, of course not."

"Uh-huh." Eddie gave me a wink.

I opened my mouth for a rebuttal, but my phone buzzed.

Who would be calling me at midnight? I frowned as I drew it out and groaned when I saw my dad's name.

"Is it her?" Eddie asked.

I shook my head. "My dad."

"Ah."

Eddie knew the basics of my family dynamic and gave me a wave as I stood. I'd been ignoring my dad all day and had forgotten to call him after the volleyball games. If I didn't answer now, he'd probably continue to call back until I did.

Oh, and let's not forget that if he was on his phone at this hour that he was drunker than a skunk. No doubt getting started on FRAB two weeks early.

When I reached a deserted corner of the diner, I hit the answer button. "Hey, dad."

"Tanner?" He sounded relieved that I'd picked up. "I've been calling and texting all day. Everything okay?"

Instead of the slurred speech, loud music in the background, and giggling women that I expected, no noise

sounded besides his voice.

“I’m at a conference. It’s been a busy day.”

“Too busy to call your old man?” He usually tried to guilt me, but tonight his words held mirth. Was he trying to joke around with me?

The mere possibility threw me off. “Uh, sorry. I was watching a table at the conference, and it was really busy.” It was a lame excuse, but the only one I could come up with.

“You work too hard,” he said.

What he didn’t vocalize, but insinuated with his tone, was that if I’d accept my inheritance, I wouldn’t have to work another day in my life.

“I like my job,” I said.

“I know you do, Tanner.”

This whole conversation was freaking me out. My dad usually called drunk and offered me all sorts of presents. I’d never had any interest in his money, especially since it had been stolen, or close enough anyway. “Why are you calling, dad?”

The change of subject distracted him. “Didn’t you get my texts?”

“I got them.”

“You never answered. Are you joining us for FRAB? Your brothers and sister will be here along with a bunch of other people. I’d really like it if you came.”

The thought of spending an afternoon with my dad and siblings as they recounted all of the money they’d spent over the past year and what they planned to buy and do the next year made my stomach churn. Not to mention the fact that last year my dad had told me—through a drunken haze—that I was his biggest disappointment. He said a lot of things when he was inebriated; I usually tried not to take it personally, but I’d

snapped. The anger came flooding back, and I tightened my grip around the phone.

Suddenly, I didn't care about working for MaxMart or what might happen between Leona and me. I would do anything to steer clear of the anniversary of my dad's so-called success.

"I'm sorry, dad, but I have a big job over the next five weeks. The pay is out of this world, and I get to work with a smoking hot brunette." Money and women, basically my dad's life since my mom had died.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I'll be onsite and won't be able to call or text much."

"Is it a government job?"

"No, dad." He hated the government. "It's for a company."

A blast of background music came from my dad's phone.

So, he was at a party. He was probably calling me from the bathroom. A woman's voice spoke and giggling followed. "You for sure can't come?" he asked me, ignoring the music and the woman.

"I'm sure. The contract calls for an on-site stay for the full five weeks."

My dad sighed. "Okay, well, I guess I'll talk to you later then."

Was that disappointment in his voice? Not the desperate kind, but actual sadness that I wouldn't be there.

I shook my head. The only reason my dad would want me there was so he could impress me with the size of his bank account, and once again, offer to buy me a place in New York or the most expensive car on the market.

"Bye, Tanner," he said.

“Bye.” I hung up, closed my eyes, and forced myself to breathe. Spending three to five weeks with Leona would be a walk in the park compared to a day or two with my family.

I quickly sent Leona a text accepting her offer, then went to sit down.

It looked like I would be busy for the next little while.

Chapter 9

-Leona-

I'd grown up mainly in California cities, so I was used to my surroundings consisting of concrete and palm trees. *Outlast* had been the only time I'd lived outside a big city. Northwest Maryland was completely different.

Green grass sat under green trees which reached for the blue sky above. Between patches of nature lay fields of crops, most having just been harvested. I had the windows rolled up, but I was certain the air would smell like overturned dirt and vegetation.

We'd passed through several small towns which boasted permanent populations of under five hundred people. After seeing the hotels in some of them, I decided the whole bedbug thing may have been for the best. There was a resort town not too far away that I could have stayed in if I'd tossed around enough money, but things had been arranged, and I didn't want to tip the balance before we even started.

According to Lyle, my head sound engineer, two of the voice actors and all of the production people had already arrived. Eddie and Tanner, who had flown in together, should only be thirty minutes or so behind me.

James glanced at me in the mirror from the front seat. "You're making the face."

I relaxed the sour expression and told myself to breathe. "Sorry."

"You can't get out of the car looking like that."

"I know." He was right, of course. First impressions, even though I was already familiar with everyone on the project,

were important. Yes, I planned to run this thing as if the world depended on us getting it finished on-time, but I wanted everyone to know that we were in it together. This would be a team effort or nothing.

We pulled off the small highway and onto a side road that consisted of packed dirt under loose gravel and more potholes than I'd seen on any freeway in Los Angeles. I was grateful I'd rented a large SUV, which James insisted on driving. Meanwhile, I hung on for dear life.

"This is an isolated area," James said.

"That's why I picked it." Not that we weren't just a few miles from two small towns, but with the rolling hills and trees we shouldn't be able to see signs of other humans from the cabin. I'd briefly thought about going out west, where there were areas that were ten hours away from anything resembling a town, but had dismissed the idea. If something broke, I wanted to be able to get a replacement to us within half a day, which meant we had to stay fairly close to civilization.

However, that hadn't stopped MaxMart from blocking the internet during working hours. As far as they were concerned, we were in a bubble of silence.

"Nervous?" James asked.

I glanced down and noticed that I was wringing my hands. I used them to smooth my pencil skirt and nodded. "A little." This wasn't my first big job, nor was it my first time-sensitive job, but the combination of requirements meant this would be the most intense project I'd ever supervised.

"But you're ready?" he asked.

"I am." I'd made contingency plans for the contingency plans, including having a back-up for each voice actor and sound technician in case something went wrong. I had food being brought in, I had people to cook the food, I had the best equipment money could buy or rent, and I had a solid group whom I knew would do their jobs to the best of their ability.

"It looks like we're here," James said.

“You really don’t have to stay,” I told him. He was going to have to double up in a room with someone, probably one of the kitchen staff, and I knew he hated camping.

“Nonsense, I’m here in case you need anything.”

A smile played on my lips. “I appreciate that.” Someday maybe I’d be able to return all of the favors he’d done for me over the years, although I wasn’t sure I could, even if we both lived to be a hundred.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires, and we turned onto an even smaller road. This one had to be a driveway. Tall trees obscured my view, and I stretched my neck in an attempt to see the cabin.

When it came into view, I raised an eyebrow in appreciation.

I’d seen pictures, but the structure—all big logs, large windows, and peaked roofs—seemed to nestle perfectly into the space that had been cleared for it. Almost as if it had grown there. A large garage sat to one side, and another smaller cabin lay behind it.

That’s where I’d be staying. I eyed the walk between the buildings and decided I was glad I’d thought to bring something besides heels.

The website boasted a hot tub, a game room, a fire pit, and a huge balcony on the back, overlooking a valley. I’d love to curl up in front of a fire and watch the flames with a blanket around my shoulders.

Tanner’s smiling face invaded the thought, but I pushed him away.

This was a professional experience, not a private one. The only attention I’d be able to give Tanner would be to critique his work.

I’d been telling myself this for a week; maybe my mind would finally accept it.

James drove toward the buildings and parked near the front door. Lyle jogged down the stairs and greeted me with a grin.

Leona terrified most people, but Lyle had always seen through some part of my disguise. Short, red hair topped his head, and he'd trimmed his equally ginger beard close to his square chin. Glasses perched on the end of his nose, and he wore jeans and a flannel shirt. He'd always been respectful but tended to be more playful than most people I worked with. He also loved to pull silly but harmless pranks on the unsuspecting. He'd learned long ago not to include me on that list. If he wasn't such a good editor, I would have considered using someone else, but why fix something that wasn't broken?

"Hey," he said as he opened my door and helped me from the back of the SUV. I'd always wondered if he was as polite with his wife. Considering they had five kids I had to believe he was.

"Everything ready?" I asked.

"I'm great, thanks for asking. Yes, I did buy this shirt and four more like it just for this job. How was your trip?"

I gave him a flat stare, which was Leona's version of rolling her eyes. "I'm glad you're so excited to be in the woods. Did you bring tick spray?"

He snorted. "Duh." Then he looked at my blouse, pencil skirt, and heels. "Tell me you're not wearing that the whole time?"

"I'm not wearing this the whole time."

I'd spent so much time cultivating Leona's driven personality that I had to concentrate on making light-hearted conversation with Lyle. If I didn't, he'd keep pushing me. Plus, he never did it in front of anyone but James. As soon as we went inside, he'd be all business.

He laughed and went to grab my luggage.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “James is going to take it to the little cabin for me.”

Lyle took the bags anyway. “It’s a bit of a mess over there at the moment. I’ll put them inside. I assume you’d like a tour before you get settled?”

“Correct.”

With a suitcase in each hand and a duffle under one arm, he easily ascended the stairs with his long legs. He somehow managed to get the door open and hold it for me. I shook my head as I went by.

“Having twins gives you skills,” he said.

“How are your children?” I asked.

“Great. I have pictures for later.”

“I can’t wait.”

He laughed again.

The thing was, I thought his family was adorable. They were the people I’d want to visit during the holidays and have over for a BBQ. But I couldn’t show any of that.

When I stepped inside, I upgraded the cabin to a lodge. The entryway opened into a soaring great room with a balcony above. The whole thing was decorated like something from a high-end mountain magazine. I knew there was a kitchen and dining room to my right and bedrooms to my left. Six more bedrooms sat overhead, and the basement boasted several more along with all of the fun stuff.

The place made me feel small. It smelled of leather and pine. I shuddered when I saw the bear head over the mantle. I didn’t much like wild animals. Drug addicts on the street? Fine. Something that had been born outside and had teeth the size of my fingers? No thanks.

James, who was right behind me, let out a little humph. He hated it. Which struck me as odd, considering his family was

from New Mexico and probably had the most cliché southwestern decorations I'd ever seen.

Lyle set my stuff down and waved for me to follow him into the basement. A rug woven with silhouettes of wildlife ran down the center of the varnished stairs. My heels thumped as we descended.

I'd expected the place to be dark, but the owners had made sure to use lighter wood and colors on the lower level.

Lyle waved us through a hallway and into a large area where three upright, rectangular boxes stood. Furniture had been pushed aside to make room for the small sound studios. They each measured four feet square and seven feet high. The gray boxes, with silver highlights and a small window in the door and a larger one in front, looked like they could be used to toss naughty prisoners in and bake them. They were perfect. A table near each booth housed a computer and three monitors along with other odds and ends. "We set up the sound rooms down here. We figured there's less chance of any noise pollution."

"Only three?" James asked.

I nodded. "Forcing one of the voice actors to rest. If they don't take regular breaks someone could damage their vocal cords." Another thing that could go wrong. I walked to one of the booths and opened the door. Inside sat a padded chair, which could be removed, in front of a microphone that hung from the ceiling on an adjustable rod. A screen the actors would use to read from and follow along with the videos sat at eye level, and headphones dangled from a hook on the wall. The inside consisted of heavy foam and other sound dampening materials. "Did you have any issues with these?" I asked.

"They were a little tricky to put together, but we got it in the end." Lyle pointed to a handful of long pins as thick as a pencil on one table. "It's okay to end up with extra parts, right?"

I stared hard at him again.

“I thought so.” He grinned.

I let out a huff and turned toward the next booth.

A familiar, feminine voice floated down from the great room. “So glad to meet you.”

I stopped in my tracks, and if I had been a cat, my ears would have swiveled in the direction of the stairs.

“Who’s that?” Lyle asked. “I thought we were waiting for the last two voice actors.”

“*That* is going to be a problem.” I gritted my teeth and sped back to the stairs. The men scrambled to follow and only caught up when we all arrived at the main floor.

A deep, rumbling laugh sounded and I almost tripped on the rug.

Not only were Tanner and Eddie standing in the great room, but Juliana Fisher was there too.

I’d met Juliana twice, which was two times too many. I much preferred we use the phone to communicate.

While the cliché of a woman climbing the corporate ladder being all but impossible was slowly crumbling, I could tell that Juliana had sacrificed some of her humanity to get where she was. Her long face, while pretty, held sharp edges that only accentuated her cold, ice-blue eyes. She’d piled her blond hair on top of her head. Like me, she wore a dark pencil skirt, a light blouse, and high heels. Although hers matched her blouse perfectly. Mine were maroon.

Her smile, which had been aimed at Tanner, slid off her lips as her gaze landed on me.

Normally, I’d be irritated that she was here at all, but at that moment all I could wonder was what Tanner had said to make her laugh.

No, this wouldn’t do. I needed to focus. Time to activate super Leona mode. I squared my shoulders and strode to the

other woman. “May I ask what you’re doing here?” It was a fair question. She hadn’t scheduled time to visit, nor had she warned us of her appearance. Hopefully, she was just dropping by for a few minutes.

Not likely, considering she lived several states away.

Tanner blinked at my blunt question. Eddie visibly flinched.

Juliana slid an equally frosty expression onto her face before she spoke. “I wanted to check on the project before it started.”

“We’re all set for our initial briefing this evening at seven. We’ll begin recording tomorrow morning at six. I’d be happy to give you a tour.” Even if I’d just gotten here, she wasn’t going to make me look weak in my own house. Especially since people started pouring out of rooms on the upper floor to see who had arrived. Another group came in through the kitchen. After a quick count, I realized everyone from the project was here to witness this little exchange.

“I thought I’d stay for a few days to observe.” Juliana smiled. I could have sworn I heard ice on her cheeks shattering under the movement.

She knew full well that with me having to stay here, we didn’t have room for another person. “That won’t be necessary.” I kept my voice even.

“Nevertheless, I’ve made the trip,” Juliana said. “I think I’ll stay. I could share your room in the little cabin. Make it a girls’ weekend.”

Our eyes never left one another’s. There was no way I was going to split a room with anyone, let alone her.

Chapter 10

-Tanner-

Awkward.

Julianna had found Eddie and me at the airport and had offered to bring us up in her vehicle. She'd informed us that she was the person in charge of the project and that she intended to supervise for a few days.

I'd immediately known that she and Leona wouldn't get along. They were both too driven and stubborn to play nice. The cold stare they were giving one another now told me my assessment was dead on.

"I think we can find you a room of your own," Leona said. "You'd probably rather stay here with the voice actors." Her sickly-sweet voice set off all sorts of alarms in my head.

"Whatever's good enough for you is good enough for me." Juliana spoke in a high voice as if talking to a baby.

Eddie caught my eye. He looked terrified. So did everyone else. Leona was intimidating enough without her having a power play with another woman. I doubted she wanted this to be the first impression she made on people—she was big on first impressions—so like the nice guy I was, I decided to intervene.

For some reason, seeing Leona look like she wanted to tear off Juliana's head made me feel...bad for her. I knew she didn't need my protection, but maybe some interference would be appreciated. Taking my life, or at the very least my career, into my own hands, I stepped between the two women.

A collective inhale sounded around me, and several mouths hinged open.

Eddie whimpered softly.

I looked between Leona and Juliana. “Let me know if we can help with anything.”

That got a snort out of Juliana. Leona’s driver raised his eyebrows at me.

I figured I should keep going, so I spoke to Leona. “Juliana found us at the airport and offered us a ride.” I smiled at Leona, who didn’t move a single muscle in her face. “I was telling her how great it was that you were in charge of this project.”

That got me a slight nose flare.

I turned my attention to Juliana. “If there’s anyone who can get this thing done in the time allotted, it’s Leona.” I looked around at the gathered crowd, including the people upstairs. “Right, everyone?”

Eddie nodded automatically. Several others did as well.

A redheaded man checked the clock on the wall, then rubbed his hands together. “Dinner is at six. Our meeting is at seven. Anyone who wants a tour can meet down here in five minutes.” He nodded to Leona. “Anything else?”

She shook her head. “That will be all.”

Leona stepped toward me.

“I’m going to grab our bags,” Eddie said as he bolted out the door.

The redhead distracted Juliana, which put me under the full force of Leona’s flat stare.

It had only been a week since I’d seen her, but I’d somehow forgotten the sense of presence she possessed. I suddenly found myself caught under the weight of her gaze, which threatened to push me back.

The thing about volleyball is that it is fifty percent hard work and fifty percent attitude and intimidation. I deflected

her death glare as if blocking a spike and grinned at her. “What’s up?”

In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, she folded her arms across her chest. Her voice barely reached my ears. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

I spoke in a low purr. “You’re welcome.”

Leona’s burgundy lips pressed together. I could tell she wanted to say something, but after a minute she blew a breath out of her nose and turned away.

Did I take a moment to admire the way the blouse and skirt combo drew attention to everything good about Leona’s figure? Why yes, I did. Her legs looked as fantastic as ever, and I remembered seeing an exercise room on the list of amenities for this place. Three weeks was a long time to go without working out. If I timed things right, I could end up in the gym with her.

Leona walked toward her driver. At the same time, Eddie threw the door open and stumbled in carrying our bags. I went to help.

“What’s wrong with you?” Eddie hissed between his teeth. “Are you trying to get fired?”

I shrugged. “Just trying to keep this from starting off on the wrong foot.”

Several hours later, after exploring the cabin and walking the grounds, Eddie and I wandered into the dining room.

This lodge could easily hold twenty people, and the long, stout table had as many heavy wooden chairs around it. Dinnerware lay in front of each spot, complete with a name printed on a tented card. Assigned seats? I wondered if Leona had been planning that or if she’d added the seating chart to keep Juliana away from her. The scent of roasted vegetables filled the air, along with a hint of barbeque. All but four of the chairs were occupied.

Eddie and I knew there were two other voice actors, and we'd speculated that we'd have video editors, along with a few additional people. We'd found out the kitchen staff had been brought in by Leona. From the smells, I'd say she hadn't skimped on their services.

Juliana sat at one end of the table like the head of a mobster family. She hadn't changed out of her business attire. I gave her a smile and a wave. We'd had a decent conversation on our ride from the airport, but the glare she gave me told me I'd fallen out of favor.

All because I'd felt the need to help Leona.

"She hates us," Eddie whispered as we made our way to the other end of the table to sit.

"Just me," I said. "You can still recover."

"Not sure it's worth it."

Eddie was on the end of the long side, and I was next to him. I leaned around and saw that Leona's name was at the head—or foot—of the table.

"Trade me," I said to Eddie.

"Gladly."

We switched the cards and settled in.

Two women, presumably the other voice actors, sat across from me. Leona had checked all the boxes. I represented the African American contingency, and Eddie's DNA held bits and pieces from four different Asian countries.

The Latina woman opposite me, Gabriella, had long black hair and wore a red tank top. Next to her sat a tall, slender, blonde, blue-eyed beauty who could have easily been a model instead of voice actor. If I remembered right, her name was Brandi. The space to her left was empty.

Gabriella smiled at Eddie. "I was wondering who else Leona had gotten for this job." Her gaze turned to me. "Although, I'm surprised to see you here."

I shrugged. “I had time in my schedule, and another guy backed out at the last minute.”

Brandi raised a manicured eyebrow. “I heard you hated working for big companies.”

“Sometimes.” I didn’t want to tell everyone I’d used this as an excuse to avoid my family.

Gabriella sniffed. “I didn’t think you wanted to work with the Beast again.”

I winced at the nickname people had given Leona and glanced around to make sure she wasn’t within earshot. I’m sure Leona knew people called her that, but for some reason it made me uncomfortable.

Eddie pointed at Gabriella before I had to answer. “I’m surprised you have time. Aren’t you in the middle of another series?”

“I was, but they ran out of funding so we’re on hold until they get their act together.”

“The money for this was so good that I cancelled another job,” Brandi said.

She didn’t elaborate, but I was sure she wasn’t the only one here for the paycheck.

The red-headed man from earlier walked in and took the chair next to Brandi. As soon as he saw us, he stood again and offered his hand. “I haven’t met you guys yet. I’m Lyle. Head editor.”

“Tanner.”

The man didn’t try to crush my fingers, which was wise, because I had killer grip strength.

Eddie introduced himself and Lyle sat.

I glanced toward the door. “Are we expecting Leona?”

“She got distracted by the sound studios.”

“They look nice,” I said.

“They should be. MaxMart paid a pretty penny for them. We got the last three on the continent.”

As if our conversation had summoned her, Leona walked in. Unlike Juliana, she'd changed into black pants and flats. The rest of us wore casual clothes. One woman at the other end was in flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt.

The din of conversation quieted as Leona greeted everyone at the far side of the table. When she got to Brandi, she noticed me and Eddie and her lips pressed together again. That must be her outlet for irritation. I gave her a smile. “My lady.” I waved my hand for her to sit.

Her eyes narrowed.

This was going swimmingly so far. We were totally communicating.

Just to be super annoying, I jumped up and pulled her chair out.

That got me a lip press *and* narrowed eyes at the same time. I was really moving up in the world. The others were starting to stare, so she quickly sat and allowed me to push her chair in. Her back remained ramrod straight, and she put her napkin in her lap with robotic precision.

I didn't mean to inhale so close to her, but I once again caught a whiff of her coconut shampoo. The next time I went to the beach and smelled sunscreen I was going to think of her.

Hopefully, she'll be with you.

Luckily for me, I was almost seated when that thought invaded my mind.

Me? Leona? A beach? Only if something had to be recorded there, and since there was no reason for that, it would never happen.

And no, I didn't imagine her in a swimsuit. Not for more than a second anyway.

Man, this woman was really getting in my head. I'd been around plenty of attractive ladies in my life. My dad moved in expensive circles where women had to look perfect or risk being ostracized. Leona reminded me of them, but there was something beneath the surface that I wanted to discover.

She'd made a joke with me the other day.

She'd called me specifically for this job when she knew there was a chance I'd refuse.

She'd shown a glimpse of humanity during the script reading at the conference.

There was more to Leona Ward, and I was determined to find out what.

A tall, dark man carrying a platter of potatoes and another of what looked like brisket swooped in and set the food down the middle of the table. "Dig in," he said.

Eddie and I let the ladies go first, which Leona looked annoyed about. I turned to Lyle, whom I'd never met before. "So, Lyle, you're our chief editor?"

"Sure am." He grinned. The expression reminded me of Josh and Justin, and I wondered if this guy was from a small town like they were. "I've been working in corporate e-learning for the past four years. It's really exploded."

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"The middle-of-nowhere Iowa."

I'd been right about the small town.

"What about you?" he asked me.

"I've lived a lot of places. My family is in Los Angeles right now. I have an apartment in Atlanta, but I've barely seen it in the past year." I turned to Leona. "She's been keeping me pretty busy."

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

I kept my attention on Leona. “Did you work out the room issue?”

Leona’s eyes narrowed, which I took as a sign that she hadn’t. Either that or she wasn’t happy with the outcome.

“You should move into my room.” I jerked my thumb in the general direction. “I can crash with Eddie.”

Good thing I’d talked to Eddie about this beforehand, because I’m pretty sure he would be kicking me under the table otherwise.

“That’s nice of you, but I think we’ve got it under control.”

The dismissive tone in her voice worried me. Before I could say more, Lyle jumped in.

“That’s a great idea.” He glanced at the far end of the table and leaned toward Leona. “That way you can put Juliana in the little cabin.”

Leona turned her flat stare on him, which caused regular men to spontaneously combust.

Lyle waved a hand. “Besides, who can resist that face?” He pointed at me.

I smiled.

Leona’s nostrils flared. She did a great job of keeping her expression neutral, but I took a moment to imagine the argument going on behind the façade.

There’s no way I’m going to show weakness in front of the others. I’ll sleep outside in a hammock if I have to.

I don’t want to take him up on his offer, because then he’ll think I owe him.

Okay, that was kind of true, but I was just trying to help. “Let a guy be a gentleman?” My smile didn’t waver under the onslaught of her irritation.

At last, Leona sniffed. “I accept your generous offer.”

“Good.” I turned to Eddie. “Looks like we’re roomies.”

“That’s great,” he muttered around a mouthful of food.
“Just great.”

Leona looked at her watch. “Eat up. Our production meeting is in thirty minutes.”

Work, work, work. Didn’t this woman think about anything else?

Like maybe me?

Chapter 11

-Leona-

I had wanted to use dinner to get back on track. Most notably to put Juliana in her place. Instead, Tanner had pulled his super-nice card and offered me his room.

Which had, in fact, been a blessing. The only options before that had been to either bunk with Juliana or several of the girls on the editing crew. Both would have caused problems, like me having to leave my prosthetics on most of the time—which would result in a nasty rash—and not getting time to be Rosemary. I'd never been trapped with people like I would be here, and I wasn't sure how long I could keep Leona at the forefront of my actions.

Now, because of Tanner, I had a room with a bathroom all to myself.

Did he know?

The question shook me to my core, but I brushed it away.

How could he? No one but James knew, and in five years, no one had come close to guessing. Not even Dwayne when he'd looked right at me the other day. If he didn't see it, no one would. I could probably fool my own mother with this disguise. Not that I wanted to be anywhere near her at the moment.

So, no, Tanner couldn't suspect.

I kept that thought firmly at the front of my mind as everyone gathered in the great room for our production meeting.

Not even Lyle knew the full extent of our job here. It was going to take everyone's focus and cooperation to get this

thing done.

Rosemary would have a softer approach for this, calling on the power of teamwork and unicorns. However, Leona was a no-nonsense producer and director that had a reputation for getting things finished on time with the highest quality.

Which is why MaxMart had asked her to do this job.

Only they'd sent Juliana to supervise like I was a rookie who needed someone around to nudge me in the right direction. If anything, she was going to slow us down. I'd have to establish ground rules for her involvement, which I hoped would only last a few days, as she'd said. However, I had a feeling she'd be here for longer. Much longer.

The cast and crew wandered into the room in twos and threes, like they were afraid to approach me alone.

Good. I needed them to respect me if this was going to happen.

The furniture in the room made a horseshoe shape and I stood in the opening. The first to arrive took the seats farthest from me, except Tanner, Lyle, and Eddie who settled closer. The sour look on Eddie's face told me he wasn't happy about the arrangement.

James stood in the far corner, resting a shoulder against the wood wall. The clock struck seven. He gave me an encouraging nod.

Leona had become a shell for me to hide behind. A brace that kept me standing up, like a cast held broken bones together. I took comfort in the hard exterior and looked over the gathered group. They were the best, and I had every confidence that they could pull this off. I mentally crossed my fingers and spoke.

"Thank you all for coming." I gave them my small smile. Not enough to look friendly, but also not sinister. No one ran away, so I continued. "As you know, this is an e-learning project for MaxMart." My eyes drifted to Juliana, who had her

lips pursed. “The timeframe is tight, which will leave us little wiggle room for mistakes.”

Frowns followed that statement.

“I’m not expecting perfection,” I said, “but I am expecting a high level of professionalism from everyone here.”

Lyle gave me a nod.

I swiped my phone to life and James turned on the television hanging on the wall behind me. “This is our schedule.”

A chart containing the days of the week and the hours in a day appeared. I gave everyone a minute to study it.

Yes, it was intense. I’d used almost every available moment of the day to move some part of the project forward, but I’d also taken into account the fact that tired people make mistakes.

“That’s tight,” Lyle said.

“It is.” I nodded and began to pace back and forth. “But not impossible.” I swiped to the next slide. “As you can see, I’ve given everyone several hours of free time throughout the day as well as evenings off.” I raised an eyebrow. “However, if we fall behind, we will eat into that time.”

“We probably won’t need that much rest,” Tanner said.

Brandi snorted. “Speak for yourself.”

I wanted to address this. “The voice actors will take time to rest their vocal cords. If one of you is unable to finish, I’ll have to call in a backup, and that will waste precious days. I’d prefer to underwork you a little rather than have to replace one of you.”

Tanner nodded. Eddie licked his lips. The two women shrugged.

I turned to the Lyle. “Your team will be under the gun the most.”

He gave me a thumbs up. “Don’t worry, we’re equipped with enough caffeine to keep the entire state of Maryland awake for three days.”

I frowned. It wouldn’t do for someone to have a heart attack.

Lyle patted the air with his hands. “I’ll make sure everyone stays sane.”

“Please do.”

As usual, Lyle didn’t look the least bit worried. He kind of reminded me of Tanner in that regard. Sure, Tanner could get intense when he needed to, but normally he took things in stride and did his best to keep the boat from rocking.

Why had my thoughts turned to him again? I blinked and found myself looking at his smiling face.

This was going to be a very long month.

I pushed on with my presentation. “I’ll release an updated schedule for each day the night before, so you can be prepared. Only half of the slides have been finalized, so we’ll be doing the voice-overs for those first.”

Most people’s expressions had hardened. I didn’t want to leave them that way, but Leona wasn’t one to comfort others.

Lyle seemed to sense my dilemma and stood. “Look, guys, we can do this. It’s a challenge. Just channel your inner undergraduate and there won’t be any problems.”

That drew a few chuckles from the group.

This had to be a team effort, and while Leona wasn’t a rah-rah cheerleader kind of girl, she could be motivational without being terrifying. “I’ve personally vetted each one of you and have total confidence on your abilities. If we work as a team, we can get this done.”

Tanner raised an eyebrow.

I wanted to scowl at him, but my face didn’t falter. “Are there any questions?”

Juliana got to her feet and picked up a medium-sized box I hadn't noticed. I bit my tongue as she set it on the table in the middle of the room and pulled a rounded display case with a heavy wooden bottom out of it. Lyle, being the nice guy he was, ran and grabbed the box so Juliana could put the object down.

"I brought some motivation." Juliana looked around the room. "We at MaxMart know this is going to be a difficult project. When I saw this product, I asked our RND department if I could borrow it for a few weeks."

Most people looked interested. I refrained from crossing my arms over my stomach.

Juliana went on. "We're making something here. Growing it from nothing." A few muffled snorts sounded. She sounded like a bad rendition of a training video.

"This device will likewise grow something. A flower." Juliana gave us a wide smile as she flipped a switch. Inside the case, a fully bloomed rose appeared. It had to be a hologram but looked incredibly real. "This is what it will look like in four weeks—the day of our actual goal. I'm going to call that our flower goal." She drew a small remote from her pocket and hit a button. The flower curled back up into a bud. "This is what it will look like on the day of our stretch goal, our bud goal. Notice just a bit of the pink petals are showing."

Lyle shot me a questioning glance.

I risked the smallest of shrugs, indicating I had no idea what she was up to.

Juliana pressed the remote again. The flower quickly bloomed, then started to wilt. "If we're still working in five weeks it will look like this." She took a moment to look around again. "This is the wither goal. If the rose gets this far, everyone here loses all bonuses." The hologram shifted back to the flower stage then into a bud. "Here you'll get the basic bonus, and here the stretch bonus." She beamed as if she'd

bestowed upon us a most welcome gift. “I thought it would be good motivation.”

There was a reason I didn’t make charts like some producers did. Yes, it helped some people to see where we were in the process, but it put undue pressure on others. Reminding us that we would lose money wasn’t the best way to motivate people in general.

Juliana then turned her eyes on me. “I think I’ll leave it right here so we can all see it each day.”

I forced a neutral expression onto my face. “Thank you so much for the thoughtful gesture.” I would have to find a way to get rid of it or talk to everyone without Juliana there. We didn’t need petty distractions, we needed focus. Back to my speech, which had been all but over. “Are there any more questions?”

Brandi’s hand shot up. Her blond curls bounced as she did so. “What are the rules about the internet?”

This wasn’t going to make anyone happy, but they’d been warned. “You’ll each have access to the internet for three hours in the evening. MaxMart is very private about this project, so don’t mention it to anyone. Nothing on social media about where you are or what we’re doing. Nothing in emails either. If you need to make phone calls, please use that same window to do so.”

It looked like a few people were about to argue with me, so I mentally braced myself. To my surprise, Juliana spoke. “Leona is correct. There is a clause in your contract about this, and if you violate these rules, you’ll finish the work but won’t get paid.”

What she said was mostly true, although I wasn’t sure it would hold up in court.

Her words brought grumbles too the group. I needed to deflect this.

“Don’t worry, everyone,” I said, “you aren’t going to have energy for social media. Not if you stick to my schedule.”

“Challenge accepted.” Lyle laughed.

The next morning dawned for me at five o’clock. I’d decided to skip exercising on the first day, opting for more sleep. Tomorrow I’d have to hit the gym or risk the possibility of being extra grumpy. If I didn’t get the endorphins flowing, I turned into a real beast.

My room wasn’t big, consisting of a bed, a dresser, and a single chair, but I was happy for the privacy. I sighed as I pulled Leona around me and headed toward the kitchen. I glared at the stupid flower display and noted a tiny stem with one leaf as I passed it on my way to the kitchen. Juliana, who wore an exercise outfit consisting of miniature red pants and a matching sports bra that screamed stripper, stopped me in my tracks.

“Leona. I have questions.”

“Now?” I asked. My eyes looked longingly toward where I could smell coffee brewing and bagels baking.

“Yes, before we get started this morning.”

I bit back a retort and let her drag me into the basement.

Twenty minutes, and at least fifty unnecessary questions later, the voice actors came clomping down the stairs in a bundle of happy conversation. I wasn’t shocked to hear Gabriella laughing at something Tanner said.

A jealous spot inside of me longed to hear the story. To be part of the group as they appeared smiling and fresh.

Instead, I’d just endured Juliana’s paranoia and now had to get this party started. All without coffee or food.

Tanner’s gaze met mine, and his brown eyes sparkled. “Morning, Leona,” he purred.

Had his walk always been so sexy, or was I spiraling because of Juliana and a lack of caffeine?

“Morning.” I managed to nod at everyone, not just him. I also managed to tear my eyes away from his form-fitting t-shirt and mischievous grin.

A few of the sound technicians, including Lyle, came down the stairs next.

Tanner went to the wall where I’d posted the schedule for the day. I’d purposely put him with Lyle for his first shift. I wasn’t sure I could concentrate if I was directing him.

Gabriella had drawn the short straw, which meant she got to put up with me. If we had a weak link in the voice actors, it was her. She had the experience but didn’t always take directing well—something I’d been worrying about since I signed her up. However, when she was on, she was on. Hopefully, this would be one of those times.

Eddie was in the other sound studio. Brandi didn’t need to be down here for another two hours. She approached Lyle and said, “I thought I’d watch.” She batted her eyes, and I made a mental note to tell her that Lyle was happily married.

Gabriella walked to me like a ten-year-old who’d been ordered to do chores. “I guess it’s you and me.”

“It is.” I waved to the booth. “Head inside and warm up. I’ll queue the slides.”

“You got it.” Her slight Hispanic accent was going to be perfect for these videos.

I sat at the table facing the bigger window in the sound booth. This way the voice actors and the directors could see one another. Two monitors and a keyboard occupied the middle of the table, while a port-a-studio sat on one side and a mixer on the other. It had taken me a while to learn what all of the buttons and sliders did, but now I felt right at home surrounded by them. I donned my headphones and toggled the switch on the small box next to my hand to open the channel between Gabriella and me.

She didn’t have her headphones on yet, but I could hear her humming and buzzing her lips to get warmed up.

I found the slides I wanted to start with and queued them up. If all went well, this first part wouldn't take long.

I liked to start with a small section of the project, just to get everyone on the same page, then I'd move to the longest portions and work our way down to the shortest.

Gabriella put her headphones on. "Ready."

"Our first section is about workplace safety. We'll need a slightly serious voice, but still conversational."

Without preamble, which I appreciated, Gabriella began. "Workplace safety is our number one priority for our employees."

I winced. I'd said a serious voice, not that of a tweenage cartoon character after sucking helium. I let her finish the lines before I flipped the switch so she could hear me. "Good pacing. Let's tone down the inflection a bit."

Gabriella shrugged and did it again. Almost exactly the same.

As her director, it was my job to guide her to where we needed her to be. "Again, great pacing. I like the timing you've got down. However, can you pull your voice into a deeper range?"

"Sure. Whatever."

I gritted my teeth as I listened to her say the lines with minimal change.

I glanced at Lyle and Tanner, saw them laughing, decided I hated them, and turned back to Gabrielle. "Why don't you give me three in a row?"

She did. They were all bad.

This really was going to be a long month.

Chapter 12

-Tanner-

“Dude, we hired you to be the African American representation,” Lyle said from outside the booth. “Give me less Ryan Reynolds and more Terry Crews.”

“Right.” I breathed in and imagined myself as Terry Crews. Now that guy had a voice. “When you join the MaxMart team, you join a community. A family. We’re all here to help you.” When I finished, I risked a glance at Lyle.

“It’s going in the right direction. Do it a couple of times. Think friendly. Smile a bit.”

I followed his instructions, and when I looked at him again, I found him nodding. “Great. Twice more, then we’ll move on.”

I complied, swinging my shoulders and pointing at an imaginary employee as I spoke.

“Perfect!” Lyle grinned at me. “Next.”

The computer screen in front of me changed, and I studied the slide before looking at my lines below.

“Hold on a second,” Lyle said. “That’s the wrong one.”

I grabbed my water bottle and took a sip. As I set it back on the floor, my eyes wandered to Leona.

If looks could kill, Gabriella would be as dead as dead could be. I’d been on the receiving end of that particular expression a grand total of once. It had been the only time Leona had actually intimidated me.

“Yikes,” I said.

“What?” Lyle asked.

I jerked my head in Leona's direction. "It doesn't look like things are going well over there."

Normally I wouldn't talk aloud about it, but I knew the only person who could hear me was Lyle.

He glanced over his shoulder then turned back to me. "I told her to let me break Gabriella in, but she insisted she do it."

"Break her in?" I asked, confused by the term.

"It's Leona's way of saying get the voice actor to comply with her vision. Gabriella is stubborn and she's been working cartoons for a while. It's going to take her a bit to settle into this." Lyle looked into my eyes. "I told her to start with you, since you're the nice one."

I shook my head. "I guess." Part of me was sad Leona hadn't opted to direct me this morning. Another part of me got all warm and fuzzy because in my mind it meant she trusted me, which for Leona, was the highest compliment she could give.

"Okay, here's the right one," Lyle said.

The image on my monitor changed again, and I went through the slide and the lines.

"Remember, deep and low, but also friendly."

I channeled a mixture of Terry Crews and the volleyball twins and read the lines.

Two hours later, I stepped from the oppressive air of the sound booth into the basement. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. It took more energy than people realized to get into a character and stay there, even if it was for an instructional video and not a story-based project. I shook off the remnants of that persona and found that Lyle and I were the first ones finished.

Lyle stood and stretched. "Nice job, man."

“Thanks.” I drained the rest of my water bottle. “Where’s the nearest bathroom?”

Lyle pointed. “That way.”

Staying hydrated was key, but it always led to a lot of trips to the toilet. I walked by Gabriella and Leona and saw that they were both scowling. I thought about stopping, but decided I wanted to live through the day, and went down the hall.

It turned out there were two bathrooms right next to one another, which I thought was odd, but convenient.

When I finished emptying my bladder, I went to open the door but heard voices outside.

“She’s killing me. Nothing is right. It’s like she didn’t know what my voice sounded like before we started.”

I recognized Gabriella.

“I heard some of it,” Brandi said. “I’m with her this afternoon, and I’m not looking forward to it.”

“It’s awful. Maybe we should quit while we’re ahead.”

I winced and waited until the other bathroom door opened and then shut before peering out into the deserted hall.

The look on Leona’s face had told me she wasn’t happy with Gabriella’s performance. Leona was a great director, if a bit harsh. Lyle always had as many compliments as he did critiques. Leona might give you a thumbs up for one thing and then ask for ten changes. It’s just the way she was. Although I’d only seen that death glare a few times, she usually reserved it for the end of a project when we were down to the wire.

Why had she come out swinging? Had Gabrielle refused to listen? Or was Leona more upset than usual?

I thought back to when I’d come downstairs. She’d already been here with Juliana. That might explain her bad mood. Juliana had since been lurking in the corner of the room. I’d ignored her, but maybe it was time I said hello.

Eddie was just coming out of his booth, all smiles and laughing with his director. I gave him a nod and moved to where Juliana sat in an overstuffed chair. She was still in the tiny workout outfit, which had to be cold here in the basement. Her eyes drifted up to mine as I approached.

She smiled wide. “Hey, Tanner. How did things go?”

“Great.” I gestured at Lyle, who was talking to the other director. “Lyle is a rock star.”

Juliana pursed her lips, which I’d noticed she did a lot. “It seems Leona is having some trouble this morning.”

I didn’t like the predatory undertones of the statement. I shrugged. “Sometimes it takes a bit to click with a voice actor.”

“Does it?” Juliana’s eyes drifted to my chest, then back up to my face. “I’d love to hear about it. You have the next few hours free, right?”

Warning alarms went off in my head. This lady didn’t just want to flirt. I changed the subject. “You were with Leona this morning. What did she have for breakfast?”

Juliana tilted her head. “I assumed she had breakfast before she came down.”

“Did she?” I asked.

“You know, I’m not sure. I caught her in the hall near the kitchen.”

There it was. She’d kept Leona from breakfast and coffee, probably on purpose. Why did this woman want this project to fail? Or was she simply after Leona for some reason?

“Thanks.” I walked away before she could say anything else. I’d observed Leona’s hanger episodes a few times and knew just the trick for getting her to soften up. I took the stairs two at a time and headed for the kitchen.

The crew was restocking the trays of food. “Hey,” I said to the head chef.

“Did you miss breakfast?” the short, Asian man asked.

“Not me, Leona.”

He frowned. “Come to think of it, I didn’t see her this morning.”

“She got waylaid.” I pointed at a stack of bagels. “Can I grab one of those, some butter, cheese, and prosciutto?”

“That’s what she likes?”

“Pretty sure. That and coffee with cream.”

The man raised his eyebrows, and I got the distinct impression that he thought we were an item.

I held up a hand. “I’ve worked with her before.”

He didn’t look convinced, but quickly put together my order. “Anything for you?”

“I already ate, thanks.” I walked out as some of the others came up.

Leona had put thirty-minute breaks between recording sessions, and the basement had mostly emptied. I found her with headphones on at her table working on what Gabriella had done earlier. I moved until she could see me. I waved the bagel and smiled.

She scowled.

I pantomimed her taking her headphones off then showed her the coffee.

That got me a deeper scowl, but she pulled the headphones from her ears. “What?”

“Eat.” I set both items down in front of her.

“I’m fine.” Her cold voice betrayed nothing, but her eyes lingered a split second on the bagel.

If she didn’t eat, she’d keep acting like a tyrant and Brandi and Gabrielle might quit. I wasn’t sure why I cared, but I did. I pulled a chair over from another station and sat.

“What are you doing?” Leona demanded. The growl in her voice was intent on compelling me to flee, but I scooted closer and put my elbows on the table. My arm was mere inches from hers. I leaned in and spoke softly.

“Things didn’t look good over here earlier.”

Leona turned to her screen. “Gabrielle isn’t listening. She’s making it twice as hard as it needs to be.”

I decided to mimic Lyle and toss out a few compliments. “Leona, you’re an awesome director. You know what you want, and you get it.”

She exhaled loudly through her nose.

I pushed the food into her hand and spoke in a low, soothing voice. What can I say, I’m a voice actor, I know how to convey emotion with words. “However, I know you get a little grouchy if you haven’t eaten. Juliana interrupted you this morning. Please eat something. I think you’ll see a better path to getting Gabriella to cooperate if you have some food in your stomach.”

The air between the two of us sizzled with something I couldn’t identify. Leona licked her lips and met my gaze. “You noticed all that?”

“Sure did.” I grinned.

“Why?” she asked in a whisper. Her eyes softened. Her lips relaxed.

There it was. The person under Leona. Vulnerable. Caring. Kind. I could hear all of it in one word. My heart leapt into my throat, and I put an arm around the back of her chair. “Because you’re better than this, Leona.”

Her brown eyes searched mine. I held my breath, afraid she’d raise her shield again and push me away. I willed her not to. I wanted to see more of this part of her.

To my surprise, she swallowed and nodded. “Thanks.” Then she grabbed the bagel and took a bite. In that moment,

her shoulders straightened, and the shell returned. "I'll take your advice into consideration."

I wanted more but decided to be happy with the glimpse I'd gotten behind her curtain. "You're welcome." Before I walked away, I gambled and spoke. "You should probably give Gabriella another chance this afternoon."

Leona grunted through a bite of food.

"You owe her an apology."

She did that posh snort thing.

I placed a hand on her shoulder and softly squeezed. "Trust me." Her skin was like fire under my touch. Electricity bolted up my arm and into my heart, which pumped faster. I quickly removed my fingers but couldn't shake the tingle.

Suddenly, I was glad I wasn't working with Leona until tomorrow. It would take me that long to get my pounding heart to slow down.

Chapter 13

-Leona-

The morning of day two dawned even earlier than day one. I'd skipped exercise and breakfast the day before, and it hadn't gone well for me. So here I was, at 4:30 in the morning, headed to the gym.

I'd had to wake up early in order to put my Leona prosthetics on and apply a light layer of makeup that wasn't going to sweat off, just in case anyone else was up at this hour.

I didn't usually put Leona on until after I exercised, but that wasn't an option here. Between Juliana and Tanner messing with my everything, I was having to keep Rosemary buried deeper than I liked. I could exercise in my room, but it was small, and the walls were thin. Someone would hear me and then ask questions, so I'd opted to use the in-house workout area. I moved through the great room and to the stairs.

Unlike Juliana, with her alluring exercise outfit, I'd donned a pair of black capri yoga pants and a tank top. No mid-drift showing for me today, not after the way most of the men had ogled Juliana yesterday.

I hated the fact that I'd noticed Tanner hadn't ogled Juliana. It wasn't a surprise, Tanner was quite the gentleman, but it still made my stomach get all fluttery.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, my eyes drifted to the sound recording booths. I'd been ready to fire Gabriella after our first session, but Tanner had noticed my lack of food, had done something about it, then had given me unsolicited advice that I totally needed.

The imprint of his hand on my shoulder still felt warm, as did my cheek from his breath when he'd whispered in my ear.

I shivered and walked past the booth. There was no time for me to fantasize about Tanner. Even if he was turning out to be an even better guy than I'd imagined. A scowl formed on my face as I reminded myself that I was Leona. Leona didn't show emotions, and she didn't have silly crushes on guys. She worked hard, got things done, made no friends, and moved on.

You're lonely.

I brushed the thought away. I had my work and my upcoming cartoon series. I didn't need people. All people did was let you down.

There were no lights on in the basement, but enough illumination came from the stairs that I was able to make my way through the recording room and the game room to the gym. I let out a huff when I saw the yellow glow from beneath the door of the gym.

Of course, someone was here. I wouldn't get a moment of peace in this place. Leona slid into place, and I entered.

The exercise room held a treadmill, a recumbent bike, an upright bike, an elliptical, and a bench with free weights along one wall. Yoga mats and a single exercise ball sat next to the weights.

I shouldn't have been surprised to see Tanner. He had one knee on the bench and held a huge barbell in his hand. The skin of his arms bulged under the muscles of his triceps. He wore a tank top and basketball shorts. I did my best not to stare, but sweat glistened on his dark skin, and I hadn't seen a guy with that much lean muscle in a while.

Tanner glanced up and gave me a head jerk of greeting. He had earbuds in, which meant we could avoid awkward conversation. I felt a blush coming up my neck, shot off a little wave, and practically ran to the upright bike. I'd normally go for the treadmill, but instead I chose the piece of equipment

farthest from Tempting Tanner. My heart rate was up even before I started to pedal.

One thing I'd done to slough off Rosemary was to get rid of every soft place on my body. I worked out almost every morning and had hired the best online personal trainer money could buy to transform me into a lean, mean, running machine.

A few months before, running had started to hurt my knees. Lately I'd moved to yoga and Pilates along with free weights and biking. However, with Tanner just a few feet away there was no way I was going to do yoga. What if he watched me? What if I wanted him to watch me? What if he wasn't impressed? Ugh. No more self-doubt. It was time to burrow farther into my Leona shell.

I donned my own earbuds and started pedaling, climbing imaginary hills. In a matter of minutes, I was soaked in sweat and breathing hard.

Exercise had become my haven after *Outlast*. I could be myself, not care what I looked like, and do things just for me. Like focus on my upper arms, because I'd always thought biceps were cool.

I did my best not to notice Tanner, but it was hard with a mirror along one wall of the room. He kept working with weights and I forced my eyes to the display on the bike so I wouldn't admire every inch of him.

It's not that I only liked guys with loads of lean muscle and definition, but Tanner was a specimen like no other. I knew the kindness and confidence that lay inside of him, and a part of me that was growing louder by the moment wanted to experience more of Tanner. I seriously felt like a creeper stealing glances at him as he worked out.

When had my life come to this?

When was the last time you even considered liking a guy?

The voice was back asking hard questions. Dwayne, from *Outlast*, was the last guy I'd allowed myself to fall for. Even off the show we'd kept in touch, and I'd thought there was

something between us, until I ruined it with my confession interview.

Looking back, I'd have to say it was a silly crush. I hardly knew the guy outside of the show, and it was probably good things hadn't worked out.

Men tended to avoid Leona—they found her incredibly intimidating—which gave me more time for work. I wasn't sure what I'd do if a decent guy decided he liked me as Leona. There had been a few advances over the years, but they were all men who liked a woman to boss them around. One of them had described his perfect night in the bedroom with such disturbing accuracy that I could never look at him again.

If that's the caliber of men Leona attracted, then it was better to keep my distance.

After twenty minutes on a bike with the worst seat ever, my butt started to hurt. Tanner was jogging on the treadmill, which left the area by the bench open. I could work my upper body with the weights then get back to my room.

I thought Tanner and I were going to remain silent until one of us left, but I made the mistake of catching his eye as I walked by. He grinned and pulled an earbud out.

How many women had fallen for that grin? Tanner belonged in a romance movie as the male lead who was practically perfect in every way.

“Morning,” he said.

I barely heard his voice over the personal development talk I was listening to but felt like I couldn't just wave and walk by. So I pulled my own earbud out and nodded. “Morning.”

“I was down here alone yesterday. Glad to see someone else out and about at this hour.”

Leona would only give him a grunt. Maybe a one or two-word answer. Unfortunately, I wasn't feeling particularly

Leona-like this morning, and my mouth got the better of me. “Pretty sure this makes us crazy.”

Tanner’s smile widened. How were his teeth so white? And why was my heart thumping so hard?

“I’d agree about the crazy part.” Tanner shrugged. “However, if I don’t exercise, I get a little grouchy.”

“*You* get grouchy?” The words spilled out before I could stop them. It was like being this close to Tanner shorted out my filter.

“I do.” He chuckled, and I swear the air around me vibrated. “But not often.”

“Good to know.” I finally made it to the bench, grabbed weights, and started doing curls.

He slowed the treadmill. “How did things go with Gabriella yesterday afternoon?”

I should have known he’d ask about that. He’d been totally right about me being hangry. He’d also been right about having a clearer head after food. I finished my set and glanced up at him. “Better.”

“I’m glad.”

Leona wasn’t one for gushing emotions, but she did give credit where credit was due. I steeled myself before I spoke. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“No one likes a hungry boss.” He slowed the treadmill again.

He’d not only brought me food, but he’d given me sound advice. I put a dumbbell over my head and dipped it toward my back. “Also, thank you for the words of advice.”

Tanner used his shirt to wipe sweat from his eyes. I congratulated myself for keeping my gaze on his face instead of his abs. “Things looked a bit rough between the two of you. Lyle said Gabriella is a good voice actor once you get her on the right track.”

I nodded. He'd been right to tell me that I owed her an apology. Not that I'd gushed about my inadequacies or anything like that, but I had told her I was sorry for my behavior and had asked her if I could direct her afternoon session. With food in my belly and coffee on my lips, not to mention the aftermath of Tanner's hand on my shoulder, I'd redeemed myself, and Gabrielle and I had had a solid recording session.

Tanner was down to a slow walk, and a moment later he turned the treadmill off and stepped to the floor. He grabbed a water bottle and took a deep swig.

One look at Tanner's fingers and it was like he was touching me again. Fire filled my stomach and ice prickled the back of my neck. I had to keep from glancing at his lips, which made me feel like I was a love-sick junior high student.

What was my problem?

"Can I ask you a favor?"

I blinked. How long had I been staring? "Uh, sure."

"Can you help me stretch?"

I looked him up and down. "You want me to help you stretch?"

"Just my shoulders." He put the water bottle in a cup holder and flung his arms across his chest and then as far back as they would go. "They're stiff."

"Maybe you shouldn't use all the biggest dumbbells when you lift."

He shrugged.

I cursed myself for letting words tumble from my mouth again. Now I was committed. I stood and put the weights back. "What do you need?"

Tanner held his arms straight out then tried to pull them behind his body. "I need you to hold my arms."

"You could use a wall for that," I pointed out.

“It’s better if I stretch them both at once. I get shoulder issues if I don’t keep them limber.”

No one used the word limber in normal conversation.

Tanner walked to me, and I found myself looking up, up, up until I reached his eyes. I pointed to myself. “You think I can actually help?”

“Sure, jump on the treadmill.” Without waiting for an answer, he moved in that direction.

Okay. Fine. I could do this. I was helping. Leona could help. This would clear up the debt he had against me at the moment. I followed him and stepped onto the treadmill. This put the top of my head almost even with his.

Do not look at his lips, even though he’s smirking.

I swallowed and motioned for him to turn around.

He did so, putting his arms out.

I rarely touched anyone. I’d had enough trauma with angry fans touching me that I did my best to stay away from it. Now, however, I reached out and took each of Tanner’s wrists in my hands. Warmth pulsed from my palms all the way to my stomach. I gently pulled his arms back.

Most people had a limited range of motion, especially in this area, so I expected to stop before his wrists touched. Just my luck, Tanner’s arms kept going. Muscles bunched and he rolled his neck.

“Just how flexible are you?” I grunted as his elbows crossed behind his back.

“Like I said, I have to keep my shoulders limber.”

“Stop bending forward,” I said.

“Someone’s bossy,” he muttered.

“It works better if you stay upright.” I knew this from personal experience. Tanner tried to straighten but didn’t get

far. So I let the stretch relax a little and took my foot and pressed it into his lower back.

“Hey!” He glanced behind at me.

I gave him a vicious grin as I pulled his arms across one another.

Tanner made a sound that bordered between pain and relief.

“Too much?” I asked through clenched teeth. It was hard to keep my balance and work his shoulders.

“Nope,” he muttered.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

We stood there for fifteen seconds as he relaxed into it. I noted the way his muscles slid under his skin as he took deep breaths. I knew what it took to stay in such good shape, and I had to admire not only the results, but his determination and commitment. When I began to let his arms move forward, he spoke. “You obviously have experience with this.”

“I’ve had some tough trainers.”

“Same.”

I needed to stop talking, but I yearned to know more about him. Who was the man behind the happy mask? Was he the male equivalent to Pollyanna, or were there some rough patches in there somewhere? “You played volleyball in college, right?” I asked.

“Sure did.” At that point, I let his arms go, and he shook them out. He didn’t give me a chance to step off the treadmill before he turned around and faced me.

Dang it, I could feel the kindness in his eyes. My breath caught in my throat as he put his hands on the handrails on either side of my hips. I was trapped but didn’t want to run. My heart thundered in my chest, but I didn’t feel like I was in danger. “Did you play sports in college?” he asked.

Sports? Me? I shook my head. “No.”

Tanner’s eyes didn’t leave mine. “You obviously spend a lot of time working out. Why do you like to stay in shape?”

I’d never been asked that question before. I swallowed as I thought about my answer. I couldn’t tell him it was because I wanted to look different than I had in the past. The moisture drained from my lips, and I had to lick them before speaking. “I like being confident in my physical abilities.”

In truth, after *Outlast*, I’d taken some self-defense classes and had done everything in my power to ensure I could either fight or get away if I ever ran into a violent situation again.

“That makes sense.” He stepped back and motioned me off the treadmill. “Thanks for helping me stretch.”

I jumped down and hated that I had to look so far up to get to his dark brown eyes. “You’re welcome.”

“Shall we do this again tomorrow?”

Why did his innocuous question sound like he was asking me out on a date? I liked being with him. I liked that he hadn’t invaded my privacy for a bit, but then we’d talked a little. I liked that he wanted to spend time with me.

Not that I could show him any of this. I shrugged one shoulder in response. “I’ll be here.”

He smiled. “Great.” He went to leave but stopped short. “Aren’t we on for recording this morning?”

“That’s right,” I said.

His smile got bigger. “Then I’ll see you in a bit.”

I turned away as he went out the door. Maybe I should have Lyle work with Tanner again. If I directed him, I wasn’t sure I could keep Rosemary cooped up behind Leona.

Chapter 14

-Tanner-

It had taken an extra-long time in the shower for me to cool down after the gym. I'd spent every minute in that little room trying *not* to watch Leona, and I'd failed miserably. It hadn't helped that she'd pulled her hair up into a ponytail, which left her neck exposed. She'd found my weakness and didn't even know it.

I loved that she wore a practical outfit, unlike Juliana. I loved that she worked out hard. I loved the look in her eyes when she'd been powering through the last few lifts of a hard set. I loved that she'd helped me stretch and had answered my questions about why she worked out.

"That's the third time you've done that sighing thing. Also, you were singing in the shower. Should I be worried?" Eddie looked at me from a chair in the corner.

Our suite consisted of a king-sized bed, a couch, a chair, a huge dresser, a television, and an attached bathroom. We'd put a barrier of pillows between us while we slept in the same bed because Eddie liked to cuddle with his wife, and I wasn't that into him.

"I always sing in the shower. Get used to it." I pulled my shirt over my head.

"Uh-huh." Eddie was playing a game on his phone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked as I yanked my shoes on and tied them.

"Nothing."

I eyed him. I'd told him that I'd met Leona at the gym, but that was it. Had I given something away?

He changed the subject. "Are you ready for breakfast yet?"

"I'm ready," I grumbled.

"Is Leona going to meet us there?" Eddie got to his feet and dropped his phone next to mine on a nearby dresser. We'd been asked to leave them in our rooms during work hours.

"Why would she?" I asked.

"Just thought you might have invited her."

I huffed and shook my head. Eddie would never know that I had thought about it, but when she said she'd be at the gym in the morning, I figured I wouldn't push it.

Besides, the next couple of weeks wasn't the place to start, dare I say, a relationship. Maybe we could hang out afterward. There wasn't much to keep me in Atlanta.

Why couldn't I stop thinking about Leona?

There was a moment in the gym when she'd bitten her bottom lip. Leona never did that, and it, once again, reminded me of something Rosemary Bellemore did on *Outlast*.

Another sigh almost escaped, but I stifled it before it came out.

Eddie was going to tease me forever when he found out I had put myself in charge of making sure Leona ate breakfast. I couldn't let her work hungry again. Everyone had noticed her angst the previous morning, and the team didn't need a repeat of that. If she didn't pick it up herself, something the head chef promised to look out for, I'd take it to her.

Eddie led me into the hallway and down the main stairs. The scent of bacon, eggs, and baked bread drew us toward the dining room. Several others, including Gabriella and Brandi, were sitting at the main table eating. Food lay on the bar in the kitchen, buffet style.

None of the voice artists ate anything heavy—phlegm was a real problem when you were trying to record—but going into a two-hour session on an empty stomach wasn't a good idea.

We grabbed a light meal and joined the others at the table where a low murmur of conversation buzzed.

“Morning,” I said in a cheery voice.

A few people muttered “morning” back. The rest ignored me.

Man, I loved taunting non-morning people. It had stemmed from my time with the volleyball team in college. You'd think that the twins, who had grown up on a farm, would know the value of getting up early. Nope. They hated it. The only thing they hated more than mornings was chipper people in the morning. I'd taken it on myself to be that guy, especially since they weren't the only ones who didn't like to get up on time.

Eddie settled across from Gabriella and I took the chair next to him. I hadn't talked to Gabriella at all the previous day. “So, how did your afternoon go?” I asked her.

She sniffed. “Better than the morning.”

Brandi laughed. “She was ready to walk out after that first session.”

Gabriella nodded. “I was.”

“What changed?” I asked.

“Leona decided to be a human being instead of a beast.”

I made a face. “She had a rough start, huh?”

“That's an understatement.” Gabriella's eyes darted to the kitchen, and she pressed her lips together.

I didn't have to turn to know that Leona was back there, I could feel her. The icy presence of the boss loomed, prickling my skin. Earlier she'd thawed a bit, but it seemed she'd doubled her efforts of putting her armor back on.

Everyone else turned away. I glanced in Leona's direction and gave her a smile. Casual black pants that hugged her hips and a low-cut purple blouse had replaced the workout clothes. She looked awesome, although I missed her hair being up. "Morning."

"Morning," she said in the most business way possible.

So that's how it was going to be. I took a drink of water. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

Eddie made a strangled sound that landed somewhere between laughter and choking.

Leona met my gaze with her brown eyes and tried to push me back a few feet. My smile didn't budge. "Don't be late." She turned and walked away with a cup of coffee and the same bagel I'd taken to her the day before.

"Why do you provoke her?" Brandi asked.

I shrugged. "I have a thing for grumpy people."

Eyebrows around the table went up.

I grinned. "I have an overwhelming need to see them smile."

"It's true," Eddie said. "It's an affliction."

Brandi laughed. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

The mood in the room had lightened.

"Good luck with that," Brandi said.

"Thanks."

Brandi rose and headed for the basement.

"You're crazy," Eddie muttered.

"I've been called worse," I said.

"I bet."

Fifteen minutes later, Eddie and I jogged down the stairs. Juliana was once again interrogating Leona, who was on her computer explaining the schedule to the other woman. Lyle already had Gabriella in a booth, and Brandi was about to climb into the other one. I decided I didn't want Leona in that bad of a mood, so I walked to her and Juliana.

"You ready?" I asked Leona.

Her eyes darted to me, then back to Juliana. "We're going to be fine. Things are always slow at the beginning."

Juliana opened her mouth to protest, but I interjected. "She's right. It takes a few sessions to really get going. Once people click, we'll speed up."

Leona shrugged one shoulder as Juliana looked between us.

Juliana sniffed. "I may be here longer than I expected." She then turned and walked away.

I could have sworn I heard Leona mutter, "Whatever" under her breath, but when I looked at her, I found her focused on the slides we were going to be working on.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready to be working with the best."

She didn't look up, but I heard the almost smile in her voice. "Get in there."

"Yes, ma'am."

Stepping into a sound booth was like putting on my volleyball shoes in college. At that moment, I left the world behind and became a voice actor. I adjusted the microphone and the screen. Gabriella must have been in here last because both hung at my belly button. Some people could sit and record, but I preferred to stand, so I pushed the chair out and shut the door. The headphones felt like they were going to crush my head, and I made them bigger until they fit.

Leona was still working on the slides, so I took a moment to warm up.

Most people buzzed their lips and went through some sort of monologue. I sang Johnny Cash songs. His music fit into my range. Today I started with *Ring of Fire*. During the instrumental parts, I buzzed my lips and used a higher voice.

This wasn't new for me, but for some reason when I caught Leona watching me dance—I couldn't help it—I almost stopped. A flush engulfed my skin, and sweat broke out on my forehead.

When was the last time I'd been embarrassed about my warmup? Why did Leona have this effect on me?

She raised her eyebrows a fraction of an inch as if to ask if I was seriously singing right now. I gave her a wink and started in on *Walk the Line*. I only got halfway through before Leona's voice sounded in my ear.

“Alright, rock star, let's get started.”

“Johnny Cash is more of a country singer.”

She ignored the comment. “Here's the first round. Let's go through them all before we record, okay?”

“Sounds great.” When she finally looked up, I smiled.

Her nostrils flared.

I counted that as a win.

Today I was recording the voice-over for new managers. The slides talked about how to wield authority, stay above your employees while remaining approachable, and how and why to write someone up. After we did a quick walk-through, Leona asked, “You ready?”

“I am.”

“I'm looking for stern but approachable here.”

I didn't know what that meant, so I read the first line in the same low and slow voice I'd used the day before.

“Congratulations on your promotion as a manager at MaxMart. This position comes with responsibilities you may be unfamiliar with. This training will take you through those responsibilities.”

The moment I looked up and saw the sour expression on Leona’s face, I knew she hated it.

Which was fine. If it wasn’t what she wanted, she needed to tell me. I waited. Leona’s finger hit the button to talk to me. “Let’s try that again. This time with less seduction.”

“Seduction?” I smiled.

“Your low and slow voice always sounds like you’re trying to sweet talk someone.”

“Nice compliment. Give me another one.”

“What?”

She and Gabrielle had worked things out, but it would be easy for Leona to slip back into her normal ways. After just a day of this project, I knew we were all going to have to give a little in our habits to make it through. “You heard me, I want two compliments and then what you want me to change.”

“Trying to do my job for me?” I heard the bite in her voice.

I met her gaze. “Not at all, but Lyle and I had a great session yesterday, and that’s what he did.”

Leona pressed her lips together, and I heard her take a deep breath. “Fine. I liked the way you put the last phrase together.”

“Was that so hard?”

Her eyes narrowed.

I knew I was playing with fire, but I couldn’t help myself. “What can I do differently?”

“Less seductive.”

“Higher voice? Faster pace? What?”

I didn't miss the head shake she gave me. I might wake up with a pillow over my face tonight as she suffocated me. Not like Eddie would save me. Leona brushed her hair back from her cheek before she spoke. "Let's try it with a higher voice. Think more like a movie announcer and less like the Old Spice guy."

That drew a snort out of me. "You got it." I said it again with her changes. When I finished, I watched for her reaction.

"Better." Her gaze met mine and she spoke slowly. "Nice job with the voice. Let's try it a little faster."

"That was only one compliment," I said.

"Better was a compliment."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

I grinned. "Okay, Leona, a little faster. For you."

Her sigh practically tickled my ears through the headphones. And was that an eyeroll I'd just detected? I repeated the lines again. Leona made a face but didn't speak for a few seconds.

"You hate it," I said.

"Something's off," she muttered. "Give me a minute."

"Sure thing."

I watched as she listened to what I'd just recorded. Her hands floated over the controls as if she'd been doing this her whole life. The screen reflected in her eyes, and after a moment, she pressed the button so we could talk. "Tanner, let's try a different direction. Would that be okay?"

"Sure."

"Great. I want more of your voice. Just say it like you would normally first."

"Uh, okay."

She looked up. “There’s a reason I asked you to come, and it was because of your voice. Not your interpretation of someone else’s voice. How would *you* say this?”

Her words filled me with excitement. I licked my lips and rolled my neck a few times. I hadn’t noticed how nervous I’d been until then.

My voice. I could do that. I went through it in my head before I said it aloud. When I finished, I saw the sliver of a smile on Leona’s face. My insides warmed.

“Good,” she said. “Perfect. Lower your voice a tiny bit and I think we’ll have it.”

“Do you consider good and perfect as compliments?” Our eyes remained linked through the glass. I moved my gaze to her red lips, which twitched before she spoke.

“I do.”

It made me deliriously happy to know I’d gotten her to smile, even if it was only for a moment. “Okay then, here we go again.”

Chapter 15

-Leona-

“We’re a week into the project, Juliana, and as you can see, we’re solidly on track to make our stretch goal.” I sat with the other woman in the living room of the small cabin. It was decorated in the same outdoors style as the main house but smelled a little like rancid Doritos. No doubt from the video team working long hours. We’d finished recording a few minutes early, and everyone else was in the lodge eating and preparing for some sort of party. As soon as I was finished here, I planned to take off my face and hide in my room.

Juliana, who wore yet another skimpy exercise outfit and her long blond hair up in a ponytail, crossed her legs and laced her fingers together. “Things didn’t go very well yesterday.”

I’d trained myself not to react outwardly to provocation, and it had come in handy at least ten times a day with Juliana. I gave her a small smile. “You’re right, it didn’t.” Brandi had found several errors in her slides, which the video team had had to fix, and Eddie had pointed out something that could be interpreted as racist. Not to mention, even Lyle was having trouble keeping Gabriella on the right path. I pointed at the screen of my laptop. “Despite the setbacks, we’re on schedule.”

Corporate people liked graphs and lots of colors, so that’s what I displayed. I also had it in pie chart form, just in case.

Juliana sniffed and sat back. The leather of the overstuffed chair crackled. “At this pace, we won’t hit our bud goal.”

I’d tried to ignore the growing holographic flower, but it drew my eyes whenever I walked through the great room.

After one week, it had grown taller and had sprouted a few leaves.

Juliana went on. "I'd like to see us get ahead."

Finishing early was something that rarely happened. Mostly because I planned things down to the wire, leaving just enough wiggle room to account for the inevitable problems that came up during each project. We were moving faster than I thought we would, which made me happy, but we wouldn't cut the time back by more than a day. If that.

I kept the smile on my face. "Getting ahead is always nice, but it rarely lasts." I shifted in the couch, sinking deeper into the soft cushions. Juliana looked as if she wanted to argue, so I beat her to it. "Everyone would like to exceed expectations and hit your...bud goal." I almost choked on the words. "But in my years of doing this, I've found that it's best to keep those expectations in the right place." I pointed at the display again. "We'll be finished at the beginning of week four. As projected."

Juliana, who had opened her mouth, closed it. Her eyes darted around the room like a toddler desperately looking for some reason to stall at bedtime.

This woman had been nothing but a distraction. Not only to me—she'd demanded lengthy status updates each night—but also to the men and women on the crew. I'd never seen someone from a corporation dress so inappropriately. If anyone asked, I'd admit that I thought she was looking for companionship. She'd paid extra close attention to Lyle for a couple of days until she figured out he really was happily married. Then she'd moved on to a couple of the video guys. I had no idea what had happened there, but it hadn't lasted more than a day or two.

Just this morning I'd seen her talking to Tanner every chance she got.

My teeth clenched together without my permission, and I forced my jaw to relax. Tanner was an adult and could talk to

whomever he wanted. I kept telling myself that whenever I saw Juliana ogling him. I also had to reassure myself that her attention toward Tanner wasn't the reason I'd called MaxMart headquarters to suggest she be pulled back.

Okay, it wasn't the *only* reason. Tanner hadn't given her more than courteous conversation, but I hated seeing her posing for him every hour. If not him, it was someone else. The project needed her gone. I needed her gone. I pointed at my computer again. "I got an email from the Vice President of MaxMart telling me they want you back at the office. He apologized profusely but was adamant."

Why yes, I had emailed him with the suggestion.

Juliana roughly inhaled and nodded. "He contacted me a few hours ago. My flight leaves late tonight."

"I've asked James to drive you to the airport." I channeled my inner Tanner for that comment. Hopefully I sounded more helpful than excited.

Her icy blue eyes narrowed. "I'm still going to need status reports."

This wasn't in the contract, but if it would keep her off my back, I'd do it. "Of course. I'll update you each evening after we record."

"And if there are big delays, I'll be back."

How did Tanner keep his cool when people were so annoying? I forced calm into my voice and expression. "I'm glad you care so much about this project. We're all working hard to make sure it happens."

Juliana looked around again, as if trying to find yet another way to extend the conversation.

I shut my laptop and stood. "You'd better get packing. James will be ready to go in thirty minutes."

She got to her feet and swung her ponytail back and forth. "Fine."

“You can look forward to my first status report tomorrow night.” Before she could find a reason for me to stay, I strode out the front door and down the wood steps.

The sun hung over the western horizon, just a few minutes from dipping behind the trees. The scent of pine and dirt filled the air, and a cool breeze licked at the skin on my arms and neck.

I hadn’t spent much time out here, so I took a moment to drink it in. Even with several small towns a few miles away, all I could hear was the leaves in the trees and the chirp of a bird. And the faraway roar of a plane, which reminded me of Juliana.

She was leaving. Finally. I let a real smile spread on my lips. With her gone, my life would be much easier. I didn’t like having to hold people’s hands.

The thought of hands brought me to Tanner and his huge, slightly rough, fingers.

We’d met each morning in the gym. Usually, we did our own thing until it was time to cool down. Then he insisted on chatting. I pretended to be annoyed, but deep down inside I squealed like a little girl about it.

This morning we’d talked about movies. It had taken a great deal of self-control for me to stay in Leona mode. She only liked artsy films with deep meanings and zero fun in them.

On the other hand, I loved action movies, comedies, romances, and all things mystery.

It turned out that Tanner would watch just about anything once, but he particularly enjoyed thrillers.

Juliana’s voice sounded through the door. A glance back told me she was on her phone, so I didn’t feel bad bolting to the lodge. She was probably complaining to her boss, and I had no desire to hear it.

When I entered the lodge, a wall of delightful scents greeted me. Salty and sweet. Popcorn—I pictured it dripping with butter—and either cookies or brownies. Or both.

I hadn't had a brownie in forever, and on their own accord, my feet took me through the deserted great room toward the kitchen.

The caterer I'd hired had been top notch, and I expected to find the chef cooking.

Only he didn't sing in a low, melodious voice.

I stopped in my tracks, but not before I'd rounded the corner.

Tanner stood next to an air popper, singing and swinging his hips to the beat of whatever song spilled from his lips. He wore his usual t-shirt and jeans, but instead of tamed black hair, it looked as if it had gotten out of its corral.

I couldn't parse the song over the roar of the popper. Or maybe it was because I was completely transfixed by him.

He thrust one hip out to the side and threw his arms in the air as he sang. He didn't see me because he had his eyes closed. For a few seconds, I couldn't move, let alone breathe.

There had always been something almost childlike about Tanner, but not in a naïve way. He'd never quite lost the joy of life. Everyone had something happen that opened their eyes to the dangers and darkness of the world. It seemed like Tanner, if he'd ever experienced that moment, had brushed it away and kept moving forward. Dancing forward. He saw the good in every situation. He also saw the good in every person.

Even Leona couldn't fool him. He knew there was more beneath the surface, and I was having a hard time keeping it hidden.

Who didn't want to dance and sing in the kitchen? Who didn't want to laugh instead of cry? Who didn't want to be happy?

He must have sensed he was being watched, because his eyes popped open and went even wider when he saw me.

The song faltered, as did his next dance move.

I fought the smile that threatened to betray me. My lips longed to shower him with the acknowledgement he deserved for me catching him singing and dancing. My eyes wanted to sparkle and tell him I'd just seen him when he thought no one was looking.

Instead, I raised a single eyebrow a fraction of an inch.

Tanner pulled an earbud from his ear and his easy grin—the one that threatened to disarm me each time I saw it—replaced the slight look of shock. “Hey,” he said.

I raised the eyebrow a little more. It had taken me years to perfect that move.

“Popcorn?” He pointed to a bowl I hadn't noticed on the bar.

Duh, of course I wanted some. One could not simply walk away from popcorn after smelling it. Especially since I could see the glittering butter poured on top.

“The low sodium bowl is next,” he said.

“You're making a low salt version?” I asked.

“For Eddie. He's got high blood pressure.”

The smell of what had to be brownies was so thick I could almost part it like a curtain. I sniffed the air.

“You like cream cheese brownies?” Tanner asked.

I loved all brownies. Instead of saying so, I shook my head. “What are you doing?”

“We're having a game night and people wanted snacks. Cooking is relaxing for me, so I offered to make some.”

“What about the caterers?”

“They just finished cleaning up after dinner. Pretty sure they're already playing games with everyone else.”

Not only did he have an awesome voice, an amazing body, and a smile that stopped me in my tracks, but he also cooked for fun? Who was this guy and why had no one snatched him up yet?

Tanner coaxed the end of the popcorn out of the popper and unplugged it. “Want some?” He pushed it toward me.

I shouldn’t have popcorn or a brownie—these abs did not keep themselves flat—but I figured I could choose one as a reward for finally getting rid of Juliana. “Uh, no.”

The hurt look on his face drew more out of me. “But I’ll stick around for a brownie.”

“So that’s the secret to your heart? Brownies?”

I tried to act nonchalant. In order to cover for the sudden rise in my own blood pressure, I sauntered toward the bar. Tanner watched every step, and for some reason, his eyes made my skin feel like I was standing next to a bonfire. When I stood opposite Tanner, I put my hands on the cool granite slab and met his gaze. I meant to say something about calories, but instead said, “Brownies are one way into my heart.”

Tanner leaned down and put his elbows on the bar. His face hovered across from mine and he oh-so-slowly smiled. “There’s more than one?”

When had my heart leapt into my throat? Why were my palms sweating? How come I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his warm, dark eyes?

“What are the others?” he asked in that low and slow voice I’d accused of being seductive.

Help!

I pulled Leona close around me, but she didn’t quite fit anymore. “People who do their jobs.”

Tanner’s expression didn’t change. “So what I’m hearing is that I’m two for two.”

Heaven help me, he was more like ten for ten, but I couldn't let him know that.

And yet, I wanted to tell him. He'd been nothing but kind to me since I'd gotten here. He'd brought me food more than once. He'd helped me get a feel for the team after the first disastrous recording session. He'd come to the gym at a ridiculously early time partially, I thought, to be with me.

My mind had sort of wandered off into Tanner zone, so when I blinked and found that he'd leaned across the counter, I froze.

He spoke softly, his lips only inches from mine. "How do I get to the three for three level?"

I swallowed. A blush raged up my neck and onto my cheeks. Now that he was so close, I could smell the bright cologne he used. It beckoned me toward him, but I held my ground. Barely.

His eyes drifted to my lips, and he moved infinitesimally closer.

My body froze in place.

He was going to kiss me.

And I was going to let him.

Chapter 16

-Tanner-

Leona's slightly open lips hovered inches from my own. I could smell her coconut shampoo and peppermint on her breath. A wild desire to kiss her had overcome the careful barrier I'd put around my heart. She'd caught me dancing and singing, and even though she'd only given me a single raised eyebrow, I'd noticed the small smirk she'd repressed. Then she'd started talking, and every word out of her mouth pulled me to her.

Electricity darted between us, and I paused for a split second, just to make sure this is what she wanted. Her eyes drifted to my lips, and she tilted her head up ever so slightly.

Was I really about to kiss Leona Ward? Every muscle in my body thrummed like a tight guitar string. There would be no coming back from this. If it went wrong, we still had at least two weeks here together.

Even as my mind reeled like a drunken sailor, I moved toward her. Slowly. Carefully. Blood pumped hard in my ears, drowning out the world around us.

Mere molecules separated us, but before I could brush her lips with mine, the timer for the brownies went off.

I blinked. As if breaking a spell that had been pulling me toward her, the beep stopped my forward momentum. An unseen hand pulled me up and I straightened. Leona stepped away.

What had I been thinking? She'd never given me the slightest hint that she might have feelings for me.

Except that she hadn't backed away.

I stared into her bright, brown eyes for a moment.

Was she breathing hard? I was.

I hadn't realized how much I'd been wanting to kiss her until it had almost been too late.

Saved by the bell, so to speak.

Only a big part of me wasn't happy about the stupid timer. Another millisecond and we would have...what? Kissed? Or would she have slapped me before I got there? Or would the slap have come after the kiss?

Leona's eyes darted away from mine to the oven. "Please save those brownies."

Right. The brownies. "Burned ones won't earn me any favors?"

She took a breath, and the flush of her skin cooled. "Zero favors."

"Good to know." I turned away, hating to take my eyes off of her even for a second, and retrieved the brownies. The heat bellowing out of the oven felt cool on my face. In order to keep my mind off Leona, I found a toothpick and stuck it in and pulled it out. A small bit of chocolate goo clung to the wood.

"Perfect."

I jumped and turned to find Leona standing right next to me. My heartrate still hadn't slowed from the almost kiss, and this jacked it through the roof.

She plucked the toothpick from my fingers and examined it. "Yup. Perfect."

Her usual business persona was back, but there was a playfulness to it that I'd hoped to see someday. I leaned one hand on the counter and grinned. "You like them a little gooey?"

"Is there any other way to eat a brownie?" She raised her eyebrow again, and I didn't know why, but that got my

stomach twisting in the best way possible.

“I know people who like them a little dry,” I said.

“They’re wrong,” she said simply.

I laughed, and the start of a grin tugged at her lips.

My mind went into overdrive. She’d said she just wanted a brownie. When she got it, she’d go hide in her room like she did every night. I had no doubt that she was working, but tonight I didn’t want her to leave.

The rest of us were throwing a little party for surviving the week. No one had said she wasn’t invited. She’d probably say no, but I wanted to spend more time with her. “It’s going to take these a minute to cool, even if you like them gooey.” I folded my arms across my chest, realized I’d just taken a defensive posture, and instead, let my hands hang by my side. “What are your plans for tonight?”

“I need to report to MaxMart and work up the schedule for tomorrow.”

I made a face. “I thought you reported to Juliana.”

What I’d consider a bright expression lit up Leona’s otherwise conservative face. “She’s leaving in fifteen minutes.”

“Did you just make a happy face?”

“Maybe.” Leona nodded and went to poke the brownies.

Out of pure instinct—my siblings had been prone to snatching food when I cooked—I slapped her hand away.

Both of us froze. My eyes were wide with shock at my behavior, and Leona’s jaw hinged open.

Was she going to yell at me? Fire me? Walk away and never come back?

Our gazes met.

She looked more surprised than angry. “Do you assault everyone who gets too close to the brownies?”

My heart started beating again. I didn't even have it in me to be snarky. "Sorry, habit."

"You owe me an extra brownie for that."

I could do better than a piece of gooey chocolate. "How about a fun evening?"

She frowned. "I have plans."

"Surely you can take an hour and come play games with everyone."

Leona's face darkened. I spoke before she said anything. "I know it's probably not your thing, but we've got at least two more weeks here, and it would do people good to see you relax a little."

Her shoulders rolled back. "I'm the boss, I can't afford to relax."

There was something to that. "Okay, fine, maybe just show some humanity."

This time her eyes flashed.

I probably could have phrased that better, and I internally kicked myself for not thinking before speaking. "I mean let people see that you can have fun when you want to, but that you're all business when you need to be."

"I think they already know I'm all business. They don't need to know anything else." The cold tone in her voice made me step back.

I held up a hand. "I'm sorry, Leona. I didn't mean to make you angry."

She snorted—this time a big one—and turned to walk away.

"Hold up," I said quickly.

She stopped.

I set a world's record as I scooped out two brownies, put them on a plate, grabbed a fork, and gave it to her. I stepped

close, but not too close, and spoke in a low voice. “I am sorry.”

Leona glanced at me, and I saw the hurt in her eyes. “It’s fine. Thanks for the brownies.” She snatched the plate out of my hand and stormed from the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, I put on my happy face and dragged the snacks to the basement.

I’d been kicking myself for driving Leona away.

Had it been my comment about her humanity or the fact that I’d almost kissed her? Had she gotten scared, or had I been barking up the wrong tree?

“There you are.” Eddie ran to help with the popcorn when he saw me coming. I gladly handed him the low sodium bowl—which I’d labeled so no one would try to murder me for leaving the salt off—and followed him to a table where I deposited the other bowl and the plate of brownies.

Three people, Brandi among them, were in the middle of a game of Twister. Most of the others were gathered around pointing and laughing. Eddie grabbed a plate, scooped out what he wanted from the bowl, and went to join them. Just before he got there, a blood-curdling scream sounded from the direction of the bathrooms.

Everyone froze and all eyes turned in that direction.

Brandi straightened and stepped off the Twister board. “Gabriella?” She jogged toward the scream. “What is it?”

Almost everyone followed.

Lyle, on the other hand, headed straight for the brownies.

“What’s going on?” I jerked my head toward the crowd.

“No idea.” Lyle took a bite, moaned, pointed at the brownie, and nodded.

Another scream filled the air, this one angry. “Lyle!” Gabriella’s shrill voice proceeded her coming around the corner with something in her hand. “What is this?” She waggled a rubber snake at Lyle.

“Snake?” he asked through his mouthful of brownie.

Gabriella glared.

“What?” Lyle asked.

“You were asking me about what I was afraid of earlier.”

“Was I?” He swallowed. “I don’t remember.”

At this point, everyone was laughing.

Gabriella glowered. “If I see this again, I’m going to stick it down your throat.” She shoved the snake at Lyle’s chest and stomped away.

Lyle blinked, turned to me, and pointed at the brownie again. “You’re a saint. My wife won’t make these for me.”

“Did you put a snake in your bathroom at home too?” I asked.

Lyle laughed. “Nope. Snakes don’t bother my wife. Dirty underwear, however, is an entirely different story.”

“She’s more afraid of clothes than a reptile?” I asked.

After a few more chews, Lyle spoke. “Women aren’t always logical.”

“Yeah.” I hadn’t meant to put any inflection in the word, but it came anyway.

Lyle frowned. “Problem?”

“Nah.” I shrugged. How would I even start explaining what had just happened between Leona and me?

He glanced around, noted a few of the editors close by, then took me by the elbow and dragged me to the far, deserted end of the room. A couch sat in front of a small television that I hadn’t seen anyone use. “Sit,” he said.

I wasn't sure where this was going, but since I wasn't in the mood to watch or play Twister, I did as he said. I had to wait for him to finish chewing before he spoke.

"I've seen the way you look at Leona."

His words pinned me to the cushions. I opened my mouth, had no idea what to say, and closed it.

Lyle waved a hand. "Don't worry, everyone else thinks you're just trying to push her buttons because you like to harass grouchy people." He held up a finger. "However, I think there's more to it."

Guys didn't have these conversations. I shifted and thought about getting up.

"I won't say anything, but I wanted you to know that there's more to Leona than her surly exterior."

Not even Eddie had believed me when I'd told him the same thing.

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Lyle asked.

I shrugged, still not feeling great about this conversation.

Lyle put his elbows on his knees. "I worked with Leona on her first voice-over project five years ago. No one knew who she was, but she walked in like she owned the place and got the job done. No one liked her, but they couldn't deny her effectiveness."

"Sounds about right," I said slowly.

"One day I walked into the break room while she was there alone. She was looking at her phone and smiling."

"You sure it was Leona?"

Lyle laughed. "Right? It was her, but she saw me and that haughty mask she wears slipped back into place, and I've never seen her smile like that again in front of anyone but James or me."

“She smiles for you?” I raised my eyebrows. I thought Lyle was happily married.

“It’s not like that.” He held up a hand. “I kept getting jobs with her and slowly wore her down. Now she’ll joke around a little, but if anyone besides James is within earshot, she’s all business.”

While I found the information interesting and it gave me hope, I didn’t see how this applied to me.

Lyle wagged his finger at me. “I’ve caught her smiling at you twice in the past week.”

“You have?” I asked.

“Once when you were doing your warmups, and once when you were telling a story at dinner. Each one lasted a fraction of a second, but it was there.”

I breathed in, and my stomach began to flutter.

“Not only that,” Lyle continued, “but I’ve seen the way you look at her when you don’t think anyone else is around.” He grinned. “You like her.”

I shook my head. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because she’s liable to push you away hard once or twice. If you like her, stick with it.”

Had he seen what had happened in the kitchen? Or did he know her that well?

He stood. “Trust me. There’s more to her than meets the eye.”

Chapter 17

-Leona-

Tears pooled in my eyes as I bolted through the great room. I blinked and one of them ran down my cheek when I ascended the stairs. If anyone had come between me and the door to my room, I probably would have thrown them off the balcony.

I thought about tossing the brownies off but couldn't get my fingers to unlatch from around the plate.

The plate Tanner had touched.

The plate that he'd scrambled to grab so he could offer more than a verbal apology for his hurtful words.

For calling me less than human. A monster. The beast.

Another tear fell.

Leona Ward did *not* cry.

I wrenched the handle, yanked the door, and stumbled into my sanctuary. Once I'd locked myself in, I put my back to the wood and slid to the floor.

I'd spent a lot of time crying after *Outlast*, and I'd learned to tame the heaving sobs to sniffles. I took one breath and thought about how the sunset had looked earlier. I took another breath and pictured the faces of my characters. I closed my eyes and let the scent from the steaming hot brownie fill my nostrils.

Crying wasted time and energy.

I needed both of those things in order to put together tomorrow's schedule and figure out how I was going to face Tanner again.

He couldn't have known that his words would press the biggest button I possessed. People used words like kill, hate, and monster flippantly all the time.

"I will kill you" was a jest between friends during a board game.

"I really hate you right now" is what sisters said to one another on a daily basis.

"You're a monster" is how people expressed fake horror.

That's all he was doing, but what he'd said cut me to the core and exposed my constantly bleeding insides.

Leona was less than human. A monster. They called me the Beast for a reason. I'd worked hard for that reputation and owned up to it. In creating a new character for myself, I'd gone the polar opposite of Rosemary in as many ways as possible. The only person before Tanner who had caught a glimpse behind the curtain had been Lyle. James, of course, knew everything.

I'd intentionally crafted Leona's personality so people would think she was intimidating and a little cruel; so why did I care what Tanner said?

The answer hung in my mind like a piñata that I refused to hit for fear of the truth spilling out and engulfing me.

Tanner had, with his soft voice, kind words, and sincere advice, peeled my curtain back just far enough to let a ray of light in. Leona had softened during the past week. Not so much that anyone would say she'd changed, but enough that not everyone looked at her with the same fear they had seven days ago.

I'd allowed Leona to take a step toward being more human, but then I'd been reminded that she was a monster. I'd allowed hope to sneak past me, and one strike to the pinata would break it open.

I couldn't let that happen. People plowed over nice guys, and girls. The public had all but crucified me after I'd tattled

on *Outlast*. Even my own mother had used my situation for her own advantage and gain.

If I ever told my story, I'd have to admit that I'd patterned Leona after my mother.

Before my dad had died, she'd been kind, but after his funeral she'd become something else. Instead of raising me, she'd thrust herself into films and had become one of the most sought-after actresses in Hollywood. She put on a good show for the public, but privately she was selfish, cruel, and uncaring.

From the age of six, I'd been raised by a nanny who hated children and expected perfection out of me. I wasn't allowed to play with other kids, act childish, or have toys. Instead, I'd studied under the best tutors money could buy and had gone to arts schools that specialized in acting.

My mother had offered me jobs on many films, but I'd refused them all, wanting to make my own way. *Outlast* had been my first real gig.

I'd stupidly asked my mother for advice about going public with what was really happening on *Outlast*. She'd taken me under her wing and had assured me that she would stand with me.

She'd lied to my face about that. As a matter of fact, she'd been counting on everything going sideways. A few stock deals before my interview had profited her millions. I'd trusted her with my feelings, and she'd used them for material gain.

I gritted my teeth and shoved the topic of my mother back to the corner where I kept her sequestered. She didn't deserve attention from me. Not now. Not ever.

Leona had been born from the ashes of Rosemary's humiliation and failure. I would not let her crack.

My eyes drifted to the brownies, and I licked my lips, wondering what it would have been like if Tanner had kissed me. We had been so close I'd felt the heat from his skin on mine.

Then the buzzer had saved us.

Or had it ruined us?

I sniffed, took the fork in my fingers, and ate a piece of chocolatey goodness. It melted in my mouth, and I let out a soft moan of pleasure. Tanner hadn't made these out of a box. The man could cook. He also held the strings of my heart.

I sighed as I let Leona fall away. Instead of removing my prosthetics, I kicked my shoes off and put my legs straight out. Air swept along my feet as I wiggled my toes. I stabbed at the brownie again and put my head back and chewed.

Tanner's smiling face appeared in my mind, and I grinned back.

One of the first things I'd noticed after I'd adopted the prosthetics was that smiling in them hurt a little. The glue tugged my skin and pinched like tiny baby fingers. In the beginning, I'd been sad about that, but it had made it easier for me to keep a neutral expression on my face.

Tonight, I reveled in the prickling sensation.

Tanner had said I wasn't human, but what he'd really meant was that he wanted the others to see what he'd seen. The glimpses of the woman behind Leona.

He knew. He didn't know everything, but it was enough to scare me.

What if he found out?

How could I tell him I'd been lying to him for the past eight months? That I'd been lying to the world for years?

Tanner didn't strike me as the kind of guy that hid anything. He wore his heart on his sleeve and left happiness in his wake. If he figured out I was Rosemary, he would turn on me just as fast as the fans of *Outlast* had.

I wouldn't blame him. Rosemary came with public baggage. No one wanted that in their life. *I* didn't want that in my life.

The buzzer had saved him from me. I looked down and discovered an empty plate.

Empty like my existence. I shouldn't be thinking about Tanner like this. I needed to stay away from him.

But I couldn't. He was too bright in a world of drabness to ignore. I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame and was about as likely to survive the encounter as the insect.

With a sigh, I put my head back and closed my eyes.

Just as I did so, my phone buzzed. I retrieved it from my pocket and saw an email notification. My heart sped up when I saw it was from the editor I'd sent my scripts to.

A perfect distraction. I bit my lip before opening the email, wondering if it would simply say, "You should find another hobby."

My eyes darted across the text, taking in the words and her meaning.

She loved the idea. She loved the characters for the most part but had a few suggestions for improvement. The pacing of the episodes was good.

I smiled when I noticed that she'd started with compliments, just like Tanner had said I should do.

I'd known that, of course, but sometimes forgot that even professionals in the industry needed encouragement and direction.

No one gave me either of those things except James, so it tended to slip my mind.

Back to my message. She'd made comments in the script. My dialogue didn't feel realistic. That wasn't surprising, considering I hadn't been a twelve-year-old girl in more than fifteen years. I thought of Gabriella, who had been working on a cartoon before this, and wondered if I could find a natural way to approach her about the dialogue.

I shook my head. Tanner had been a bad influence. These people were not my friends. They had no reason to help me.

Which meant I was on my own. I opened my laptop and went through her notes.

They were good. This editor was worth the money. She'd redlined the dialogue of the first episode, and I read through it a few times to get the feel of what she was going for but couldn't hear it in my mind.

Suddenly I thought of Tanner reading some of these lines, and my cheeks warmed. He would watch me through the window as he spoke, then smile as I listened before asking him to change something. We'd laugh and joke, I'd give him some direction, he'd bug me about compliments, and we'd do it again.

I closed my eyes. I was in so much trouble, and I wanted to dive in headfirst.

Another thought came to me, and I sat up.

I could record this.

I'd been practicing the voices. We had sound studios in the basement. I could sneak down when everyone was asleep and record it myself.

Excitement pulsed through me. I'd never considered making a sample before. It would be for my ears only, but it might give me the direction the editor was talking about.

Also, it sounded fun.

Leona's voice droned in my head. *I don't do fun.*

"Stuff it." I got to my feet and headed to the bathroom to take off my prosthetics so Leona could rest for the evening. Then I thought about someone catching me in the middle of the night. I made a face in the mirror. It looked like they'd have to stay on for a few more hours. If I left them on for too long, the glue would begin to damage my skin. I'd have to set a timer so I got back up here before that happened.

Invite Tanner.

That was my inner voice. I wished I could, but only James knew about the cartoon. Telling Tanner would leave me open to questions that I wasn't prepared to answer. Plus, it would provide us with alone time, which I certainly wasn't ready for.

I checked the hour, figured everyone would be in bed by midnight, and decided to take a nap until then. I changed into my exercise clothes, put the revised script onto a flash drive, set a timer, and snuggled into the bed.

Three hours later, the timer beeped twice before I turned it off.

I'd be paying for this little midnight run all day, but it would be worth it. I grabbed the flash drive from my dresser, pushed my phone into my pocket, and crept to the door.

If I found someone awake, I'd tell them I couldn't sleep and wanted a snack.

It occurred to me that no one ever notices a creaking floor until they are trying to be quiet. I stepped slowly and as lightly as I could along the balcony and down the stairs. Blood pumped in my ears, and my eyes darted back and forth. I half-expected someone to hop out and say "boo."

No one did. I jumped at my own shadow cast from the moonlight streaming through the windows in the great room. Someone had left the light over the stairs on, and I jogged down to the basement. I stopped at the bottom and listened.

No talking. No laughing. No drone of a television. Everyone must be in their rooms or asleep.

The only bedrooms down here were at the other end, so I didn't worry about someone seeing the single light I turned on.

The three sound booths stood like lonely sentinels, waiting for us to return in six hours. I moved to the one I'd been using and flipped the computer on, then went into the sound booth itself and made sure everything was hooked up and had power.

It might have been my imagination, but I could have sworn I smelled Tanner's cologne inside. He'd been the last person in here. I took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds.

He even smelled good when he wasn't present.

I exhaled and went back to the computer. Once everything was ready, I inserted the flash drive and brought up my script. The monitor in the booth lit up. Since it was just me, I pressed record and stepped into the booth. The program would tell me when I reached fifteen minutes of voice-over, so I left my phone outside, in case it went off for some reason.

I hadn't been on the speaking side of the microphone in a while. I had to lower it from where Tanner had left it and tighten the headphones before I slipped them on.

If I was a voice actor, the headphones would get me into character. They blocked all sound, putting a barrier between the outside world and this one. I pulled the booth door shut and looked at the monitor.

The simple dialogue waited patiently as I stared at it. I thought of Tanner's warmup routine and smiled. There was no way I was going to sing anything, but I did take a few seconds to talk and make noises, more like Eddie than Tanner.

Once I felt ready, I said the first line.

"Hi, Lyla."

I rolled my eyes. Way too drab. Grant, the guy talking, liked Lyla and would either be beaming or nervous. I opted for nervous. And did it again.

Nope. Too high-pitched.

Again.

That one might be okay. Once I did his line a few times, I tried the other two characters. After five minutes of that, I decided to go through the first two pages of dialogue, just to get a feel for it.

Fluttering filled my stomach as I adjusted the headphones and started to speak.

Of course it wasn't perfect, but I could feel the show behind the lines. I could see the characters as they would walk across the screen. When I got to the end of the page, I closed my eyes and smiled.

It was good, but the editor was right, I needed someone who knew more about teenagers to help me with this.

A deep voice came through my headphones. "I like your voice for Lyla."

I screamed and literally threw myself backward away from the window of the booth. My eyes darted around, looking for an intruder in the small space, or maybe a ghost.

Then my gaze settled on the computer outside. Light from the monitor illuminated a dark face.

Tanner's face.

How? Why?

I opened my mouth to ask, but no words came out. My racing heart didn't slow.

Tanner was seated in my usual spot. A wide grin exposed his white teeth. I could feel, even from here, the brightness he always brought into a room.

"I also really like the way you point at the microphone whenever Grant is talking."

Chapter 18

-Tanner-

I'd spent the better part of the past two hours trying to figure out what I'd done wrong with Leona and how I could fix it.

Sleep wouldn't come, and Eddie complained that I was tossing and turning too much, so I'd put on my exercise clothes and had decided to hit the gym to work off the excess energy burning through me.

Then I'd seen the lights and found a booth on. To my surprise and delight, I'd discovered Leona recording something.

She hadn't noticed my approach, so I sat down at the computer.

I didn't have to hear her to know she was enjoying herself. In two minutes, I saw more emotions on Leona's face than I'd seen since we'd done our first job together. She smiled, widened her eyes, lowered her jaw, scrunched her eyebrows together, and even pointed at the microphone as if giving it a lecture.

This was something I'd never thought possible. It was like seeing an endangered species in the wild. Leona Ward was having fun.

I fought with the urge to pick up the headphones for a few seconds after that, but my curiosity got the better of me, and I loosened them and put them over my ears. I scanned the script on the computer screen until I caught up to her.

Leona had a deep voice, but she spoke in a high pitch for Lyla, and a love-sick fluttery boy's voice for Grant. I sat

transfixed. My technical mind started to identify points where she could improve, but I focused on the fact that she looked... happy.

When she'd stormed out of the kitchen, I'd felt her armor go back on, thicker and stronger than before. Right now, it was as if she'd left it in her room.

I wouldn't have interrupted her, but I noticed she hadn't initialized the sound booth from the inside. She wasn't actually recording any of this, and I figured if she'd gone through the trouble of coming all the way down here in the middle of the night, she probably wanted proof of her little adventure.

After a deep breath—she might actually hate me after this—I hit the button to open the line between us and spoke. “I like your voice for Lyla.”

She screamed and jumped back. Her head snapped around the booth as if expecting an intruder before her eyes moved outside to me. She opened her mouth, but nothing came through her parted lips.

She looked beautiful and scared and on the verge of being furious all at the same time.

I smiled so wide I might have stretched my cheeks. “I also really like the way you point at the microphone whenever Grant is talking.”

Leona's eyes, which had been as big as the proverbial saucers, blinked a few times, then narrowed. Her usual persona settled around her. “What are you doing?” Her cold voice burned ice into my ears. However, she had her hands clasped together like she was nervous.

“Giving you compliments.”

She continued to glare.

“Plus, I thought you might want to know that you haven't started the recording in there.”

“What are you talking about?” Her words came out annoyed, but her eyes darted to the monitor, the microphone, and the light switch next to the door.

“There’s a little button behind the monitor.” I pointed. “I turned it off when we finished earlier.”

“There’s no little button.” Leona craned her neck to try to get a look.

It was up kind of high and hard to reach. I was used to getting tall things for short people, so I hopped up, took my headphones off, and strode to the booth.

Leona jumped when I opened the door. A tickle of coconut filled the air. When I inhaled, it made my head buzz.

Or, more likely, was the fact that I was about to get into such a confined area with Leona.

She took her own headphones off. “What are you doing?”

“Getting the button for you.”

She pushed herself into the far corner and held the headphones between us. I had to step all the way in so I could get past the monitor. The door clicked behind me. “Relax. I’m not going to bite.” I automatically spoke in a soft, reassuring voice. “It’s up here, see?” I pointed.

Leona, who wore her workout clothes, inched along the opposite side of the booth until she could see my finger. “You have to turn that on?”

“Sure do.” I pressed it, and a little green light in the corner of the monitor blinked to life. “I’ve never used a booth like this before, so I’ve forgotten a few times myself.”

“I see.” Her voice was all business, but her wide eyes kept meeting my gaze then shifting away.

I’d come in to help, but now found myself mere inches from Leona for the second time tonight. Right now, tension etched her face and neck, but before I’d intruded, she’d been more relaxed than I’d ever seen her. I wanted a chance to

apologize. Should I take it now? Could I clear the air between us and maybe pick up where we'd left off in the kitchen? Not the almost kissing, but right before that.

The waves of get-out-of-my-space that were coming from Leona told me this wasn't the time. I'd interrupted her private moment. I cleared my throat. "I'll leave you to it."

At the same time, she licked her lips and started to talk. "Tanner, I'm sorry about what happened earlier."

We stared at one another.

She was sorry? I barked a laugh. "What are you sorry for?"

At the same time, she said, "Oh, okay."

We blinked.

"Sorry," we both said.

She posh snorted.

I kept my mouth shut and motioned for her to keep talking.

Leona took a breath. "Like I said, I'm sorry for what happened earlier."

What exactly was she sorry about? Us almost kissing? Me saying something that made her angry? Or her walking out in a huff? I wasn't sure how to approach this, but I hated it when couples fell apart because of poor communication.

Wait, had I just thought of us as a couple? Where had that come from?

"You hit a sensitive topic and I reacted badly." Leona looked me straight in the eye as she spoke.

At least she wasn't sorry about the almost kiss. "It's okay," I said. "Can you tell me what I said wrong so I can avoid it in the future?" On instinct I reached out for her hand.

She jerked it away.

My stomach turned inside out, and I let my arm fall. She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Sorry about that too. I’m not a touchy person. Please don’t take it personally.”

The breath that had been blasted from my lungs slowly replenished. “Okay.”

One side of Leona’s lips twitched. She studied me for a few seconds. My skin burned as her eyes moved from my gaze to my lips to my neck then to my chest and back up. Was she checking me out? Or looking for vulnerable spots to hit? It could go either way.

Leona’s lips parted, but she pressed them back together.

I had the urge to lean down and kiss her but squeezed one hand into a fist to stop myself. “I should go.” My other fingers reached for the handle.

“Wait,” Leona said in a soft voice.

Every muscle in my body froze.

She looked out the window, then back at me. Her normally hard eyes had softened, and her shoulders sagged a little. “I know people call me the Beast and say that I’m a monster. I deserve it, but you saying I lacked humanity hit a nerve tonight.”

Leona Ward had just shared her feelings. I licked my lips. Should I tell her she wasn’t a Beast? Reassure her that she wasn’t a monster?

No.

Leona didn’t need me to pander to her. She’d just admitted that she knew about and deserved the names. For the most part she was right. However, I’d never see her as either of those things going forward. I gave a warm smile. “Thank you for telling me. It won’t happen again.”

“I appreciate that.” She shifted her weight and looked at the screen.

I wanted to ask her about the script but didn't want to push her any more than I had already. My fingers settled on the handle. "I'll let you get back to it."

Before I turned it, words tumbled from Leona's mouth like an avalanche. "You gave me two compliments. Do you have some constructive criticism for me?"

Thoughts came from all directions. She'd listened to my compliments. She wanted my opinion on something. Did I detect a tremor in her voice?

Also, had she just asked me for voice acting help? My throat lodged shut and I started at her.

"Or not," she said after a moment. "Apparently, I'm the best there is."

And then she'd made a joke. I let go of the door handle and leaned one shoulder against the wall. "Well, if you must know, unless you've had at least a few grueling years of experience acting for cartoons or video games, one person probably shouldn't do all of the voices for a series. It's fine for an audio book, but not a cartoon. Unless maybe you're Jim Dale." Jim Dale narrated the Harry Potter books.

Leona nodded. "He is extraordinary."

"He is."

She folded her arms across her stomach. "I actually need feedback on the dialogue." She paused. "For a client."

"I'm not the most experienced with kids shows." When she continued to stare at me with those deep brown eyes, I continued. "But I'd say that it sounds a little mechanical. It could partially be your inexperience with voices or the dialogue. Most likely a combination of both."

I expected a cloud of anger to roll over her face, but she nodded. "I agree."

That threw me for a loop. "You do?"

“I do. This is the client’s first stab at a series, and she was looking for feedback.”

“And she came to you?” The words came out before I could stop them.

Leona raised an eyebrow. “Because I’m the best.”

I put up my hands. “You are good at what you do.”

“But?” Her eyebrow went up again.

Would she hate me if I said this? I decided we’d both lobbed a few truth bombs. One more shouldn’t hurt. “But you have zero experience in this realm.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t learn.” This time her eyes glinted.

We’d never had a conversation like this. Honest. Open. Humorous, but still meaningful. If I hadn’t been drawn to her before, I would be now. She wanted to produce a cartoon for someone who’d never done it before. She wanted to learn new skills. Her ambition appealed to me more than almost anything else. What would I see if I peeled Leona’s layers back? I wanted to find out.

A new light from outside caught my attention. We both turned and saw Leona’s phone on the table. It was glowing and vibrating.

The warmth that had been building between us dissipated. Leona moved toward me. “We’d better get to bed, or we’ll both be useless in the morning.”

I’d rather have stayed here and chatted some more, but she was reaching past me to open the door and if I didn’t move soon, she’d run into me.

Not that her being close to me sounded unpleasant, but I wasn’t about to push my luck. When she reached past me, her arm slid against my side, and I had to resist taking a quick inhale of breath to stifle the sparks that danced around my chest.

Leona turned the handle, and a click sounded.

On instinct, I shoved with my back to open the door. It moved a fraction of an inch, then stopped.

Leona ran right into me.

I hadn't forgotten her falling on me at the conference. Her firm muscles and hard-as-a-rock elbow pressed against my chest had taken my breath away for more than one reason.

This time she stopped, but not before she'd collided with as much of me as was possible. My skin ignited into unseen flames, and I felt a full-on blush galloping up my neck.

Her eyes flickered up to mine, and I was once again within the grasp of her death glare. "It won't open."

I heard the words but couldn't process them. Not with her so close and the scent of her shampoo filling my nostrils and the warmth of her body seeping into mine. "What?"

"The door." She jiggled the handle hard. "Why won't it open?"

"Let me move." I grunted as I attempted to get her to step back.

Only then did she seem to realize how close we were. She jumped, hitting the opposite wall, which was a mere three feet away, hard.

The booth rocked.

Something creaked, then snapped.

"What was that?" she asked.

I reached out with a trembling hand and tried the door. The handle turned a little, but the door wouldn't budge. "It's stuck."

"Yes," she said through gritted teeth.

I tried it again, then pushed it hard. Nothing.

"No problem," I said as I reached for my phone. "I'll call Eddie to come get us out." He'd be mad, but he'd come to the

rescue.

Where I expected to find the hard edges of plastic in my pocket, I found only fabric.

Not good.

My eyes darted to the table outside.

“What?” Leona asked.

I met her gaze. “Your phone is out there, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

I gave her an apologetic smile. “Mine’s in my room.”

Chapter 19

-Leona-

Seriously? The door wouldn't open and neither of us had a way to contact the outside world?

What was this, a bad romcom?

I glanced at my phone where the alarm warning me that I had thirty minutes to get my prosthetics off or I would end up with rash was still going off. I needed to get back to my room. "Try the door again."

Tanner did. I failed to look away from the muscles in his arms as he twisted the knob as well as the slight musk that accompanied his cologne.

For a moment, I couldn't help but stare. Not just because he was drop-dead-gorgeous, but because he'd been talking to me like a normal human being. He'd asked about what he'd done to upset me so he could avoid it in the future.

Tanner wanted to make me happy.

With the exception of James, no one had cared about my feelings in a very long time. It was enough to make my knees go weak. Which is why I was leaning against the far wall of the booth trying to hide my heaving breaths.

Yes, heaving breaths. I hated myself for using those words in my mind, but that's what was happening.

"It's not going to budge." Tanner reached up and pushed on the ceiling.

Ignore his biceps. Don't even look.

Tanner grunted. "I think we twisted it. Either that or Lyle set a trap."

“Lyle?” I squeaked.

“Yeah, he’s been pranking people all night.”

Of course, I knew Lyle liked to trick people and wasn’t surprised it had finally come out. If he’d somehow jammed the door, we’d never escape. Or it could be related to the extra pins Lyle had had after they’d put the booths together.

Tanner tried the door again. “I think it’s twisted.”

“What is?”

“The booth. When you hit that wall and I was leaning against the door.” He pointed back and forth.

“We twisted it?” My mind wasn’t making connections. The skin under my fake nose and cheekbones was already itching. It was probably psychosomatic, but I clenched my fingers and let my nails bite into my palm.

“Yeah. Like it’s out of square. That’s why the door won’t open.”

I didn’t know much about construction, but I understood what he was talking about. “How do we fix it?”

He scowled. “I’m not sure.”

My mind went into overdrive. Not only did I need to get back to my room, but if I spent any more time this close to Tanner, I was going to do something I regretted.

No. Check that. I’d do something that I really, really wanted to do which might turn into the biggest mistake of my life.

Or the best thing that had ever happened.

Was it getting hotter in here? I barely kept myself from fanning my face. “If we broke it by leaning on these walls, can we push on the other two to fix it?” I waved a hand.

Tanner frowned. Even that was handsome. I took a steadying breath.

“Again, I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “I’m not exactly an expert at stuff like this.”

If my alarm had gone off, then it was almost one o’clock. The earliest anyone would be down here would be six. Five hours from now. Five hours for my skin to react to the glue and for the rest of me to react to Tanner. “We need to try something.”

“Okay.” Tanner wiggled the door again.

A crack sounded from the corner near the hinge. He stopped and looked at me with wide eyes. “Maybe we should leave it.”

“And be trapped in here for the next five hours?” I hadn’t meant to assault him with my shrill voice.

He winced and hurt crossed his expression.

“Not that I have anything against you.” I quickly came up with a plausible lie to cover my panic. “I’m just not a fan of tight places.” There was a grain of truth to the statement. Small spaces didn’t bother me, but I’d never been in one with a man I found insanely attractive before.

He nodded like I’d just given him a mission. “Then let’s see what we can do to get out of here, shall we?” He smiled but didn’t get closer.

Oh boy. Tanner was in full knight-in-shining-armor mode.

I watched as he pushed against each wall, careful to avoid touching me. With the limited space, I could feel his warmth, even without our skin brushing. The foam lining the walls dampened most of the sound, but I heard each of his breaths and the light thump of his feet on the floor.

After a minute, he moved to the far corner. “I’ve got nothing. Let’s try your theory. You push there and I’ll push here.”

“Got it.” I moved to the wall while he put a hand on either side of the window.

“Ready?” He asked over his shoulder.

“Ready.”

“Push.”

I did. The foam groaned under my hands, and another crack sounded. This one from below. I glanced down and found that the back wall had separated from the floor a quarter of an inch. “Stop!”

He froze.

“We’re breaking it.” I pointed.

He moved toward me, but not too close, and shook his head. “We might be in trouble.” He gave me an apologetic look.

This wasn’t anyone’s fault. I could go all Leona on him and blame him for interrupting me and entering without asking, but that would be a jerk move. Especially since I’d wanted to step into his arms ever since he’d arrived.

Tanner took a minute to study the inside of our prison. “Did you see the crew setting these things up?”

“No.”

He folded his arms and looked around again.

I thought back to when I ordered the sound booths. There had been a video about assembly. I’d watched part of it to see how much room we needed to put them together. I closed my eyes and tried to remember what I’d seen of it.

“You okay?” Tanner’s voice whispered on my skin and enfolded me in a hug that didn’t need arms.

I shivered and held up a finger. The walls had been separated and fastened to one another with pins on the outside. The floor was also separate, but the ceiling had been connected to one of the walls. It hinged up and over like the top of a jack-in-the-box toy. If I remembered right, the connection was on the back.

I opened my eyes and found Tanner watching me with trepidation. If not for my itching skin, I might not have said anything, because part of me was fine being trapped in here with Tanner for hours. However, if I wanted to be able to show my face for the next few days, I needed to get out. “The top might hinge up if you push there.”

Tanner moved next to the monitor and pressed his hands into the ceiling. It didn’t budge. Tanner looked back at me. “How bad do you need to be out of here?”

For my skin, pretty badly. I focused on that instead of how I’d rather stay in here with him. “I—I’d like to get out soon.”

“Then I’m going to try to force this.”

If he forced it, he could break the booth. We’d fall behind schedule if we ended up being down a recording studio. I opened my mouth to stop him, but he jerked one hand up and hit the front of the ceiling hard.

A screech that reminded me of nails on a chalkboard sounded, and one corner popped up a few inches.

“There we go,” he said.

Fresh air rushed in, and I could hear my alarm going off. I winced. Someone was sure to have noticed that.

“I’m going to do the other side.” Tanner slammed his fist into the ceiling again. The second corner rose farther than the first.

A terrible crash sounded from above us. He was going to break this thing apart. “Wait.” I held up a hand. I was going to have to take one for the team and wear a mask for a few days. “I’d rather not have to get a new sound booth.”

He winced and lowered his arms. “Yeah.”

“You could stop there. The fresh air is helping.”

Tanner angled toward me. “You look pale.”

I nodded. Probably because Tanner was literally going to rip this place apart to get me out. Not only was I worried about

the booth itself, but I was drowning in the fact that Tanner was willing to break something to help me. "I'll be okay."

"You sure?" Concern laced his voice, and his hand raised as if he wanted to touch my arm.

Leona Ward had never once had to be rescued, but Tanner had done it multiple times. This wasn't his first offense, and my fluttering stomach hoped it wouldn't be his last.

Here we were, two people trapped in a sound booth barely big enough to house both of us, staring down the reality that we might be here for a long time. Instead of fear, I felt exhilarated. My heart sped up and energy buzzed beneath my skin. The moment we'd almost kissed in the kitchen fell around me, and my arm moved of its own accord.

Before Tanner's hand fell to his side, I hooked one of his fingers with mine. His eyes went wide, the white around his iris contrasting his skin. I heard his quick intake of breath.

Was he feeling the connection between us? Or was it just me? Was I barking up the wrong tree? Or was Tanner on the same page as I was?

He moved a few inches closer and spoke in that low and slow voice that made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. "What can I do to help you?"

Hold me. Hug me. Kiss me.

I bit all of those things back and took a deep breath. "Maybe just talk to me?"

"Okay." He pulled away from my grip. "Can I stand next to you?"

Warmth bled from my body without his touch, but I nodded.

Tanner carefully moved until our arms almost brushed. We were leaning against adjacent walls with our shoulders in one corner. I was surprised there weren't lines of electricity darting between us.

“So,” he said softly, “what should we talk about?”

My mind buzzed from his proximity, and I fought for a moment before I came up with a question. “How did you get into voice acting?”

Tanner put his head back and looked at the ceiling. “It’s kind of a story.”

I waved a hand. “It’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

“True.” He chuckled. “Well, I got into college on a volleyball scholarship. One day the announcers for the girls’ team didn’t show, so one of my teammates and I took it over. He was rubbish—like he should never be allowed in front of a microphone again—but I was pretty good. I got a lot of compliments on my voice and the way I called the game, so they asked me to come back.”

I knew he’d played volleyball but hadn’t ever been to a meet. I didn’t even know they needed announcers. “Before that, were you planning to go into professional sports?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t really have a plan at that point. I was probably good enough to go pro, but I didn’t love the lifestyle. It was like voice acting came at the perfect moment.”

“How did you get from announcing to actual voice-overs?”

His gaze drifted down to mine and his eyes pinned me in place. “The dean of the drama department heard me and asked if I would do a voice in a cartoon one of the students was producing. I agreed, recorded it for them, loved it, found out I could make money doing it, and decided that’s what I was going to do when I grew up.”

“That wasn’t a very long story,” I said.

“I abbreviated it for you.”

“I see.”

Tanner shifted, and because of his t-shirt and my tank top, our skin brushed. Actually, it was so soft that it might have

only been the hair on my arm touching his, but it was enough to send a shiver through me.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t keep the smile off my face.

The contact moved farther down my arm to the back of my hand where Tanner’s fingers brushed mine.

I suddenly needed more oxygen. It only got worse when Tanner slipped his hand around mine and gently opened my fingers.

Now not only did I lack oxygen, but my stomach was twisting in anticipation, and I could hear blood pumping through my ears.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

Was it okay? It had been over five years since I’d even thought about liking a guy. Half a decade since a man had touched me like this. The good old biological clock decided to wake up, and the sane part of my brain, which was warning me to run away, got shoved off a cliff. I turned to face Tanner and looked up into his dark eyes. He was breathing hard, and when I touched his chest, I found his muscles taut. “Is this okay?” I asked him.

He smirked and snaked an arm around my waist. “You’re the one who doesn’t like small spaces.”

“Maybe you should distract me.” I leaned into him and went up on my toes.

Our lips hovered inches apart. We both stopped and stared. Tanner felt great against me, but even better was the way he looked at me. Hungry? Yes. But also gentle. Concerned. Happy. Excited. His other hand tilted my chin up. “You sure about this?” he whispered.

Instead of answering, I grabbed his neck and pulled his lips to mine.

Tanner froze for a split second, and I reveled in the fact that I'd surprised him, then his hands were pulling me even closer, and his lips were exploring mine.

I hadn't dared think about what this might be like, but even if I had, I wouldn't have come close to the cacophony of sensations running through my body. Breathing had become a distraction. Each brush of Tanner's fingers against my arms, my neck, or my cheeks sent shivers through my very core.

I tasted the smile on his lips. His touch remained gentle but strong and oh-so electrifying.

He took his time, and he made me feel like I was the only thing that mattered.

A minute—or an hour—later he kissed me deeply, then gently pulled away. We were both breathing hard. I found myself grinning so wide I thought my face might crack in half.

Tanner took a moment to study me, and my skin caught on fire in the wake of his gaze. When his eyes returned to mine, I found warmth there that I'd never experienced from anyone before. "You're incredible, you know that?"

Chapter 20

-Tanner-

I hadn't expected Leona to be so forward, but then again, maybe I should have. She usually went after what she wanted; I just hadn't been sure she'd wanted me.

"You're incredible, you know that?" I asked. I'd only seen a few of her layers, and I could sense there was even more to this beautiful, ambitious, and in some ways, shy woman.

I drank her in with my eyes. That expression had always sounded weird to me, but now I understood. I wanted to know everything about her, see all of her, not forget a single thing from this moment.

When I spotted glistening tears forming in her eyes, I froze. "Leona? Are you alright?" I immediately stepped away. Had I been too close? Triggered her claustrophobia?

She grabbed my waist and pulled me back. "Less talking." Before I could ask what was wrong, she used my shirt to tug me down.

I'd kissed plenty of girls in college but had cooled off since then. Not one of them had made me feel like Leona did. Her lips demanded things I was more than willing to give. Her hands traced ice and fire along my skin, and after a few seconds of her being in charge, I gently pushed her up against the wall.

She didn't object but let out a small moan of pleasure as I moved from her mouth to trail kisses down her neck. Her fingers dug into my back. I'd just made it to her collarbone when a snap sounded, and she jerked away.

I stopped, and my gaze met Leona's. Her wide eyes told me a moment too late where the snap had come from.

Before I could right myself, Leona fell away from me.

A creak filled the air, then a clack.

Leona tightened her grip around me as if I could keep her from falling. Maybe if I'd had my own footing I could have, but I'd been leaning into her.

The box was coming apart. Light poured in through the corner where two panels had pulled away from one another.

Leona swore.

What would people think we were doing in here for this to happen? Not that it should matter what they thought, but this wasn't going to look good. I was suddenly thankful we were alone.

The wall tilted away from us just fast enough that we couldn't stop ourselves from falling with it. A twang sounded, and another corner cracked open.

It was like our make-out session had filled the little booth to overflowing, and it was breaking apart under the assault of our love.

Had I just thought that? Leona's lips had affected me more than I thought they had.

I was going to blame the thought on hitting my head on the floor at the voice actor's conference. Even though I hadn't done anything of the sort. I knew how to fall.

Volleyball had taught me how to hit the floor without injuring myself. I'd taken people down with me before, but they were usually other volleyball players, and I left them to their own devices. Leona was another matter. I didn't have time to twist around so I could cushion her fall, but I pulled her to me and tried to turn so my shoulder hit first.

Leona let out stream of profanity that honestly impressed me, while at the same time, reminded me of someone else and

buried her head in my chest.

How in the world did I have time to feel butterflies in my stomach from that?

We both braced for impact.

My shoulder hit first, and I was happy for the padding on the wall. At least I hadn't dislocated any joints in my arm.

Then movement flickered in the corner of my eye. Not only had one side of the booth broken away from the others, but it had also taken the top with it.

Now I swore and threw my hand up to catch the lid.

Leona screamed.

Or maybe that was me. I'd deny it if anyone asked.

Luckily for us, I worked out. If not, the roof of the booth would have come down and squished our heads. With the padding, we wouldn't have died, but I could only imagine my face being wedged between the two and not being able to breathe.

"He's attacking her!"

Leona and I had curled into one another, but suddenly someone was pulling me away from her.

"Get off!" a woman yelled.

Then something that felt distinctly like a fist hit me in the eye. Pain exploded across my cheek and through my neck.

"Hey!" I threw up my arms.

More shrieks filled the air, and I got hit a few more times in the side, but it felt like a couple of kittens instead of a mountain lion.

"Get away from her!"

"How dare you!"

"Wait!" That was Leona. "He wasn't attacking me."

My brain caught up. They thought I was attacking Leona?

Who were they?

“Break it up!” That was Lyle. “Get off him.”

I’d curled into a ball, every muscle tense. After a few seconds the assault ended. I peeked around my arm. Lyle stood between a pack of women, including Gabriella and Brandi, and myself. He held his hands out like that guy from *Jurassic Park* with the velociraptors. The girls glared at me as if they’d like to rip me to shreds.

“You okay?” Lyle asked me over his shoulder.

“Maybe,” I grunted and sat up.

“What was he doing to you?” Gabriella demanded of Leona.

“Nothing!”

Eddie’s face came into view as he squatted down next to me. “So, what do you have to say for yourself?”

I blinked, looked around at the enraged women, blinked again, and shrugged.

Fifteen minutes later, I sat at one end of the dining room table with a baggie of ice wrapped in a towel pressed to my eye. Leona, Lyle, and the other women sat at the head of the table. Except for Leona, the other ladies took turns glaring in my direction.

Eddie, who had settled next to me, shook his head and spoke softly. “Do you want to tell me what you and Leona were doing in a sound booth?”

I shook my head. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“If you say making-out, I’ll totally believe you.”

“Shut up, we weren’t making-out.” *The whole time*, I added to myself.

“So you were!”

I shot Eddie a glare and he held up his hands. “Don’t worry, I know you didn’t force yourself on her. You’re not that guy.”

The death stares from the women were melting through me. “Tell that to them.”

“I think that’s what Leona is trying to do.”

They all spoke in hushed voices, and I didn’t bother to try to hear what they were saying. Although, the one time I’d caught Leona’s eye, she’d looked more annoyed than anything else. She kept touching her cheek, and I wondered if she’d hit it.

James, Leona’s driver, walked in wearing a legit bathrobe over an undershirt and probably boxers. He went to her and whispered in her ear.

“What’s that about?” Eddie asked.

“No idea.”

Not only had I just kissed the woman I was likely falling in love with, but I’d been accused of accosting her and then beaten by a pack of girls.

What a night.

My eyes drifted to Leona, and the feel of her in my arms flooded through me.

What a night.

“Dude, don’t make that face,” Eddie said.

I didn’t bother to ask what face. Instead, I cleared my throat and turned away.

“No really, what happened?” Eddie asked.

I’d decided not to tell anyone about Leona’s client’s project—although I had my suspicions about it being hers and not someone else’s—and had come up with a plausible lie. Something I hoped Leona and I would be on the same page about.

“I couldn’t sleep so was on my way to the gym to work out, and I saw her in the booth.”

Eddie’s eyebrows went up, and his expression asked if we’d planned to meet.

“No, it wasn’t a secret rendezvous.” Not an intentional one.

“Fine. Go on.”

“She looked like she was recording, but I noticed on the monitor outside that she hadn’t flipped the switch to start the microphone inside.”

Eddie nodded. “I’ve done that twice. Which is why Lyle started turning them on every morning a few days ago.”

“I got her attention and told her about the switch. She didn’t know where it was, so I went in to show her, and the door shut behind us.”

So far, so good.

I continued. “I turned everything on and went to leave and the door wouldn’t open. She’s claustrophobic and was scared, so we started trying to get out through the top.” I waved a hand. “You can see how that went.”

Eddie, who was fighting to keep his Asian features from breaking into an uncontrolled grin, pressed his lips together before speaking. “How exactly did you end up on top of her?”

Kudos to my dark skin for hiding the blush that was once again headed toward the tips of my ears. “The wall started to fall, and I tried to catch her.” I grinned. “I’m counting it as payback for the stage incident at All the Voices.”

The conversation from the other end of the table had stopped, and the hair on my neck rose. I swiveled my head and found them all looking at me.

“You ladies can go,” Lyle said.

James took Leona by the elbow and guided her out the door. She met my eyes for a moment and mouthed the word,

Sorry.

Lyle rose and came to sit next to Eddie. He wiped his face and shook his head. “Do I even want to know?”

Eddie pointed at me. “He has a good story, but I say they were making-out.”

“What’s your story?”

I repeated what I’d told Eddie. Lyle nodded throughout, and when I finished, sat back. “That’s pretty much what Leona said.”

“Then why did the pack of wolves over there still look like they want to eat me alive?”

Lyle put his forearms on the table and laced his fingers together. “Honestly, this is probably a good thing. The other girls are feeling very protective of Leona, instead of wanting to strangle her.”

“Awesome,” I muttered.

“Look, man, your story jives with Leona’s. I seriously doubt you’re the type to force yourself on her. I’ll have another talk with the ladies in the morning, but you should probably keep your distance from Leona for the rest of the project.”

“We’re trapped in the same building.” I waved a hand around.

“I know, but do your best.”

I snorted. “Fine.”

Lyle bobbed his eyebrows. “I do want you to know, that while I believe your story, I also saw the flush on your faces when we got to you.”

I stared at him. “I thought it was weird that the door wouldn’t open. Was that your doing?”

Lyle put a hand on his chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Alas, now you’ll never know.” He laughed, then sobered. “Do yourself a favor and don’t be alone with any of the women. Keep Eddie at your side at all times.”

“Great, a babysitter.”

Eddie put a hand on his chest. “I’m a great babysitter. Ask my kids.”

“Pretty sure I’m more complicated than dinosaur chicken nuggets and ice cream.”

“Are you?”

I thought about flipping him off but stood instead. “Come on, babysitter, I need some sleep.”

Not that I was likely to get any now.

Even after being accused of assaulting someone, the strongest emotions I’d felt that night came from the lightest of Leona’s touches. The small smiles she’d given me. The way she’d looked when she’d been doing the voices in the booth.

I may not be able to be physically close to her, but that’s what cell phones were for, right?

Chapter 21

-Leona-

“Are you okay? Feeling sick?” Gabriella asked as she approached the booth. She wore skintight jeans, a low-cut green shirt, and nothing on her feet. Her thing was to be without shoes when she recorded.

I’d practiced exactly how I was going to approach this. Or, more appropriately, how Leona was going to approach this. I hadn’t taken off my prosthetics until almost two o’clock in the morning, and the skin under where they usually sat was raw and peeling.

I’d had to leave them on more than I liked during this project, so the reaction was worse than normal. It would take at least two days to heal, so I’d donned a medical mask. Good thing the past few years had made wearing a facemask when you thought you might be sick normal. “Just a bit of a sniffle. It’s probably allergies but could be a cold.”

Gabriella’s gaze studied the covering over my nose and mouth and frowned. “He didn’t hit you, did he?” Her dark eyes darted to where Tanner had already started recording with Lyle.

No matter how many times I’d told the story, the other women on the project refused to fully believe it. In some twisted part of their minds, they still thought Tanner had assaulted me.

Warm tingles crept up my neck at the memory of our kissing. I licked my lips and cleared my throat to push the memory aside so I could concentrate on work. I drew Leona closer around me before I spoke. “Of course not. I told you what happened.”

Gabriella still didn't look convinced, but I hadn't been playing the role of Leona for five years only to have someone bully me. I stared her down, daring her to contradict me. After a moment, she shrugged and moved inside the booth. She made a show of pressing the button behind the monitor, which brought me back to Tanner.

If I let my mind wander for more than a few seconds, I replayed those blissful minutes with him over and over. Tanner had made me feel loved. That was the long and short of it, and I wanted to feel that again so badly that I'd almost suggested we meet at the gym this morning.

However, people knew we'd been working out early together, so in our texting right before bed, we'd decided to split the gym days. He'd gone this morning. I'd go tomorrow. Right before I'd left my room to come down here, I'd noticed he'd sent a message saying there were two other people there bright and early.

It had probably been a good thing, considering I'd spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out a new schedule. With only two booths, we were going to have to run them longer each day to make up for the damaged one. Which meant there would be two voice actors and one director not working at a time, which meant we'd have to make up that time in the evenings until we could have repairs done.

I'd thought this was going to be a grueling project before Tanner and the loss of one of our sound booths. Now the next several weeks were going to be absolute torture.

I repressed a sigh and focused on the monitor in front of me. At least Gabriella had decided I wasn't some sort of shrew. Today would likely be our best session yet if I could stay on task.

Gabriella donned her headphones, and I followed suit. Before I could get the slides up, she spoke.

"Seriously, girl, you can tell me if something happened. He can't hear you."

I almost rolled my eyes. The irritation had to go somewhere, so I picked up a pen and started clicking it. The pure Leona part of me wanted to tell her to mind her own business and stop calling me a liar.

Tanner had taught me a sliver of patience over the past week, and I drew on it before I answered.

“I appreciate your concern, but do you really believe that I wouldn’t call him out if he’d done something inappropriate?” I let Leona’s icy voice slide through the connection and willed Gabriella to listen instead of brushing my comments aside.

Leona didn’t take crap from anyone, especially a guy who got too fresh.

Not that any man had dared get fresh with Leona.

Or Rosemary. Not after *Outlast*.

Basically, our kiss last night had very much felt like a first kiss all over again. Although my first in junior high had involved a lot more spit swapping and much less finesse. Tanner had been absolutely perfect, and from his reaction, I hadn’t done half bad either.

I was suddenly grateful for the mask hiding my burning cheeks.

Stop it, brain.

Gabriella studied me for a few seconds before she shrugged a shoulder. “Fair enough.”

For some stupid reason, I felt I needed to say more. “Thank you for your concern. Really.”

The other woman’s lips spread in a genuine smile. “You bet.”

The warmth from my cheeks dropped into my stomach. Not due to my memories of Tanner, but because someone had been concerned about me.

I’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone besides James care about me. Friends had been few and far between

growing up the way I had, and I'd never been good at keeping them. Mostly because so many had had ulterior motives that had to do with gaining some kind of access to my mother. Why bother getting to know someone that would never have real feelings for me?

Enough wallowing. I shoved all thoughts of people from my mind and pulled up the slides. "Today's set is about training employees on how to deal with difficult customers."

Gabriella gave me a nod.

I'd learned to let her lead the conversation. "Why don't you watch the first few and let me know what you think?"

Another nod.

A chill ran up my neck, and I knew someone was watching me.

I hit the play button and forced my eyes to stay glued to the screen. Tanner shouldn't be looking at me, but if he was, I didn't want to catch his eye. It would make me want to kiss him again. And again. Anyone else would be giving me the pity look, like I'd actually been assaulted. Except Eddie. He somehow knew we'd been making-out and kept grinning at me like a jerk.

"I'm thinking a reassuring voice." Gabrielle shocked me out of my meandering thoughts. "Start me at the beginning and you can tell me what you think."

I'd been planning to suggest the same thing, so I did as she asked. I didn't want to admit that the two of us had synched well when it came to voice-overs. As soon as I'd figured out how to communicate with her, we'd become the most effective team behind Tanner and Lyle.

Gabriella read the lines, and they sounded pretty good. I let my awareness settle into the familiarity of Leona's job. "I like it. Good energy, but not too perky. Can you lower your register just a little for the more serious subject matter?"

"Sure." Gabriella smiled and did it again.

Curse Tanner for being right about her.

He'd been right about me too. Ever since our encounter at All the Voices, he'd been studying me as if peeling back Leona to see what was underneath.

There was plenty there, and he'd certainly gotten past my first, second, and third lines of defense. I had to admit that I'd loved every minute of it.

The familiar process of recording kept me engrossed for the next couple of hours. Gabriella and I finished a few minutes early, and when she came out of the booth I stood and stretched. My eyes drifted toward Tanner like a marble going down a hill, but I diverted them.

"Round one for the day done," Gabriella said with a grin.

"You sounded good," I said.

"Thanks." Gabriella's gaze darted toward Tanner again, and I braced for another round of accusations. To my surprise, she yawned. "Have you had breakfast?"

"I grabbed a banana." One I'd had in my room. I already missed Tanner bringing me food.

"Come on," Gabriella said. "If we hurry, there should be one of those bagels you like left."

She'd paid enough attention to know what I liked to eat?
"Uh."

Gabriella reached out and took me by the elbow. "This way."

I didn't resist, mostly because I did need food, but the surprise I felt overpowered my resolve not to look at Tanner. My head turned of its own accord, and I found him watching me through his window. A wide smile spread his lips for a moment before he wiped it away.

It was enough to turn my insides into fluttering leaves.

Before anyone noticed, I snapped my attention to the stairs. Right now, I needed to figure out how I was going to

take my food and go to my room because I couldn't remove my mask in front of anyone. I was sure Gabriella would give me crap about it, but Leona ignored that kind of thing and did what she wanted.

That night, after a day of recording, editing, and avoiding eating lunch in front of the others, I bolted to my room.

Like most people, I'd gotten used to face masks, but that didn't mean that I liked it. Especially with tender skin that needed air circulation more than anything else.

I'd tossed the mask the moment I'd come through the door, and since then I'd been sitting in a chair, holding my phone.

Technically, I could have mine on during the day, but in the name of solidarity, I'd decided I would refrain from looking at it unless I was expecting an important message or email.

Now I was afraid to swipe it to life because I desperately wanted there to be a hundred text messages from Tanner.

There wouldn't be. There couldn't be. He'd left his phone in his room until after dinner which, for everyone who wasn't in a booth, was being served.

A light knock came at the door.

I stiffened and glanced at the box of masks on the nearby table.

"Leona?" James' soft voice drifted through the wood. "I have your dinner."

He wouldn't ask me to open the door if anyone else was around, so I jumped up and turned the handle. My oldest, and before Tanner, my only friend stood on the other side with a covered plate in one hand and a large glass full of what looked like orange juice in the other.

I made a face at the juice. Way too much sugar and acid this late at night.

“Gabrielle insisted,” he said with a smile.

“Of course she did,” I muttered. “Come in.”

He shook his head and offered the plate and glass to me. “Eddie has asked me to play spades with the group.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Does he have any idea how good you are?”

“Not even a little.” His light eyes gleamed.

I took the food. “Should I warn them?”

“Please don’t.”

We both laughed, but James’ smile faded almost immediately. “How is your skin?”

“Angry.” I resisted the urge to reach up and touch my cheek.

“I’ll do my best to keep anyone from bothering you.”

“I appreciate that,” I said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Everyone but Tanner, that is.”

Before I could object, James turned on his heels and walked away.

He hadn’t teased me about a boy since Dwayne. He hadn’t had the chance. I shook my head and shut the door. After setting the food on the dresser, I went back to my phone. A deep breath steadied my nerves, and I swiped it to life.

More than a dozen unread emails greeted me, along with various other notifications that I ignored. My eyes locked onto the text message icon and the number ten next to it.

They’re not from him.

How could they be? He was downstairs eating.

Still, my finger pressed the screen and my messages popped up.

Eight were from other people. The last two had Tanner's name attached to them.

The fluttering from my stomach beat its way into my throat, and I swallowed hard.

What if he said he didn't want to be associated with me anymore? What if he said what happened last night didn't mean anything? Just a moment of weakness? What if the accusations against him had left a bad taste in his mouth and he wanted to keep his distance from now on?

My heart thundered in my chest, and I shook my head. "Come on, girl, you've got this." Before I changed my mind, I hit the screen.

Tanner: You and Gabriella looked like you had fun today.

He sent a text about *her*? Was that worse than him saying he wanted nothing to do with me? I quickly read the next one in case I needed to pull the Band-aid off in one fell swoop.

Tanner: I spent all day fighting the urge to look at you.

Now my heart stuttered and stopped. My hand flew to my chest, and I gulped down air. I could barely type back.

Leona: Same.

Had he been waiting for my reply? Wondering if I felt as he did? Was he holding his breath right now?

I was. I stumbled to the chair and sat, clutching my phone and watching the bouncing dots.

Tanner: I told everyone I had to take a shower before I ate. I couldn't wait another minute to talk to you.

A legit sigh escaped.

Leona: Same again. Not about the shower.

He sent a smiley face.

My insides melted into a pile of goo. I quickly typed.

Leona: How was your day?

Tanner: Good. Except having to ignore you. I messed up a bunch of times because my eyes kept trying to drift to you. Lyle noticed.

Leona: I'm not surprised.

Lyle noticed everything. He'd been the first to see past Leona to Rosemary, even if he had no idea what he'd glimpsed.

Tanner: What's with the mask? Did you get a bruise from last night? Did I headbutt you?

I laughed.

Leona: No, I really am feeling a little sick.

Tanner: You should have told me before I kissed you!

Thinking about a thing and talking about it were completely different. Me remembering the kiss brought a blush to my cheeks. Him mentioning it so casually set all of my skin on fire.

A flurry of kissing emojis followed.

Tanner: No regrets.

I took a deep breath and typed back.

Leona: The only regret I have is that the booth interrupted us.

An evil grin spread my lips as I sent it. Was I hoping to make him squirm a bit? Why yes, I was.

He sent a gif of a man shaking his fist. Then one of a little boy sighing like he'd just missed Christmas.

Tanner: I supposed we shouldn't try for an encore.

I blinked and read it again and again, letting the implication sink in. Then I thought of the perfect response.

Leona: Yet.

Tanner: Promise?

Leona: Do you promise?

Tanner: A thousand times.

I sighed and brought the phone to my chest. Now I understood why those girls in regency romances swooned over the letters they received from their beloved men.

My phone buzzed, and I looked at it.

Tanner: Eddie is here to escort me back to dinner. Text later?

Leona: Only if you want to.

Tanner: There's nothing I want more.

Tanner: Except to kiss you.

I sent a set of emoji lips back to him, then put a pillow over my face and squealed like a little girl.

Chapter 22

-Tanner-

It had been four days since the breakdown of the booth, and every night since then, I'd gotten less and less sleep because I couldn't stop texting Leona.

After she went to her room, it was like she shed her polished exterior and let her inner little girl out.

We'd talked about a hundred things. She'd made me laugh, roll my eyes, agree to disagree, and even cry. Although I'd never admit that one, but what else should happen when we recounted that first ten minutes of the movie *Up*? If that didn't make a person tear up, they were likely a serial killer.

Eddie had taken to throwing a blanket over his head so the light from my phone didn't keep him awake. He kept saying how much I owed him, and he probably wasn't wrong.

It was Leona's turn in the gym, so I donned headphones and decided to go for a run.

I'd done enough running in my volleyball days to last a lifetime, but there was something about my feet pounding on a dirt trail that cleared my head in a way nothing else could. Except maybe actually playing volleyball.

Light from the soon-to-rise sun turned the eastern horizon of trees and hills into the perfect silhouette. A sort of twilight hung over the woods outside the lodge. I took a deep breath and threw my arms out wide to stretch my chest. The scent of soil and vegetation filled my nostrils, and I held it for a moment before exhaling. My eyes fell to the nearby path, and I jogged to it and started my journey. I hadn't been in the mountains like this since Tyler's bachelor party, and it had been at least five years before that when I'd been camping last.

Leona and I had talked about camping the night before.

I shook my head. I'd vowed to keep her out of my mind for at least five minutes and had hoped the distraction of the outdoors would help.

Wrong.

Instead, my thoughts returned to our conversation.

Tanner: When was the last time you went camping?

Leona: I've never been camping.

Tanner: Seriously?

Leona: Seriously. We went to a lodge once when I was young, but my mom and nanny hated dirt and wouldn't let me go out and play.

Tanner: That's sad.

Leona: I snuck out, ended up covered in mud, and got grounded for a week. It was worth it. We never went into the mountains again.

Leona: What about you?

Tanner: One of my best friends had his bachelor party in Colorado last summer. We were at this bed and breakfast in some forest. It was cool.

Leona: What about when you were a kid?

Tanner: We went twice, but my parents and my sister stayed in the lodge, and my brothers and I got the tent. It was fun.

The trail turned and went up a hill. I followed, pumping my legs hard to get to the top.

I reminisced about my childhood camping trip as I ran. I'd been ten and had loved every minute of it. It was one of the only experiences I'd had with my brothers that had been enjoyable. We'd run around the woods, jumped in the creek, climbed trees, and ended up with more scrapes than we knew what to do with.

Not long after that my mom had died, things with my dad's business had gone awry, and we hadn't done anything like that as a family again.

I reached the top of the hill and the trail leveled out. I could see several miles of green trees and wilderness in each direction. I took the right fork and headed for a nearby creek. Two nights ago, Leona had opened up about her childhood.

Leona: I hated being a kid.

Tanner: Why?

Leona: My dad died when I was young, and my mom used work to cope with it. I barely saw her. She hired the meanest nanny in the world and that's who I spent most of my time with.

Tanner: How do you know she was the meanest nanny in the world?

Leona: I couldn't watch television and I wasn't allowed to have toys.

Tanner: Yikes.

Leona: I had a window of forty minutes when my nanny would sit down for tea in the afternoon and completely ignore me. She thought I was studying, but I used to sneak into my dad's old office and watch *Kim Possible*.

Tanner: You rebel!

Leona: Right?

Now I knew why she'd reacted to talk about *Kim Possible* at the conference. I'd thought I'd had a rough time growing up.

Each time we texted, I peeled a tiny bit of Leona's exterior away. Sometimes she'd relax for a whole string of texts, and other times she'd be the stiff Leona the world knew. I longed to explore every aspect of Leona until I found the woman who lay beneath it all.

I gritted my teeth and focused on running down the slope to the stream of water that trickled in the small valley between hills. When I got to it, I leapt over and started up the other side.

The night before we'd started a friendly competition over our traumatized childhoods. We started with our worst Christmas memories.

Tanner: The year my dad didn't have money and he bought presents with a stolen credit card. The police came to our house Christmas morning. You?

Leona: Not sure I can beat that. I spent most Christmas mornings alone without presents. I got to eat pancakes instead of oatmeal, so that was a thing.

I had to admit, that was sad. At least I'd had my family, even if they were jerks. Next up, we tackled parents.

Leona: I already told you about mine. Dad died when I was six and Mom ignored me after that. I haven't spoken to her in five years and have no plans to do so.

Tanner: My mom died when I was ten. A few months after that, my dad was arrested for scamming old people. We'd been living like kings

in San Francisco since I'd been born. The government took all of his money but didn't put him in jail. Instead, he got to stay out to take care of us. We then lived as lower middle class until I was headed off to college.

I'd won that volley, though not by much. I hadn't explained that my dad had founded a barely legal company and had eventually made all of his money back and then some. He still borderline took advantage of the elderly, which is why I refused to accept a single penny from him.

Our next subject was the worst things we'd had to eat.

Leona: Oysters when I was seven. I still gag if I see them.

Tanner: Generic SpaghettiOs. One can per kid a day for a month. I tend to get sick if I smell them.

Leona: I've never had them.

Tanner: You're not missing anything.

After too many bad memories, we'd gone on to fun stuff. Like her favorite childhood memory being watching *Kim Possible* and mine being the last Christmas with my mom. We laughed about our first kisses and told stories of exes from college.

I found myself smiling as I recounted our texting conversations.

While I'd take any communication I could with Leona, what I really wanted was to talk to her. To look into her eyes as she shared a story, to take her hand, to watch as she shed her angry exterior and showed me the playful side that lay beneath.

Thanks to the booth debacle, that couldn't happen here. At the end of this project, I'd go one way and she'd go another and what then?

My lungs tightened, but not because I needed oxygen.

I hadn't asked Leona about our future, and she hadn't mentioned it. Was it too much to hope that we could continue to get to know one another after this? Or would the drive to the airport be our final farewell?

My phone beeped, indicating that I'd jogged for thirty minutes. I took the next trail, which would lead me back, and steeled myself for another day of ignoring Leona and pretending I was okay with it.

In a moment of longing, I stopped and took a selfie of me in front of the emerging sunrise. I sent it to Leona and then slowly made my way to the lodge.

A few hours later, I once again stood in a recording booth with Lyle acting as my director. He'd been working what amounted to two shifts a day, and I didn't envy the bags under his eyes or the large coffee in front of him.

"Twice more," Lyle said in a cheery voice that I knew had to be forced.

"You got it," I replied in an equally cheery voice.

It had taken me almost thirty minutes to settle into my role, which had put us behind. Now that I'd mostly pushed Leona from my mind, we were catching up.

Lyle had positioned Leona so I couldn't see her from the booth, which I appreciated. There was no way it was a coincidence, and I thought I might actually thank Lyle when this was all over.

"We've got fifteen minutes," Lyle said when I'd finished. "Do you think we can get through this?"

I surveyed the slides. "Let's do this thing."

We worked seamlessly and finished our set with a minute to spare. The cold blast that hit me when I emerged seemed to freeze the sweat on my skin and I shivered.

Lyle moved to intercept me. He always did a quick review of the recording session, so it wasn't surprising. "Everything okay? You were pretty distracted when we started."

I nailed my eyes to his so I wouldn't watch for Leona walking toward the stairs. "Not sleeping well."

Lyle raised an eyebrow and spoke in a low voice. “Leona looks a little tired too.”

“Does she?” I poured innocence into the words.

“She does. I know you’re staying away from her, which must be hard, but I really appreciate it.”

He certainly suspected us of something. “Sure.” I shrugged.

He glanced over his shoulder, and my eyes followed as Leona walked by.

My breath threatened to catch in my throat, but I forced it out. Each time I saw her, she looked more beautiful. Not because she was wearing a fashionable blouse and slacks, but because I could see past the slightly pursed lips and the guarded eyes to the woman who had been texting me about her most embarrassing childhood experiences the night before. She’d ditched the medical mask the day before, and I had a difficult time not staring at her lips.

I didn’t avert my gaze before Lyle looked back at me. “Oh man, you’ve got it bad.”

“Shut up.” There was no use arguing. I could only imagine the love-struck look on my face.

Lyle slapped me on the shoulder. “Just a few more weeks.”

I grunted and now that there were plenty of people between me and Leona, I headed for the stairs. When my foot stepped on the first one, I heard a familiar voice.

“Hello there, I’m here to visit Tanner.”

An invisible force welded me in place. I’d know that fake happiness anywhere. I’d only been listening to it for the past fifteen years. His face swam in my vision, similar to my own, but longer. His smile plastered in place even for me. His back-slapping hug that showed everyone else that he was the best dad ever.

How had he found me?

Lyle moved around me. “Who’s that?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t move.

Why was my dad here?

What day was it? Thursday? Friday? I’d lost track.

“Tell Tanner his old man is here to celebrate.”

I groaned and let my chin fall to my chest. It must be Saturday. FRAB day.

Lyle stopped a few steps up and looked back. “Your dad?”

“Seems like it,” I grumbled. I could only imagine the strings he’d pulled to figure out where I was. Knowing him, he’d called the CEO of MaxMart himself, schmoozed the guy up and down, and then told him he wanted to pay the project a visit for motivational purposes.

If I had to guess, I’d bet he’d brought the most expensive dinner he could pick up on the way from the airport, lavish gifts for everyone here, and a special surprise for me that probably included a new watch or maybe a car.

All things I would politely refuse.

“Everything okay?” Lyle asked.

I realized I was scowling and smoothed my expression. There was only one way to deal with a visit from my dad and that was to get through it as quickly as possible. Lifting my foot took a Herculean effort, but I managed it once. Twice. Enough times to get to the top of the stairs.

The entire crew had gathered around the entry hall where, as I’d predicted, my dad stood with a literal mound of boxes and bags, all professionally wrapped.

Leona, who knew just enough about the relationship with my dad, caught my eye while everyone else was moving toward the man like bugs to a light in the dark. She cocked an eyebrow. I imagined her asking, “What’s up?”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. I had no idea how he'd gotten here and wanted nothing to do with it.

She pressed her lips together, and I could have sworn her face transformed farther into Leona than it had been a moment before. She held up a finger, indicating that I should stay where I was.

Fine with me. I moved to the wall and leaned against it with one shoulder.

Like the producer she was, Leona strode through the crowd to my dad.

He stood half a head taller than her—I'd gotten my height from both parents—and wore a casual, but insanely expensive, blazer over a cream shirt and dark pants. Shoes were his thing, and I noticed the custom-made sneakers on his feet.

That was new.

Leona took all of this in as she held out her hand. "We weren't expecting anyone today."

My dad's eyes traveled the path of Leona's figure before he took her hand. "Robert Anderson sent me. He thought you guys might need a little pick-me-up."

Leona's eyebrow raised a notch. "Did he?"

"He did."

Watching the two of them was like observing an unstoppable force push against an immovable object. Leona didn't take nonsense from anyone, but crap was all my dad knew how to dish out.

My dad let go of Leona's hand and pulled his phone from his pocket. "I have a voice message right here."

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to my dad to go the extra mile when it came to impressing people. He held up his phone and hit a play button.

"Hi everyone, this is Robert Anderson, CEO of MaxMart. Mr. Harris came to me and asked if he could help with this

project. His son, Tanner, is there, and since Tanner had to miss an important family celebration to be here, his father thought he could bring the party to you.”

“I hate my life,” I said under my breath.

The message continued. “He’ll only be there for a few hours, but he wanted to bring some respite from the grueling schedule I know you’re keeping. Please enjoy the time off.”

I stopped listening after that and glared at my dad.

He must have felt my animosity because his gaze found mine. A slow grin spread his lips, and when he lowered his phone, he pointed. “There he is.”

Everyone turned to look.

“I really hate my life,” I muttered again.

Chapter 23

-Leona-

“Son!” Tanner’s dad threw his arms out and walked straight at his son.

Tanner tensed and pushed away from the wall. Lyle caught my eye and gave me a questioning look. I shook my head. I didn’t know any more than he did.

The familial resemblance between Tanner and his father was unmistakable. They both had the same wide nose, the same wide shoulders, and the same gait as they walked. Mr. Harris was an attractive man. Despite the garish sneakers he wore with what was otherwise a classy outfit.

I couldn’t help Tanner with this, so I took a moment to bring my phone to life and send a quick text to Eric Tyler, the VP of MaxMart.

Leona: Did your CEO send Mr. Harris?

Mr. Tyler replied immediately.

VP: Yes. Humor him. He’s an investor.

I gritted my teeth. We didn’t work directly for MaxMart. I didn’t care who invested in the parent company, but the man was here now, and from the look on Tanner’s face, he was prepared to weather the storm. However, he wasn’t going to be happy about it.

Not that I could blame him. When I’d been young, my mother had had a habit of crashing my activities like this. Come in strong, bring gifts, lay the compliments on thick, then get out fast so it seemed like she’d sacrificed time out of her busy schedule to be there.

Mr. Harris would likely follow the same pattern, except he didn't look like he wanted to leave anytime soon. In fact, as he gave his son a back-slapping hug, he glanced around as if assessing the place.

I sent Mr. Tyler one last text.

Leona: How long is he here?

VP: 2 hours.

It wouldn't ruin the entire evening, but it would likely ruin Tanner's night.

"You look good," Mr. Harris said to Tanner as he held him at arm's length.

"You too," Tanner said in the most fake tone I'd ever heard him utter.

His dad beamed and threw an arm around him. "Come on, son, we have gifts to hand out."

Tanner held back, but his dad dragged him forward. Tanner spoke in a soft voice that I couldn't hear, but I read his lips and was pretty sure he said, "Dad, what are you doing here?"

Mr. Harris patted his son on the chest right before they got to the main group. "Everyone, you'll find a gift with your name on it. Please take it and open it. I've got your chefs preparing the best meal you'll have while you're here." He checked his watch, which was likely worth more than my mom's car. "It will be ready in thirty minutes. Until then, hang out. Open your gift. I'd like to get to know you all."

I found myself gritting my teeth for Tanner's sake. The poor guy couldn't get away from his dad as the older man pointed out people's box or bag and had Tanner introduce them.

Lyle sidled up to me with his arms folded across his chest. His frown pulled his ginger beard down. "What's this about?"

"Eric Tyler says this guy is an investor and that we need to humor him."

Lyle shook his head. “Wonderful.” His tone was anything but thrilled.

“He’s only here for two hours.” I glanced at my phone. “Six minutes gone.”

“You know, that’s why I like you.” Lyle turned to me.

“Because I hate interruptions and keep track of time?”

He leaned in close. “And because you are willing to throw this guy out if Tanner gives you the go-ahead.”

I blinked and turned to look at Lyle. “Excuse me?”

His grin had to be letting off actual light. “You like him.”

“Mr. Harris?” I deflected.

“The younger one, yes.”

I’d purposely avoided Lyle since the booth incident for this exact reason. “We’re keeping things professional.”

“Under duress,” he said.

I didn’t answer and turned my attention to Tanner and his dad.

They were both handing out boxes. People had piled into the great room to open their gifts. My eyes moved past the ridiculous rose, which was less than a week from our bud goal.

The first gift I saw out of the box was a green leather purse. Then a pair of sneakers, boots, a wallet, jewelry, and more.

“Who is this guy?” Lyle asked under his breath. “Did Tanner tell you he came from money?”

“Not exactly. I do know there’s tension between him and his dad.” Tanner hadn’t mentioned that his dad was rich again.

“I can see that.” Lyle studied me. “Tanner doesn’t live like that, does he?”

“Not that I know of.” Everything I’d heard about Tanner before this project had been that he liked to work for

underdogs. He didn't care about the money a project would make him. Maybe this was why. Maybe he didn't need cash.

"Ms. Ward?"

My head snapped up at my name, and I found Mr. Harris smiling. He lifted a bag in my direction.

Tanner gave me a look that clearly said he was sorry.

"Go on." Lyle gave me a nudge.

I walked to the almost dwindled pile and took the offering. "You shouldn't have," I said to Mr. Harris.

"If I'd known my son was locked up with a beautiful woman like you, I'd have been here earlier."

If Mr. Harris had been in his seventies, I would have laughed at the compliment, but from this man in his late fifties it felt creepy.

Tanner grunted and shot his dad a dirty look. "He's said that to all the women."

"Good to know." I took the bag.

Lyle arrived and distracted Mr. Harris. "I'm Lyle. What do you have for me?"

Mr. Harris beamed and turned his full attention to our director. Which gave Tanner and me a precious few seconds to actually talk.

"Sorry about this," Tanner whispered.

"You don't look thrilled." I spoke quickly.

Tanner cast his father a quick look before he said, "Today is the anniversary of the day my dad became a millionaire for the second time. It's a big celebration weekend, which I was trying to avoid. Sorry he brought it here."

"So he's rich again?" I asked.

"Believe me, if he'd done it honestly, I'd be proud. In reality? Not so much."

Tanner's dad turned back to us, and I walked smoothly away from them. I'd never seen Tanner so thrown off by anything, and the way he spoke of his father's wealth made me want to ask him a hundred questions. It also made me want to hold his hand and drag him away from here.

Since I could do neither of those things, I joined the others and opened my bag. Inside sat a brand-new pair of ankle boots that I knew for a fact were worth several thousand dollars.

"Tanner never told us he was rich," Gabriella said.

Eddie grunted. "He's not."

Gabriella held up a purse worth at least as much as my boots. "You sure about that?"

Mr. Harris' dinner was, in fact, delicious. The best clam chowder I'd ever had, along with flat corn muffins and either lobster or steak. There was a vegan option, but I ignored that. It seemed that Mr. Harris had done his homework and had even avoided any and all food allergies. He'd spoken loudly at first, but after a few minutes, had calmed down and chatted with the people around him. Including Tanner.

Or, I should say, he tried to talk to his son. Tanner only gave terse answers and did his best to steer the conversation somewhere else. I wondered what his dad was trying to say to him.

This more reserved man clashed with the guy who had handed out expensive gifts like Santa Clause. I spend most of dinner trying to figure him out and failing miserably.

After two hours, we'd had dinner and dessert, and a handful of the crew, including Tanner, Lyle, and myself, ended up in the great room. Tanner's dad asked us about producing and voice acting, and Lyle asked him about his business.

"I run a company that helps people invest," he said. "It's a lot of technical mumbo jumbo. Let's just say if you have a

little money and want more, I'm the guy who can help with that."

Tanner's lips pressed into a thin line at the comment. His dad glanced at him, coughed, then changed the subject.

What were the two of them dancing around?

When the two-hour mark hit, I graciously thanked Mr. Harris and ushered him out. He dragged Tanner along, saying he wanted to talk. They stood just outside the front door, which they'd left open.

Did I stay close enough to hear?

Guilty as charged.

"I'm glad we got to spend some time together today," Mr. Harris said.

"Why did you come?" Tanner's words held a hard edge.

"I really wanted you to join us for FRAB this year."

"Why? You know it's not my thing."

Mr. Harris cleared his throat. "Because, things were different this year."

"Different? How much did you spend on those gifts?" I could imagine Tanner waving his hand back toward the lodge.

"It was the only way the CEO of MaxMart would let me come up here, and I wanted to see you. He's a nice guy, but very protective."

A silence so awkward that I felt it from the other side of the door hung in the air.

I bit my lip. Should I pretend I was coming out to say goodbye? Or did Tanner have this under control.

"I do have a gift for you," Mr. Harris said.

"I don't need anything from you," Tanner said.

"I know." His dad sounded tired. Like a mom after a day of watching rambunctious kids. "They're not actually from

me, but from your mother.”

Tanner said nothing.

“She gave them to me, and I want you to have them.”

I desperately wanted to know what it was but bit my lip and forced myself to stay in place.

“Why me?” Tanner asked. “Why not Kyle. He’s married and successful.”

His dad’s voice grew quiet. “I know her death hit you hard. Maybe these will bring some good memories. I won’t leave until you take them.”

Tanner sighed. “Fine. Now go.”

I scrambled back and around a corner right before Tanner stormed inside and up the stairs. I waited until I heard his door slam before I followed. My phone buzzed before I got to my room, and as soon as I was inside, I swiped it to life.

Tanner: Kill me now.

I felt bad for him and decided to lighten the mood.

Leona: No can do. We need you to finish recording first. Priorities!

Tanner: Someone else can do it.

Leona: But I want you to do it.

The pause between my message and his next one made me sweat. Had I been too forward? I breathed a sigh of relief when his text came through.

Tanner: Thanks.

Tanner: I can’t believe he found me.

Leona: Me either.

I hated not being able to hear his voice. Then I had an idea. The last I’d seen Eddie he was still downstairs, which meant Tanner was...

Leona: Are you alone?

Tanner: Yes.

Before I could second-guess the action, I hit the call button. A moment later Tanner’s voice came through my

phone. “Leona?” Surprise filled the word.

“Hi,” I said.

His tone softened. “Hi.”

I imagined him sitting on his bed, looking at the wall but thinking about me. At least that’s what I was doing. “Sorry for calling. I wanted to talk, not text.”

Pause. He took a breath. “I’ve missed hearing your voice.”

“Same.”

“Sorry about my dad showing up.”

I wanted to make light of it, but he was obviously upset. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He sighed, and now I imagined him flopping down on the bed to stare at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

I waited. It only took him a minute to continue. “You know the beginning of the story. My dad made his first fortune by swindling old people out of their life’s savings. No one knew. My mom died and he did some stupid stuff, then the police caught up with him. Instead of going to jail and leaving my siblings and me alone, the government took all of his money and turned us out onto the streets.”

I held my breath, afraid interrupting might stop his flow.

“We spent about ten years in the lower middle class, which for my dad was total humiliation. After I went off to college, my dad figured out how to swindle people again, only this time it’s legal, and today is the anniversary of the day that he was able to buy a new house and an expensive car for each of us kids. He calls it FRAB.”

There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but figured I’d keep the story going. “What does FRAB stand for?”

“Filthy Rich Again, Baby.”

I let out a laugh. “Seriously?”

“He celebrates each year for a whole week. I usually avoid it except for one day. This year, I was hoping to get out of it all together, but he couldn’t let it go. Especially when he saw how many people he could impress.”

I took a moment to think before I spoke. Tanner had only given me the bare bones of his family life. He obviously didn’t want to be a part of them. To my surprise, Tanner continued.

“The real problem is that my dad believes he’s a nice guy. Some people know they’re stupid or rude or arrogant. Not my dad. He sees himself as everybody’s friend.”

I ventured a response. “Sounds complicated.”

“You have no idea.”

“I’m sorry he showed up unexpectedly.” I bit my lip. “I’m sorry he hurt you.” I wasn’t just talking about tonight. Bad parents were something I understood.

“Thanks, Leona.”

The name rolled off his lips and into my brain sending a cold shiver down my spine. A chill seeped from my gut, and I had to remind myself that he only knew Leona.

I needed to tell him about Rosemary. About *me*. But how could I broach that subject? Especially now that we weren’t allowed to spend time together? It’s not like I wanted to do it over text.

Tanner spoke. “The worst part is that he lied to my mom about the money in the first place. Then, the second time around, he lied to us again saying he wasn’t taking advantage of anyone.” I could tell he was gritting his teeth. “Lying is the quickest way to kill a relationship, you know?”

My mouth turned to sand and my tongue disappeared.

I’d been lying to him since day one. How could I tell him about me without pushing him away? Tears threatened to pool in my eyes, but I blinked them back. I had to get my prosthetics off before I cried.

“Leona?”

“Huh?” I managed.

“Crap. Eddie is back. Thanks for calling.”

Then the line went dead.

I continued to stare at the wall. Could I ever tell him? Would he run if I did? Was it selfish to keep the truth from him? What if I wanted a few weeks of this thing between us?

My phone vibrated and I looked at the incoming message.

Tanner: Miss you already.

Kissing lips followed.

I squeezed my eyes shut and decided I was going to need a second helping of Boston cream pie to go with my self-loathing.

Chapter 24

-Tanner-

Leona and I didn't text after our conversation. She'd seemed a little distant, or maybe that had been me. I never reacted well to visits with my dad. Usually, I took a day or two alone or playing volleyball to recover.

It's not that I didn't love the guy, because I did. I also hated him.

And what was with the cufflinks? My mom had given them to him and now he'd gifted them to me? Why? They were simple—flat and gold with the letter H engraved in each one. H for Harris. I'd stared at them for a good ten minutes before slipping them into my bag.

My dad had always had a thing for giving gifts, even after he'd lost his first fortune. We barely had money for food. I'd done all of the cooking and cleaning in our tiny, rented house, and he'd somehow found a way to bring home presents for people's birthdays. Big presents. Things I knew we couldn't afford. I was too chicken to ask him about it then, but when he'd presented a high-end SUV to me on his first FRAB day, I'd walked out of the house and hadn't looked back.

Granted, my humble 2-door car had been packed for college, so it wasn't like I'd stormed away without my stuff. Since then, I'd only set foot in either of his mansions on FRAB weekend, and even then, it was under duress. After the blow-up the year before, I'd vowed never again.

I'd told Leona that FRAB stood for Filthy Rich Again, Baby. My dad used an entirely different "B" word.

I stared at the ceiling as Eddie got ready for bed.

Leona had called me. Her voice had calmed me like nothing else could. Despite my turmoil, I felt grounded.

When my phone rang again, my heart leapt. Was it Leona?

Eddie raised an eyebrow.

I glanced at the screen and found Bryan's number. "It's a friend," I said to Eddie as I answered. "Hey, Bryan."

"Hey, Tanner. How goes the project?"

"On track, actually."

"Good."

An awkward male silence ensued.

I cleared my throat. "You drew the short straw, didn't you?"

"Actually, I volunteered to call today."

"Liar."

I could picture Bryan holding up his hand. "No, really. Josh drew the short straw, as you put it, but Royce wanted to tell him no and call himself. I jumped in and said I'd do it."

My volleyball friends were some of the best men I knew. "Thanks, I guess."

Bryan laughed. "So, did he show up today?"

"How did you know?"

"He was calling around trying to find you."

I sat up. "Did you tell him where I was?"

"Duh. No. None of us did, but he usually gets what he wants."

A growl escaped my throat. "Yes, he does."

"So, uh, are you okay?"

Bryan wasn't the guy who talked about his feelings. "Did that hurt you to say?" I asked.

"What if it did?"

I laughed. "I'll be fine."

"Do I need to drive up there and have a one-on-one game with you?"

"I wish." In truth, the aggressive exercise would do wonders for clearing my mind.

"I'll do it."

"Nah. I already interrupted production once. Thanks though."

"Fine, but never say I didn't offer."

For the first time, I noticed the noise in the background from Bryan's end of the conversation. An announcer's voice echoed words I couldn't make out. "Where are you?"

"Uh, nowhere."

"You're not at home," I said.

"I'm at a bar."

I frowned. "You barely drink."

"I came to watch a game."

I'd never heard of Bryan doing so, but I hardly knew everything about my friends. "What game?"

A new voice, a woman's, came through. "You'll be seated at table three to start with. Once we get through the first round, you'll rotate that way."

First round? Rotate? "Bryan, what are you doing?"

"Nothing. I need to go."

There was only one activity that I could think of that took place in a bar and had you rotating after a round. "Are you speed dating?"

"What? No."

"Bryan..." I used my low dad voice.

"Sorry, bud, gotta go. Glad you're okay."

Before I could quiz him further, he hung up. I looked at my phone. “Huh.”

“So not Leona?” Eddie asked.

“Nope. My friend Bryan.”

“He’s speed dating?”

“Apparently.”

“Why did he call?” Eddie asked.

I jerked my head toward the door. “Because he knew my dad would probably show up today.”

Eddie nodded. “You have nice friends.”

I sighed. “I do.”

Eddie yawned and turned the light off. “Night.”

“Night.”

Sleep came faster than I thought it would, as did my alarm the next morning.

When I walked out my door and looked down on the great room, all I could think of was my dad and his gifts. Several boxes and bags lay discarded next to the couches and chairs.

Then my eyes landed on the holographic rose, and I winced. We were closing in on our bud deadline, or whatever it had been, but after losing a booth we weren’t going to make it. I knew Lyle had tried to fix the damage but had ended up making it worse.

Just one more thing about this project that had gotten away from us.

It was my turn in the gym, but I needed to get out of this building.

I’d take a more difficult trail this morning. That would keep my mind off of both my dad and Leona. As I stepped outside, I put in my earbuds and started my favorite best-of-the-70’s playlist.

The temperature had dropped, and the cool air filled my lungs like a peppermint patty. I breathed it in and started out slow.

The trail took me up a steep path and along the top of a hill. I pushed myself harder than usual in an attempt to purge the bad energy that my dad had left behind.

I wondered about Bryan and his speed dating. Maybe he'd lost a bet with the twins. That wouldn't surprise me. Or maybe he was feeling the same pressure as the rest of us to settle down like Tyler, Royce, and Dakota.

I'd never given much stock to things like that. Would he find someone to date? Or would he walk away with a list of girls that he'd delete after he got out the door?

The path dipped and climbed, and I kept running.

My mind wandered to another couple I knew, and I suddenly realized that I hadn't heard from Rodney and Myrtle since the day they'd gotten home from their cruise.

Leona had distracted me. I made a mental note to get in touch with them after I finished recording tonight.

Leona.

I'd resisted her siren call in my mind for a good twenty minutes. That was a record. Unfortunately, my lungs and legs were burning, and I was forced to slow down or risk rolling an ankle or straining a muscle. I shouldn't have pushed it that hard. Now I would be limping tomorrow and the next day.

Leona would make fun of me for sure.

I continued to reduce my speed until I was at a brisk walk. I'd need to stretch before I slowly jogged back to the lodge. I decided to take the long way so I could cool down my muscles and maybe keep them from turning me into an old man.

The sun had crested the horizon a few minutes before. Long shadows covered the ground around me. *Mr. Blue Sky* played in my ears. I stopped in a patch of light and closed my eyes, soaking in the warmth.

The earbuds made it impossible to hear little sounds, but I didn't have the volume up so high, nor was I singing loudly enough, that I couldn't make out someone calling to me.

Or the crack of a nearby branch.

I glanced around and saw nothing but trees. Still, the hair on the back of my neck rose, and I decided to start moving.

So far, the biggest animal I'd seen was a rabbit. Which is why the huge shadow that darted between trees brought me to a sudden halt.

Chapter 25

-Leona-

I regretted not bringing a jacket as I jogged through the woods, but by the time I got to the place I'd been doing yoga on my days out of the gym, I was warm. Ish.

It was the perfect spot: a clear area with a flat section where I could lay my yoga mat and workout as the sun came up.

I'd never been much of a morning person, but *Outlast* had taught me to get up early. It was the one thing from that horrible experience that I'd carried over into my life.

That and hiding Rosemary from the world.

The other thing I liked about this location was that no one else came out this far. I'd left early this morning because my skin was still recovering from the booth incident, and I didn't have my prosthetics on. I had a mask in my pocket, on the off chance that I met someone when I went back to the lodge, but so far it was just me and a couple of chirping birds off to my right.

We'd shifted our starting time back to seven and worked later into the evening. If it had been too dark outside, I wouldn't have come.

Tanner had actually given me the idea to come here. He'd told me that he'd been jogging along the trails, and I'd decided to follow his example of embracing the great outdoors.

I scowled as I got into downward dog pose. I'd been trying to avoid thinking about Tanner. His words about lying and relationships had haunted me all night. I needed some distance.

Only it wouldn't come. Everything here reminded me of him. I could imagine him jogging down the trail and coming into my clearing with his lips spread in a huge grin.

A grin that would fade once he recognized my clothes but not my face.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to breathe. At one point in my life, I'd made fun of the women who swore by yoga, but the therapist I'd used after the backlash from *Outlast* had suggested I try meditation. Sitting still didn't suit me, especially then, so she'd told me to try doing yoga while meditating.

To my utter dismay, it had worked.

I imagined my hands and feet pressing into the earth beneath them. Grounding myself so nothing could push me over, not even my own traitorous thoughts.

The same therapist had been concerned about my self-loathing and had actually given me the idea for Leona, although I'm sure it wasn't what she had in mind when she said I needed to reinvent myself. But hiding Rosemary away for safe keeping and forming the impenetrable wall that was Leona had kept me from totally imploding. Not only that, it had catapulted my career. A career that I loved. A career that I was going to use to bring something good into the world. Maybe something great.

The reading I'd done of my script had, as Tanner had pointed out, been amateur. The editor I'd sent the script to was correct when she said I needed to find someone who had experience with kids to improve the dialogue.

Before the booth incident, I'd been planning to use my evenings to watch some more cartoons and get a feel for what the editor was talking about. Instead, I'd spent that time either working or texting Tanner.

I barely harbored any guilt about it.

Mostly because Tanner made me feel so good. He made me feel seen and loved. He made me feel like a desirable

woman and not just because I looked good.

Every thought of him made my heart speed up, and I moved into a more difficult position so I could distract myself.

It didn't work.

My mind had come full circle and Tanner's words about lying came to the front of my thoughts like a dog begging for food. They stared me down until I wanted to duck my head.

How could I tell him about me? About Leona? About Rosemary? About everything?

Technically, I'd manipulated people, just like his dad. Although I'd never swindled anyone out of money. That had been my mom's MO.

I wobbled.

Thinking about her was never pleasant. I understood Tanner's reservations about his dad all too well, but I couldn't tell him the whole truth or he might figure out who I was.

Would that be so bad?

I shook my head. I needed to talk to him face-to-face. Maybe rip my nose off dramatically like a super villain revealing their secret identity.

That thought made me snort.

Behind the snort, I heard the clomp, clomp of shoes on dirt.

Someone was running toward me.

Any relaxation I'd gleaned from yoga disappeared as I jumped off my mat grabbed it, and ran for the nearest clump of trees. My heart hammered against my ribs and my hands shook, making rolling up the blue mat almost impossible.

The sun had just barely crested the hills, so the shadows were dark and long. I used that to my advantage and crouched down behind a bush.

The sound of running feet got louder. I curled in on myself and willed whomever it was to go past without stopping.

The man who rounded the corner made my heart skip a few beats.

Tanner.

He wore a long-sleeved shirt and basketball shorts, and he made them look good. Long legs took even longer strides, and his head bopped back and forth to whatever he was listening to. His lips moved, and if I'd been closer, I could have heard him singing.

Who sang while they jogged?

Tanner, that's who.

I licked my lips and clutched the mat to my chest. He was supposed to be in the gym, but here he was.

Was he looking for me? Or was he simply out for a jog? Maybe blowing off steam from his dad's visit? That's what I'd be doing.

This was the first time I'd seen him alone since the booth incident. There was no one else around; I could talk to him. Hold his hand. Kiss those kissable lips.

Only I wasn't Leona, I was Rosemary. If I went out there in my mask, could I resist kissing him?

Tanner slowed and looked around.

Had he seen me?

I instinctively dug my pocket for my mask, but I found it empty.

Tanner walked to where I'd had my mat just moments before and bent down to pluck something off the ground.

Uh-oh.

When he straightened, he had my mask dangling from his fingers. Lucky for me, I used the disposable ones, so there was nothing linking it to me. He shook his head and shoved it into

his pocket. As he did so, he busted out a few dance steps that involved some impressive footwork. He was singing something from the 70s. Before I could completely grasp the lyrics, he resumed his jog.

A trickle of sweat ran down my back as the realization that I didn't have a mask hit me.

I was out here without any way to hide my face. And Tanner was lurking, completely oblivious to the fact that he'd just taken my disguise.

Stupid.

Why had I left my room without my prosthetics on? I was usually so on top of things, but Tanner had thrown me off. In the best way.

I took a deep breath and got to my feet. Tanner had gone around a bend and down a hill. I looked in the direction he had come from. I could take that trail back, but he would likely beat me. I'd found a map of the footpaths around the lodge, and if I remembered right, I could cut through the woods behind me and reach one that would take me directly back in just a few minutes.

Sure, it involved some bush whacking, but I needed to get there before he did. The other girls had started doing a workout in front of the lodge before recording. I needed to get in before they came out. Also, I needed to beat Tanner.

Nature had never been my thing, but I turned and stared through the bushes and trees. Time to blaze a trail.

In just a few feet, I decided I was grateful for Tanner listening to music. A semi would likely make less noise trying to get through the brush. Branches snagged my pants, and I already felt several stickers in my socks. I kept my arms up but couldn't get them out of scratching range.

Still, I was pretty sure I was going the right direction. If I kept moving, I should reach the trail I wanted in fifty yards or so. The Maryland hills kept me from seeing very far, but that also worked to my advantage.

It felt wrong to be running from Tanner, especially since he was always on my mind. However, I wasn't about to spring the whole Leona / Rosemary thing on him in the middle of the forest with more than a week left on this project.

If I did expose my identity, it would clear the air, but it might also make the rest of our stay here insanely awkward. I didn't think he would spill my secret, but who knew what he would do if he felt betrayed?

The way he treated his dad answered that question.

I sighed and ducked under a branch. It snapped and I froze.

The birds had stopped chirping, and I heard the clomp, clomp of Tanner's running feet.

Seriously? How had he gotten this far? I darted behind a tree, putting my yoga mat between me and the bark.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Tanner's voice filled the woods. This time I recognized *Come and Get Your Love* and I wondered how he was hitting those high notes. I would have teased him about this for days if I didn't have to stay hidden. Also, he should be resting that voice, not abusing it.

The path lay a mere twenty feet beyond my position, but I couldn't make it out because of the underbrush between here and there. Tanner jogged by, oblivious to my ragged breathing. I watched him run, appreciating his gait. Did the guy ever not look good? I'd have to find some junior high pictures or something. Maybe he'd had braces on his teeth and limbs too long for his frame.

I leaned so I could keep appreciating him and felt a tickle on my neck.

Not like a stray hair, or Tanner's lips (yes, my mind went there), but more like a finger.

My first thought was that Tanner had found me, but he was just disappearing around a bend.

My second thought was that one of the other women from the project had discovered me lurking in the woods. But why would they stroke my neck?

Both of those went through my mind before I turned my head to see what had actually touched me.

The third thought was in the midst of forming when my eyes beheld a branch close by. A thin, almost clear string dangled from it. At the end of it, I saw a fuzzy brown body the size of a dime that housed eight hairy brown legs.

Involuntary reactions are hardwired into the human brain. Like throwing out your hands to catch yourself when you fell. Seeing a huge spider hanging inches from my face—and knowing it had probably just been on my neck—brought forth primitive instincts.

I yelped, because that was going to help, and jumped away. One hand swatted at the spider—certainly not the wisest action, especially when I hit it.

The yelp became a scream as my palm collided with the little body that felt like a hard hairball.

That thought made me gag even as I backed away.

Or tried to.

My other arm remained wrapped around my yoga mat. I got pulled to a stop because said mat was stuck fast to the tree.

The spider had swung one direction, hit an apex, and started back toward me.

There were days when I couldn't find the keys sitting right in front of me. Today my eyes followed the arachnid like a hawk stalking a mouse. I could practically see the arc it would take as it returned. I had to get away.

Which meant leaving my mat. I somehow surmised it was stuck to the tree via sap.

I gave it one last tug, which did nothing, before I dropped it.

Fight or flight took over, and I embraced the running. A hair brushed my neck, and I swatted it away. Then my bun got caught on a branch, and I had to detangle myself. The loose hair clung to my cheek, and I swiped it away. Why did my face suddenly feel sticky and smell almost sweet?

Sap.

I didn't have time to worry about it. I flew across the trail and back into the woods. I tried to get my body under control, but it was having none of it. That had been a tarantula or something, and it had touched me! Violated the treaty I had with all insects. If I didn't see them, I didn't kill them. If they touched me, their death would be by fire.

I was going to have to burn this place to the ground.

More branches snapped as I plowed my way down a hill. I barely felt the scratches on my arms or the tears in my yoga pants.

When I got to the bottom of the slope, I found a small stream. The four feet to either side of it consisted of thick mud. Mud that I put my foot in before I realized my mistake.

The ground shifted. My foot slipped. My balance faltered, and not for the first time since I got to Maryland, I found myself falling.

In proper reaction, my hands flew out to catch me. My face didn't go into the mud, but it did land in one of the millions of bushes. Afraid there was another spider nearby, I jumped to my feet, but the bush came with me. At least parts of it.

I tugged the leaves away with mud-encrusted fingers, but they only stuck to my hands as well as my face.

Great, now I had sap and mud everywhere and the sap had greenery attached to it. I stumbled up the hill and to the path. Maybe I could make a run for it.

Tanner's singing voice floated through the air coming at me from the right. I turned left and heard giggling from that

direction.

Gabriella.

I glanced back and forth, eyed the hill I'd just come up, remembered that moment from *Mrs. Doubtfire* when Robin Williams stuck his face in a pie, and ran back down.

Chapter 26

-Tanner-

I stopped and looked at where I'd seen yet another silhouette, slinking away into the woods. A cursory inspection revealed nothing out of the ordinary. However, something felt off. The shadows were too deep for me to make out much of anything. The real question was, did I want to find out what it had been?

Was this area famous for Bigfoot sightings?

I shook my head. The creature hadn't been that big.

Baby Bigfoot, maybe?

A nearby tree shifted.

I took out my earbuds, expecting to hear something rustling in the underbrush.

Instead, I heard at least three women approaching. I recognized Gabriella's laugh and glanced around. I really didn't want them to see me out here. Both Leona and Lyle claimed to have talked them down from the whole assault thing, but I still got plenty of side-eye glares and furrowed brows. After dealing with my dad the night before, the last thing I wanted was a run-in with the other ladies from the project.

Besides, there was a small possibility that Leona was with them. If she was, I'd look like a stalker, even if I was on my way back to the lodge.

My eyes drifted to where I'd seen the shadow.

What if it wasn't an animal, but a person? Someone else after the girls?

I heaved a sigh and decided I couldn't leave them there alone, so just in case, I darted into the trees on the other side of the path and hid. The scent of sap and dirt filled my nose, and I took care not to touch any bark.

The pack of women arrived mere moments later, laughing and talking.

"I've heard there's a Bigfoot around here," one of them said.

"Bigfoot isn't real," another replied.

"Why don't we find out?"

More laughing.

To my chagrin, they stopped at a nearby wide spot along the path.

"I think we go this way."

"I think we stop here. At least that's what Lyle told me."

Had Lyle set them up? Was he the one I'd seen? I wouldn't put it past him.

"You sure?"

I risked a peek around my cover and found four women, including Gabriella and Brandi, standing in a loose circle. They each had their phones out, and I had to assume they were ready to record.

"This is it," Brandi said. "Lyle sent me coordinates."

"What do we do?" one of the other girls asked.

"We spread out, see if we can find footprints or something. Remember our goal."

I rolled my eyes. Seriously, these women were on a hunt for a mythical creature at six in the morning? Why not do it at night?

Unfortunately, spreading out included coming in my direction. I shimmied around the tree, keeping it between

myself and Gabriella. I didn't dare look at her directly but watched her feet when I could and did my best to remain quiet.

Each step she took ratcheted up my heartrate. Quiet breathing became more and more difficult. It's not that I was afraid of them but being caught lurking wouldn't go well.

Brandi, who had followed the path the shadow had taken down the slope, spoke. "It looks like something just came through here."

Gabriella stopped and huffed. "Like you can tell."

"No, really, there are broken branches and fresh prints."

"Bigfoot prints?" Gabriella turned and started toward Brandi. The other two followed, laughing.

This was my chance to get away. I used their conversation to mask my passage and slunk through the trees, staying a few feet from the trail. If I could get around the next bend, I could start jogging and they'd never know I was there.

"Wait, I see something over there!"

I stopped in my tracks, glad I'd just crouched behind a bush.

"Where?"

"There."

I couldn't see where they were pointing, but I had to assume it was right at me.

This was going to be so bad. They'd eat me alive, and Leona would have no choice but to fire me and then I'd probably never see her again.

When I'd found that mask, a part of me had hoped I'd find her out here, but no luck.

Footsteps sounded past my ragged breathing, but I couldn't tell if they were getting closer to me or not.

"Are you sure you saw something?" Brandi asked.

"Right there!" another woman shrieked.

A bead of sweat trickled down my back.

“I didn’t see anything.”

The footsteps stopped.

Brandi spoke. “Let’s follow this trail, Gabriella. We can go that way after.”

“Fine.” I could hear the eye roll in Gabriella’s voice.

I counted to ten before peering through a gap in the branches.

The entire group was headed down the slope where I’d seen the shadow.

Warring ideas battled it out in my mind. If I didn’t tell them there was something down there, and it was an assailant of some sort, or Lyle lying in wait to scare them, I’d be responsible if anyone got hurt. On the other hand, if I revealed myself, they’d likely turn on me.

Neither option felt particularly inviting.

Then a third option presented itself. I could get back down the path and then jog toward them. They’d see me, make a fuss, but wouldn’t have any reason to accuse me of anything. The noise should scare whoever was down there away.

Not that anyone sane would mess with four women, but crazy people were, by default, not sane.

There was better cover across the path. I waited until the last woman walked down the hill then darted to the other side.

No screams followed, so I slipped behind yet another tree—thank goodness for Maryland foliage—and breathed a sigh of relief.

The exhale halted when I heard the snap of a twig to my right.

The sun had risen higher in the sky but still cast nothing but a few rays of light down between hills. For the first time, I noticed a lack of birds chirping and insects buzzing.

An image of a man-ape hybrid filled my brain, but I dismissed it. This wasn't a sasquatch; it was probably a person.

If not Lyle, then someone nefarious.

A wild pig would have charged by now, right?

The shadow was too small to be a moose, thank goodness. I'd had enough of those creatures in Colorado during Tyler's bachelor party.

No, it was something else.

Interestingly enough, whatever, or whoever, it was, was now moving away from the group.

Maybe this guy was smart enough to run from the four women. Still, I didn't like the thought of someone hiding out here until they caught one of us alone.

A bush rustled. A relatively loud thump sounded, followed by a muttered curse.

I should have called for backup, but by the time anyone got here this guy would be gone. I could simply chase him away but catching him and making sure he got arrested would be better.

Too bad I didn't have a Taser.

I briefly wondered if any of the women did, then discarded that idea, because if I approached, they might use it on me.

Confronting a possibly armed assailant wasn't the brightest thing to do, so I decided to follow him, track our location, then give the police a call, and tell everyone in the lodge not to go out alone until they caught him.

My mind turned to what my friends would do. Bryan would be on my side. The twins would already be chasing the guy, begging to see his knife, and asking if they could practice throwing it. Dakota was from Montana; he'd probably have a gun or something. Royce would have already sent for the national guard, or the twins—whichever was closer—and he'd

have a plan for capturing the man without anyone else getting injured. Eduardo would likely call the guy out for a fight.

I decided to stick with my plan. The guy made a lot of noise for someone trying to sneak, which was nice for me because it made him easier to follow. He seemed to be on the same path I'd planned to use. One that led back to the lodge.

Maybe it was Lyle and he'd understandably lost his nerve.

Before I decided what to do, I heard a high-pitched scream.

Images of a wild man attacking the four women filled my mind, and I ran in a b-line toward them.

The screaming continued. The alternating shadows and blinding sun made it difficult to see, but I managed to crash through the bushes in a few seconds before a fleeing figure ran right into me.

He bounced off—he wasn't very tall and weighed hardly anything—and when he looked up a dark face greeted mine.

A breeze moved the branches above us, and a ray of sunlight hit the guy in the eyes.

Eyes that I knew. Before I could figure out where I'd seen them before, the guy jumped back and screamed.

His face looked scarred. Almost melted. His bright eyes were wide, making him look crazy. Leaves stuck to his hair, cheeks, and hands.

Tales of a disfigured man living in the woods who trapped people to eat them came back to me, and I screamed back.

I'm not proud of it, but there it is. I had good reflexes, and my fist was ready to fly, but something about the guy's voice got through my panic, and I hesitated long enough to figure out whether this guy screamed like a girl, or this was a girl.

A woman.

I cut my panic off and took a step back, but the rest of the women plowed through the woods.

They were also screaming, which masked my girly cry of alarm as they attacked.

Only they weren't going after me, they were going after the figure with the melted face.

For a moment, I thought about letting the girls have them. They'd done a number on me and hadn't been trying. They might learn from this experience.

Then the person shouted in a voice I knew all too well.

“Guys, stop!”

Chapter 27

-Leona-

First Brandi had spotted me and had brought the rest of the women with her. I'd been trying to get away without them seeing me, but obviously that hadn't worked.

Brandi had been the first to scream, her cry echoing through the woods like an alarm at four in the morning. I could have tried to explain, but then I'd seen a guy coming from the other direction. So I'd bolted.

Then, as if Fate had it in for us, I'd literally run into Tanner. There was a Leona face print in mud on his shirt to prove it.

I must look a mess, because Tanner's eyes went so wide, I could see white all the way around his irises before he jumped back and screamed like a little girl.

That screaming had been drown out by Brandi and company as they came toward us. It looked like they were after Tanner, but then they turned on me.

"There he is!" Gabrielle yelled.

Nope this was not happening, so I put out one hand toward them and one toward Tanner and said, "Guys, stop!"

Everyone froze. Mouths hung agape and eyes glittered with fear and excitement.

Brandi cocked her head to the side. "Leona?"

Then one of the other girls let out a bloodcurdling cry of terror. "Bigfoot!" She pointed.

We all turned, and I saw another person running at us. He was crouched over and looked like he was about to barrel into

Brandi.

Tanner moved to intercept the man, but Brandi and Gabriella beat him to it.

As one, they ran at the guy, yelling obscenities. Before anyone could react, they were pushing him down the hill toward the stream.

“Wait!” a familiar voice cried.

“Is that Lyle?” Tanner asked.

“Ladies, stop!” Lyle pleaded right before a splash sounded.

I made the mistake of looking at Tanner and found him watching me with wary eyes.

Good thing for the mud covering my entire face or my skin would be glowing with the blush that I felt rising up my neck.

“Leona?”

I grinned and felt the now drying mud crack. “That’s me.”

His eyes took me in, and he shook his head. “What are you doing here?”

Me? I’d been trying to do some yoga. Maybe relax a bit. Now I was standing next to the man I was falling for with mud on my face so he didn’t see the real me. “Uh, natural mud mask.” I pointed. “It’s great for the skin.”

Which was a lie. The itching had begun seconds after I’d slapped the substance on.

“I see,” he said slowly.

I wasn’t about to let him make me feel dumb. “What are you doing out here? Isn’t this your day in the gym?”

Tanner shrugged. “I needed to get some fresh air after my dad last night.”

“I get that,” I said.

It felt oddly liberating talking to Tanner without my Leona prosthetics on. Even if my face was covered with something else, it felt different.

Before either of us could say more, the quartet of women came back up the hill, dragging a soaking wet Lyle and laughing.

“That’s what you get for sending us out here on a wild goose chase,” Brandi said.

“Did you really think we were going to fall for your Bigfoot hints?” Gabriella asked.

“You got me,” Lyle laughed.

I casually stepped away from Tanner and thought about leaving, but Gabriella spoke before I could. “Leona?”

I spun and gave her a little wave. “Just out for a morning walk.”

Gabriella’s dark eyes darted to Tanner and then back to me.

There had been enough accusations thrown around, so I cut these off before they could start. “I was coming from that way.” I pointed. “And I heard you guys in the bushes. When I went to investigate, I ran into him.”

Tanner pointed the other direction. “I was jogging along this trail and heard you.” He kept his voice low and comforting. “I thought I saw someone else in the woods, so I decided to check on you. Make sure there wasn’t anyone nefarious around.”

“Nefarious?” Brandi folded her arms over her chest.

“Bad,” I said.

Lyle shook his arms and sent water everywhere. “You probably saw me.”

“You’re a jerk.” Brandi poked him in the shoulder. “How does your wife put up with you?”

“She knew what she was getting into.”

One of the other women walked toward me. I felt riveted to the spot, afraid she could see the shape of my real face. She stopped a few feet away and narrowed her eyes. “Mud mask? Like, real mud?”

“Is that how you keep your skin looking so good?” the other asked.

“I’m trying something new,” I said. “I read it on the internet,” I quickly added.

Brandi’s eyebrows went up. “Oh yeah?” She came over, looped her hand through the crook of my elbow, and dragged me away from Tanner. “Show me.”

I tried to go throughout my day like normal, but people had heard about what happened and everyone had questions. Gabrielle and Brandi were more than happy to tell everyone about their plan to thwart Lyle’s prank, and they often came over to me to do so, as if having me corroborate their story would lend it more credence.

It had been years since I’d had so much positive attention, and I had a difficult time keeping it from going to my head. The buzz of acceptance danced around me like a swarm of bees. I wanted to let it in but knew that Leona would never do so.

Rosemary would.

Tanner dutifully ignored me during breaks, but I felt his eyes on me more than once while I was working.

With one booth down, we were pushing the voice actors harder than ever. They were taking it in stride and the two who weren’t recording were in the room, awaiting their turn. Tanner sat with a booth between me and him, but I knew he was there. I could feel him like I could feel the heat from sunlight on my skin.

After a long day, I took off my headphones and stood, ready to grab dinner and retreat to my room.

The mud hadn't left a rash, but I could tell the skin under my fake nose and cheeks was starting to chafe.

"Leona?"

I blinked and found Gabriella and Brandi standing next to me. How had I missed their approach? I must be more tired than I thought. "Yes?" I asked in a cool—not cold—voice.

Gabriella jerked her head toward the booths. "The guys are all recording tonight. Brandi and I are going to watch that reality model show, and since you're off too, we were wondering if you wanted to join us?"

Brandi chimed in. "We can grab snacks and hang out in our room. You know, girl time. Just for an hour or so."

Girl time? I wasn't sure I'd ever been asked to participate in something like this before.

No, I had to take that back, the ladies on *Outlast* had hung out a few times, but that had been onscreen, and since I'd been playing the bad girl, I was invited but hadn't actually been welcome.

Brandi's bright face darkened as the space between her question and my answer grew wider.

I shouldn't. I had work to do; I wanted to take off my prosthetics. I...did I actually want me time?

If the truth be told, I wanted to hang with Tanner. I'd likely spend most of the night pining over him. We tended to wait to text until after ten.

"Or not," Brandi said.

She looked genuinely upset, so I held up a hand. "I have some work I have to do, but I should be finished by eight. Will that work?"

Brandi's expression lit up. "Sure. It's streaming so we can watch it anytime."

Gabriella nodded. “We’ll grab some snacks and meet you in our room when you’re done?”

At that moment, Tanner strode behind us. I automatically tracked the movement, and my gaze was drawn to his. He smirked and raised an eyebrow.

Years of being Leona kept my expression neutral. I’d send him a smiley face emoji with its tongue out later. I spoke to the girls. “Sounds good.” Rosemary wanted to jump up and down and squeal, but Leona nodded. “Thanks for the invitation.”

The two women grinned at one another then walked away.

Between Tanner, mud masks, and a falling booth my heart had had quite the workout during this project. It was once again racing, but this time in excitement at being included.

At eight, I stood outside Gabriella and Brandi’s door, feeling awkward. I’d donned yoga pants and a t-shirt and had brought a dark chocolate bar I’d been saving for a bad day.

A tiny voice in my head told me to run. They didn’t want to be my friend; they were going to use me for something or humiliate me. No matter how much I told myself I was stupid to be harboring such thoughts, they persisted. They might be correct, but I didn’t think so. These two wouldn’t be dumb enough to mess with Leona while she was in charge of their paycheck.

Maybe they wanted to have an intervention because I’d been standing too close to Tanner this morning. I could handle that. Or maybe they just wanted to do some girlie bonding. That thought sent a thrill through me and gave me the courage to knock.

“Come in!” Brandi yelled.

I swallowed and wrapped my fingers around the cool, metal knob. Before I could talk myself out of it, I twisted and pushed the door open.

Movies always portrayed girl time with a lot of beauty products and food. The room I walked into fit the bill.

Two twin beds lay against opposing walls, leaving a lot of space in the center of the room. The western style decorations matched those in the rest of the lodge, as did the small couch and low table.

Gabriella stood next to the television hanging on the wall, running a cord from her laptop to it. Brandi put something down on the table then turned and gave me a smile. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Have a seat,” Brandi gestured toward the couch.

There wasn’t room for all of us on there, and the look on my face must have said as much.

“Don’t worry.” Brandi pointed at Gabriella. “She likes to lay on the floor and do Pilates during shows. Because she’s a weirdo.”

I didn’t want to admit that I often did the same thing. It saved time.

Gabriella shrugged. “We actually found something better to watch than the model show.”

I sat. “Oh?” Small talk wasn’t Leona’s strong suit.

Gabriella’s dark eyes glittered. “The best of *Outlast*.”

There were those moments in the movies when the speaker’s voice slowed down and twisted, the world blurred, and darkness crept onto the edges of the screen.

That happened to me right then and there. I stared at Gabriella’s lips, hoping I’d heard wrong.

I hadn’t.

The television on the wall came to life and to my utter horror the screen filled with a hodgepodge of characters from the iconic show. Including me.

A blast of frost shot through me, and my heart jumped to my throat.

Did they know?

I glanced at Gabriella, expecting her to be staring at me accusingly. Instead, she grabbed a rolled-up yoga mat from the corner.

Brandi sat down next to me, the couch bouncing under her. “I love this show.”

Did they know? I glanced at Brandi, but she was considering her choices of crackers and cheese or candy from a small platter.

They don't know.

I willed it to be true. If they knew they would have been watching for my reaction to the show, wouldn't they?

“I think the first season is still my favorite,” Gabriella said as she unrolled the mat and laid it on the floor.

“Same.” Brandi decided on crackers and loaded a few with cheese. She looked at me. “What about you?”

I swallowed hard, as if it might help keep my identity a secret. “I—I've seen more of the first season than anything else.”

The music came on, and my feet and hands turned to lead weights. Flashes of the mob of people who had ambushed me filled my mind. My breath caught in my throat, and my lungs refused to reinflate.

Gabriella hit the play button. “Dwayne is super-hot.”

“Duh,” Brandi said. “Rosemary is so good as the bad girl too. They were an awesome couple.”

“But fake,” Gabriella said.

“So?” Brandi waved a cracker at the screen. “Every season is rigged, but that doesn't keep me from watching it.”

“True.”

They were talking about this as if they didn't know Rosemary was sitting right next to them. It had to be a twisted coincidence. I willed my lungs to relax and took a deep breath.

“You okay?” Gabriella frowned.

I nodded. “Yeah, just tired.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be getting up so early,” Brandi said. The playful tone in her voice allowed me to shove Rosemary’s issues aside.

“Says the girl who was out hunting Bigfoot just this morning.”

Brandi laughed. “That was one time.”

Gabriella chuckled as well. The announcer’s voice started, and Gabriella swiped a piece of candy. I added my dark chocolate to the mix.

Of course the announcer began with season one. “When *Outlast* started, the producers swore to the public that, unlike other reality survival shows, that this one wasn’t rigged. The contestants weren’t actors and none of them had been asked to play a certain part.”

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to breathe. How fast I could get out of this room? I was willing to use diarrhea as an excuse to bolt.

The announcer went on. “Then, after Rosemary Bellmore had been voted off the show, and right before the finale aired, Rosemary gave this interview with *TV Tonight*.”

Suddenly my real face filled the screen. My skin burned, and I began to sweat. It felt surreal watching this, watching me make the biggest mistake of my life. They only showed me saying a couple of lines.

“The producers hired me and asked me to play the part of the bad girl. They did that for everyone.”

The announcer returned. “The producers of the show had to come clean after Rosemary’s statement. Although, even she admitted that the episodes weren’t scripted; the show let that play out naturally. Which, ironically, is the defense the producers provided for their claims that the show wasn’t rigged.”

I'd gotten tens of thousands of emails and social media messages after the interview. People approached me on the streets. I eventually lost track of the death threats. Everyone thought I was just as bad in real life as I had been on the show. They thought I was angry about being voted off and needed to get the last word in.

A real bad girl would have ridden that wave. I got more publicity than anyone else on the show and could have been famous.

Instead, I'd gotten surrounded by a mob of angry fans and had ended up with two broken ribs and a broken arm. That's when I'd retreated.

"I think Rosemary got a bad rap," Brandi said.

Brandi's words cut through my haze. I looked at her, again expecting a knowing expression on her face as she caught me in my lie. Instead, she met my gaze and raised her eyebrow. I swallowed. "You do?"

"Sure. She didn't want to be known as a jerk, so she told everyone the truth."

Gabriella snorted. "She was dumb to come out with it."

I agreed.

Another interview popped up on the screen, and I focused my eyes on a spot right below the television.

"It's all fake, you know? They asked me to be the bad girl on the first day. Same with Dwayne. We were just playing parts given to us by the studio."

What had I been thinking? Going against my first big job because of vanity? I knew now that I could have set up a series of publicity stunts showing that I was a nice, compassionate woman who only played a part in the show. Instead, my need to be seen had destroyed my life.

Now my need to *not* be seen was destroying my life.

That thought brought me to Tanner. I needed to tell him. Watching my real face on the screen drilled it into me how I was lying to him.

He deserved better.

I jumped when my phone rang.

Brandi raised her eyebrows.

I retrieved the device and saw the name of the company who had supplied us with the booths. Little did they know that they were my savior. “Sorry,” I said to the girls as I stood. “This is the booth people. I need to answer.”

“Of course,” Brandi said with a smile.

“It might take a while,” I said.

Gabriella, who was working her abs, waved a hand. “It’s all good. Come back when you can.”

Is this what it was like to have friends instead of colleagues? They didn’t mind my work; they invited me to come back but didn’t sound like they’d be mad if I couldn’t.

Now wasn’t the time to ponder any of that, so I stood and swept out into the hall. “Hello?”

“Leona Ward?”

“This is she.”

“Hey, this is Colene from the sound booth company.” She went on before I could say anything. “I’m sorry to say that we don’t have the parts to fix the unit that broke, and we don’t have an extra to send to you.”

“I was told you had one.” The last person I’d talked to had assured me we’d have another working booth in two days.

Colene sounded repentant. “Unfortunately, that one is also broken, and we haven’t been able to repair it.”

My fingers tightened around my phone. “What do you need to fix it or the one we have?”

“There are a few parts, and no one has them. I asked around. There’s been a shortage for six months.”

We could not be down an entire booth for the remainder of the project. “How far did you ask around?”

“Everyone on the continent.”

I cursed under my breath. We were already burning the candle at both ends. Without another booth we were going to be in trouble.

Chapter 28

-Tanner-

After an extremely long day full of Big Foot scares, the late recording session, and trying not to think about Leona, all I wanted to do was lie down on my bed until she sent me a text. I'd caught part of the conversation between her and the other girls. They'd invited her to come watch a show with them? If she went, which I thought she had, she'd be busy for a while.

Which left me time to wallow.

"What's that pouty face for?" Eddie asked from the chair where he was watching a video on his phone.

"There is no pouty face," I said.

"Uh-huh."

My phone buzzed, and I practically fell off the bed rolling to grab it from the nightstand.

Eddie laughed.

I ignored him. My barely contained glee slipped away when I saw Justin's name instead of Leona's. At least it was just a text and not a call. The last time they'd called me they'd been in the middle of a parade marching band or something. Very loud.

Justin: Bryan is going out with a girl from the speed dating thing!

Tanner: I've been meaning to ask; did you guys put him up to that?

Justin: Us?

A gif of a woman looking shocked followed.

Tanner: Yes. You.

Justin: What if we did?

This time he sent a guy bouncing his eyebrows up and down.

Tanner: How?

Bryan wasn't very forward with women. He had an unhealthy relationship with accounting numbers, and he loved being competitive on the court, but outside of that he didn't have many friends or hang out with people.

Justin: You forget how amazing we are.

Tanner: Can't forget something that isn't true.

Justin: Why are you so mean?

A cartoon character fountaining tears followed.

I sent an eye-rolling emoji back.

Justin: We double-dog dared him.

I knew better than that.

Tanner: Did he lose a bet?

Justin: He lost a bet. And now he's going on a DATE!! Find out more for us. He won't tell us anything.

I made a face. I wasn't going to pry into my friend's business. I left that to the twins.

Tanner: No way.

Justin: Please?

This time he sent a selfie of his pouting.

Tanner: Nope.

Justin: Hate you.

Tanner: Same.

Justin: Gotta run. Games to play. We're not finished with this convo!

I sent a waving hand and chuckled. Leave it to the Taintor brothers to brighten my day. Just to be annoying, because that's what we did, I sent Bryan a text.

Tanner: How was the date?

He answered immediately.

Bryan: I will destroy them.

Tanner: I'll help. Good luck, man.

Bryan sent me a thumbs up.

And that's all we needed to say to communicate. Guys were simple.

Eddie eyed me. "Leona?"

"Friends."

Just then Eddie's phone buzzed. He jumped, frowned, and got up. "I'm going to take this outside. It's my sister."

Likely the same sister who was in cancer treatments. I gave him a nod and said, "Hope everything's okay," as he went out the door.

I was just about to put my phone down when it rang. I swiped it to life, expecting Bryan, and spoke accordingly. "Did you already mess everything up with her?"

The pregnant pause told me I wasn't talking to Bryan. I glanced at my phone and found Leona's name. "Sorry, thought you were someone else."

"Clearly." She sounded amused.

I'd talked to her this morning, but not like this. Just her and me. We'd decided not to call, so why was she on the line. "What's up? Everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said in an unconvincing tone.

"You can't lie to me."

She sighed. "Can we meet?"

A dozen different questions filled my brain, including why did she want to meet, where could we meet, what was bothering her, and did she want to kiss me as badly as I wanted to kiss her? I reigned all that in and said, "Are you certain that's a good idea?"

"Unless you don't want to."

It wasn't like Leona to be unsure, but she sounded like she was now.

I lowered my voice. "Of course, I want to see you, but where?"

“The garage. James assures me no one is ever in there, and he’ll guarantee we have privacy.”

“So we have a lookout?”

She laughed. “I guess.”

I didn’t have to think about my answer. “When?”

“Ten minutes?”

“I’ll be there.”

“See you then,” Leona said in a breathy voice that made my insides curl in anticipation.

Only when I hung up did I remember Eddie. I stood to find him—going through excuses for me to not be in the room—but he walked in.

“Good to hear. Love you, sis. Bye.” Eddie hung up and gave me a grin. “My sister’s last treatment is over.”

“I bet she’s happy.”

Eddie nodded. “I’m going to call my wife.”

I waved at the door. “I’m going to not be here when you do.”

He grinned. “Thanks.”

The door shut behind me, and I jogged down the stairs. The great room was deserted because most people were downstairs either playing or working. I avoided the kitchen and made it to the mud room without being seen. A quick jaunt outside and I slipped through the back door of the garage.

Garage was an understatement. It contained two standard sized vehicles and two motor homes. An impressive workbench lined the back wall, housing simple hand tools.

There were only three vehicles inside: Leona’s, Lyle’s, and one other. Except for James driving Leona’s car, none of them had moved since we’d arrived.

Leona stood near the bench. She wore her workout clothes and looked just as beautiful as ever. My first instinct was to sweep her up into my arms and kiss her until we were both dizzy, but since she'd called the meeting, I figured I should let her set the pace. I cleared my throat and moved toward her.

She looked my way, and I noticed both the smile on her lips and the wrinkle between her eyebrows. She was upset about something, but also happy. I hoped she was happy to see me.

I got that cleared up as she met me halfway, snaked her arms around my neck, and pulled me into a kiss.

Okay, fine, it was a series of very, very satisfying kisses. Everything I'd been bottling up since we'd been separated after the booth incident came pouring out through my lips and into hers. How much I'd missed her. How much I wanted to make up for lost time. How much I hoped she was okay. And how much I wanted to be able to do this again soon.

She responded in kind, her hands exploring my chest and her lips making it difficult for me to keep up. I couldn't help grinning at our teenage antics, and after a few more seconds, she drew her head back so she could look at me.

"Hi there," she said.

"Hey." I leaned down and trailed kisses along her jawline, then her neck toward her shoulder. She let out a contented sigh and wrapped her arms around me.

"I've missed you."

"Same," I said as I went for her lips again. Once I'd thoroughly expressed my stricken mental condition without her, I pulled away and looked into her eyes. "You sounded upset on the phone. Everything okay?"

She sighed and took a step back. "I need to tell you something."

I kept one of her hands in mine. "What is it?"

Leona bit her lip, again reminded me of Rosemary on *Outlast*. “I—I’m not who you think—”

Before she could finish, the opening theme of *Phoenix High* played from my phone. It was the ring tone I’d set up for Rodney and Myrtle.

For a split second, I hesitated. Leona was right here and needed to talk, but then again, I hadn’t heard from Rodney or Myrtle in over a week, and I wanted to know that they were okay.

Leona raised an eyebrow. “Is that the old people?”

I nodded.

She smiled. “You’d better get it.”

“You’re okay for a minute?”

“I’ll probably survive.”

I leaned in for a quick kiss, which felt just as good as all of the others, before swiping my phone to life. “Hello?”

“Tanner?” Myrtle never sounded stressed out, but now her voice shook.

“Myrtle? You okay?”

“It’s not me, it’s Rodney.” She spoke quickly, as if she’d memorized the words and wanted to get them out as fast as possible. “He had a heart attack and is scheduled for surgery. They don’t know if he’s going to make it.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “Where are you?”

“The hospital by our place.”

My eyes darted to Leona. “What can I do?”

Myrtle hesitated, and I knew what she was going to ask before she spoke. “I know you’re on a secret assignment or whatever, but can you come?”

I’d met Myrtle and Rodney through my volleyball friend Dakota. I’d bonded with the adorable old couple, and we’d been fast friends ever since. Neither had family close, and I

knew Rodney had strained relationships with his kids. I wanted to say I could go but needed to ask Leona first. “Can I call you back in a few minutes?”

She sniffed. “Of course.”

“Hang in there, okay?”

“Okay.”

I hung up and closed my eyes. If I could talk someone into doing a recording session with me tonight, and then another when I got back, we shouldn’t get behind. We were supposed to be getting a booth to replace the one we’d busted, so the schedule would be back to normal soon.

Leona squeezed my hand. “You okay?”

I gave her a quick smile. “If I can make up my time in the booth, can I have two days off to go visit Rodney? He had a heart attack and may not make it.”

Leona held my gaze, and I saw the regret on her face. “I just found out we won’t be getting another booth.”

I stepped back. “We’re not?” My mind went through the calculations. Without a third booth, there was barely time to meet our flower goal, or whatever Juliana had called it. I knew Leona had been counting on the replacement to give us a shot at the bud goal.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Tanner, but there won’t be enough time in the day to make up the hours you’ll miss.”

Chapter 29

-Leona-

The hurt look on Tanner's face made me want to pull him into a hug, but I didn't dare. He stared at me with his mouth agape, likely trying to process what I'd just said.

"You can't get another booth?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"What about parts to fix the one we have?"

"There are several key components that aren't available anywhere in this hemisphere." I watched as he thought through the implications, just like I had seconds before.

With only two booths, we wouldn't hit the stretch—bud—goal. We'd be lucky to make the flower deadline. There literally wasn't time for Tanner to work longer hours because it would keep someone else out of the booth and then they'd have to log extra hours, and at that point, someone's voice would likely give out or one of the directors would have a meltdown.

Like a story-based algebra problem, there were too many variables and no good answers.

"I'm sorry," I said at last.

Tanner took a breath then walked past me. For a second I thought he was angry, but he reached out and stroked my hand as he went by.

The kissing had been good. Amazing. Eleven out of ten. This simple touch to let me know he wasn't mad, but thinking, both warmed and chilled me to the bone. If I had to give it a name, I'd call it...love.

Yes, my brain had gone there, and it felt right. This man, who was obviously concerned about his friend, also wanted to make things right with me. A woman he'd only been hanging out with for a few weeks and had kissed for the first time days before.

This is why I'd asked him to come. I'd wanted to tell him the truth. I was ready to peel off my prosthetics and show him the real me, but something more important had come up. Leona wouldn't have given up on having her voice heard so easily, but I did, because I cared for him.

How my feelings had blossomed so quickly was a mystery, but they had. A desire to help him bubbled inside of me, but I gave him space to think as he took long strides to the nearest wall, turned, and came back.

His gaze met mine. "The booth is a no go?"

"I put feelers out for anything that might help, but so far nothing." I even had James contacting people.

"What about a recording studio close by? Is there anything at a library in one of these towns that would work?"

I hadn't thought about that, mostly because it violated our terms and conditions with MaxMart. I said as much as Tanner passed me.

He huffed. "Can we call and talk to them?"

"Maybe." I couldn't keep the trepidation out of my voice. I'd build a new sound booth out of sticks and leaves before I called Juliana.

"You'd rather not."

"I'd rather not."

Tanner walked back to me and stopped. He reached for my hands and squeezed. "Here's a really crazy idea." One side of his lips quirked up, but his eyes remained serious.

I made a show of shifting my weight, squaring my shoulders, and breathing in. "I'm ready."

Now the grin broke loose. “Could you give me the slides and dialogue for the rest of my voice-overs? I could take them and record them in New York, where Myrtle and Rodney live. There are plenty of places there, as you know, and I’m sure I can find a director who will sign an NDA.” His fingers teased mine. “You probably know someone.”

I did.

It wasn’t a bad idea, but I already knew Juliana’s answer to my unasked question.

“What do you think? That way I can stay in New York if I need to, and you still get everything you need from me.”

Not everything. I wanted him here. With me. Even if we didn’t get to talk or see one another outside of working, simply having him near had grounded me in a way I hadn’t felt since before my interview about *Outlast*. My hands tightened around his as if he were about to disappear.

While I was being selfish, Tanner was doing the opposite. He was trying to fulfill his contract, give me a way to still succeed with the project, and help his friends.

I wasn’t sure anyone on the planet deserved this man, let alone me.

“Will you think about it?” Tanner looked into my eyes and I melted. How could I say no to that face? “Call MaxMart?” He jerked his head over his shoulder. “My dad knows the CEO.”

That drew a laugh out of me.

Leona wouldn’t have budged on the matter, but I was turning into something besides Leona. I pressed my lips together and decided to at least consider it. “I’ll try.”

Tanner threw his arms around me and drew me in for a kiss. Before he got there, I put a finger over his lips. He stopped cold. “What is it?” he asked around my finger.

“I said I’d try.” I dropped my hand. “There are no guarantees they’ll agree.”

Tanner nodded. "I get it. Thank you."

He needn't have said the words thank you, because he took the next few minutes to show me how grateful he was.

My mind stubbornly tried to hold on to the fact that I was going to have to fix this, but Tanner's lips and hands completely distracted me.

Each kiss professed his gratitude. Each gentle touch told me how much he cared about me. About us. It took me a moment to catch up, but when I did, I did my best to show him how much he meant to me.

Words became obsolete. We would never need them again.

After an undetermined amount of time, my phone buzzed. I came up for air and shied away as Tanner once again trailed his lips along my neck and onto my collar bone. "This might be about the booth," I said to get him to stop so I could see straight.

His lips moved a fingers width away from me. His breath tickled my ear as I quickly looked at my phone.

It wasn't about the booth. It was from the girls.

Gabriella: Everything okay?

I sighed. "I should go."

"You shouldn't." Tanner pulled me closer to him.

"I should." I reached out and stroked his cheek with my thumb. I needed to get away from him if I was going to try to fix any of this. "Sorry, I need to get a hold of MaxMart."

Tanner sighed and released me. "Okay."

I leaned in for one last kiss. "Maybe we should meet here again."

He laughed. "I'm for it."

Then I realized he might not be here in twenty-four hours. I repressed a sigh, straightened my shoulders, and walked to the exit.

Tanner didn't follow. He'd probably wait a few minutes.

I answered the text.

Leona: Sorry, booth issues. On my way back.

Leaving Tanner had torn a hole through my insides, and I worked to repair it as I jogged back up the stairs and to the girls' room. I knocked and once again they told me to come in.

Gabriella had put her yoga mat away and was sitting on the floor. Brandi still occupied the couch. She smiled at me. "We thought we'd lost you."

I sighed as I sat.

"More problems?" Gabriella asked.

I nodded.

"Anything we can do to help?" Brandi asked.

Concern laced both of their voices. Normally, I wouldn't share any of this, but Leona was off her game, and I needed support if I was going to call Juliana.

So I told them about the booth, that Tanner had a family emergency—close enough anyway—and that I doubted Juliana would agree to his plan.

By the time I finished, both women had sour looks on their faces.

"You know, I didn't much care for Juliana when she was here," Gabriella said.

"Same," Brandi agreed. "And if she doesn't let Tanner go for a couple of days, she's one of the biggest jerks on the planet.

"Especially since he's willing to record while he's gone or do it when he gets back," Gabriella said.

"True," I said.

"You know." Brandi adjusted on the couch to face me. "Two weeks ago, I wouldn't have thought you would care

about something like this, but now that we've gotten to know you a bit, I can tell there are layers in there."

"Layers, huh?" I asked.

"Yes. Many of them." Brandi pointed at my phone, which was in my hand. "Maybe Juliana has layers you don't know about too. Would it hurt to call her?"

Hurt? No, it wouldn't hurt Brandi. It might hurt me. Or, more precisely, the bonus I was set to get at the end of this project.

I needed that money for my show, but that hardly compared to Tanner's friend having a heart attack. With a long exhale I stood.

"You're going to call?" Gabriella asked.

"I'm going to call." I gave them both a smile. "Sorry I messed up girl's night."

Brandi waved a hand. "This is what girl's nights are really about anyway. Helping one another. Get out there and make it happen."

Helping one another? No one but James had been there to help me since I'd been handed off to a nanny at the ripe old age of six.

What would it be like to have friends?

Tears burned the back of my eyes and a lump rose in my throat. Before any emotion appeared on my face, I was out the door and headed for my room.

I dialed on the way, and just as I opened my door Juliana answered.

"Hello?"

Chapter 30

-Tanner-

Every inch of my skin buzzed with the urge to run to Leona and take her into my arms again. Right now, my mind should be consumed with images of Rodney lying on an operating table, but Leona overshadowed him.

It took me a few minutes to get my breathing back to normal. I dialed Myrtle and she picked up on the second ring.

“Tanner?” she asked.

“It’s me. How are things going?” I began pacing the length of the garage again.

“Nothing to report so far. I’m sitting in the waiting room. Waiting.”

The woman was usually ninety percent sass, but today I could hear the helplessness in her voice. She was all alone, and I couldn’t get there.

“I would have called Dakota and Winifred, but they’re in Montana,” Myrtle said.

A hand reached into my chest and squeezed. “I’m so sorry, Myrtle. My boss is trying to work it out so I can leave.” My voice echoed in the mostly empty space, making me sound as lonely as Myrtle.

“I shouldn’t have bothered you, but I didn’t know who else to call.”

“I’m glad you reached out. Have you contacted Dakota?”

“No.”

“Do.” His mother would have a care package at the hospital before they got off the phone. I reached the end of the

garage and turned around. “They’ll kill you if they find out about all of this later.”

“I’m old; that isn’t a threat.”

There was some of her usual sass. “Please, Myrtle, call them. If nothing else, it will distract you for a few minutes.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

“Good. I’ll let you know the second I’m on my way.” The words tumbled from my lips before I realized I’d said them. I didn’t even know if I could go yet.

A moment later, I figured out that I didn’t care what MaxMart said. I’d walk away from this project and its huge paycheck for Myrtle and Rodney if I had to.

The line remained quiet for a few seconds. “Thank you, Tanner.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

We hung up and I went back into the main house. No one gave me a second glance as I walked past the kitchen and up to my room. Eddie lay on the bed watching something on his phone. When I entered, he popped up and stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Where have you been?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Talking to Leona.”

He blinked. “Dude, at least lie about it.”

I didn’t have the heart to banter with him. “My friend Rodney had a heart attack and is in surgery, and his wife is alone in the city. I wanted to know if I could get two days off.”

It took Eddie a minute to process that. “Rodney as in the old people you’re always going on about?”

“That’s them.”

Eddie muttered a curse. “I’m sorry, man. That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“Did Leona say you could go?”

I shook my head and told him about the sound booth. Then I told him about my idea to take the work with me. “It would actually speed us up.”

Eddie made a face. “What did she say to that?”

“She’s going to talk to Juliana.”

We both frowned. Eddie spoke first.

“I’m betting that won’t go well. Leona told me not to expect time off even if a loved one was in the hospital.”

I winced. “I’m hoping she’s softened her approach since then.”

“To you, maybe.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I’ve already decided that I’ll leave if she says no.”

Eddie swung his legs off the bed. “Are you serious? That will void your contract.”

“You know the money doesn’t matter to me.”

“No, but a job well done does.”

The words stung. I squirmed away from them by sitting on the bed and lacing my fingers into the flannel comforter. He was right about that. I hated leaving anything halfway done, and I hated giving someone shoddy work even more. That’s why I’d offered to take the project with me and do it in the city. I was certain I could squeeze it in, and I knew there were several recording studios I could use that were close to the hospital.

“You really care about these people,” he said.

I nodded. “Would you drop the project if your sister needed you?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been praying that doesn’t happen.” Eddie studied me. “Would you leave if, say, your dad or brother had been in a car accident?”

More confusion added to the already rising emotions swirling through me. I didn't want to process his words, but my mind did it anyway.

What if it were my dad in the hospital? Would I drop everything for him?

The answer I should give is that of course I would. He's family.

However, I knew that unless he were actually dying, I might not go. A hollow spot opened up in my stomach.

My dad and my siblings had put me through too much for me to run to their sides when they called. I'd been their personal slave after my dad had lost his money, and I'd been too nice to deny them. One voice in the back of my mind would wail that they wanted something from me while another would remind me that they'd likely fill my time with tales of what they'd bought in the past year. Complete with a slide show on their phone.

Rodney was a different matter. He'd never asked anything of me, except to help with his wedding. He and Myrtle had been like grandparents to me, and I owed them for being my friends. For loving me as I am and keeping me in line when I got pouty. Not to mention the croquet tips they'd given me.

Good people like that hadn't existed in my world after my mom had died. Not until I'd met my volleyball friends.

Eddie cleared his throat.

Right, he'd asked me a question. I took a moment to phrase my answer. "I probably wouldn't go see my dad."

A look of pity went across Eddie's face.

I held up a hand. "I'd probably do it for your sister, though."

"Your family dynamic is messed up."

"Believe me, I know." The hollow spot expanded, threatening to drag me in. I avoided my family at all costs, and

this was why. Everything was complicated. Everything came with a price. Everything led back to the fact that they'd mistreated me for too long and expected money to fix it.

My phone rang, jolting me out of my spiral. Leona's number showed on the screen.

"Rodney?" Eddie asked.

"Leona." I hit the answer button. "Hello?"

"Hey." Her voice sounded tight, more like it had in weeks. "I called MaxMart. Can you meet?"

"Where?"

"I'll come to you."

Chapter 31

-Leona-

“Hello?” Juliana said. The word was more accusation than greeting.

“Juliana? This is Leona Ward.” I sat on my bed.

“I know who it is. What’s wrong?”

I flinched. Did she have to assume there was a problem?

Of course there was a problem. I sat up straight and channeled every confident Leona molecule I could. “I heard back from the sound booth company and thought you would like an update.”

“Make it quick, I’m about to go into a meeting.”

At nine o’clock at night? Did this woman have a life outside of her work? The irony of that statement hit me as I looked around my room. Like I was one to talk. I shook my head and continued. “They can’t get us a new booth and the parts we need to fix the one we have are out of stock all over the country. We’re going to have to make do with two.”

A pregnant pause filled the space between us. I waited. After a few seconds Juliana spoke. “What does this mean for the project?”

“It means that unless we have the booths going twenty hours a day, we won’t make our main goal.”

Juliana spoke slowly. “The flower goal. That’s disappointing.”

May as well hit her with the second round of bad news while she was digesting the first.

“Yes. There’s been another complication that could set us back.”

“What’s that?” The razor edge in her voice could have cut through any of the trees outside.

This wasn’t going to go well, but I’d promised to ask. I took a moment to consider my words. I didn’t want to say that Rodney was Tanner’s friend, because he was more. “Tanner has had a family member suffer a heart attack. The man is in surgery down in New York, and Tanner would like two days to go visit him.”

A lack of noise was considered silence. This was more than no sound. This was a void that every ambient noise had been sucked into and would never escape from. I could feel Juliana’s seething rage over the phone, and I braced for her response.

“You assured me that nothing like this would come up.” Her voice remained calm, but the dangerous undercurrent had the back of my neck tingling. I’d expected this.

“It’s impossible to predict when a family emergency will occur.”

“You vetted these people. The man with the sick sister said he would stay even if she died.”

Leona was hard-nosed about pretty much everything, but I reeled back at her words. I’d never told Eddie that he would have to stay if his sister passed during her cancer treatments.

However, the Leona of three weeks ago might not have been sympathetic to his cause, even if she had let him go. Growing up with an absent mother and being raised by a nanny who had no business interacting with children hadn’t given me the proper perspective of a healthy family dynamic. I literally didn’t understand why anyone would drop everything for a single person.

James’ smiling face drifted into my mind and a stab of panic ran through me. What if he was injured or dying? In an instant, I knew I’d leave everything behind for him. He’d been

through everything with me and had remained by my side even when Leona was at her worst.

“Leona?” Juliana asked. “What are you going to do about this?”

I blinked away the image of James in the hospital and stood so I could pace. “Tanner has proposed a solution. Without a third booth, we’ll have to stay on this schedule, which means even if he stayed, we’ll struggle to meet the main—flower—goal. He’s asked if he can take his part of the production with him to New York where I can arrange for a private studio and a director I trust, so he can record his remaining—”

Juliana spoke before I finished. “Unacceptable.”

I ignored her. “With one recording space out of the picture, this will actually speed up production and give our sound engineers a chance to sleep, reducing the risk of mistakes. If we let him do this, we could still hit our flower goal. If not, we’ll be down to the wire.” I wanted to add that her stupid holographic flower would be dead, but refrained.

“You need to reread your contract,” Juliana said. “No part of this leaves the recording site. No matter what.”

“Tanner is trustworthy.” I stopped and glared at a painting of a moose.

“I don’t care if he’s the world’s best Boy Scout, a contract is a contract.” She snorted. “If he stays, will you hit the flower goal?”

I bit my lip. There was technically time, but it would stretch everyone thin. Mistakes were bound to happen, someone would have a meltdown, and we’d end up in worse shape than we were now. “I doubt it.”

“That’s on you, which means you won’t get your bonus.”

My eyes darted to my tablet. I thought of the characters from my show. If I didn’t get that bonus, the show would be

delayed by at least a year. “I am aware,” I said through gritted teeth.

Juliana sighed as if she were about to unload a huge burden. “If Tanner leaves, he’s not to take anything with him. He will sign an additional NDA and not return. Have someone else finish his voice over work. He will not get paid, per his original contract.”

Each declaration thrust a knife into my chest. I closed my eyes until she finished.

“Do you understand?” Juliana asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good. Call me tomorrow with an update.”

The line went dead, and I was never as happy to hear silence as I was at that moment. A mountain lion was laying on my chest, and I had to sit so I could breathe.

My phone vibrated. It was probably Tanner. I didn’t want to look at it. Didn’t want to have to tell him Juliana’s decision.

The phone shook again. I peeled my eyes open and braced myself. Instead of Tanner, it was James.

James: Everything okay?

Leona: Not even a little.

James: What can I do?

I smiled and sniffed. This is the man I’d do anything for.

Leona: Get ready to drive Tanner to the nearest airport?

He sent a thumbs up.

Now I had to do something even Leona hated. I took a breath and called Tanner.

Two minutes later I knocked on Tanner’s door. Eddie answered almost before my knuckles had pulled away from the wood.

“Hey,” He gave me a smile, then his expression drooped into worry, and he glanced over his shoulder before speaking softly to me. “You want me to leave?”

I nodded. “Please.”

“You got it.” He opened the door and motioned me through. It looked like he wanted to pat me on the shoulder or give me words of encouragement, but there was still a little part of Eddie that was terrified of Leona. “I’ll be right down there.” He pointed at the ground floor.

“Thank you.” I slipped into the room and found Tanner sitting on his bed. He looked up at me with those big, expressive, beautiful, brown eyes, and I almost melted right there.

But I had to be strong. I had a plan, and I was going to stick to it.

James had been the only the man I’d do anything for. Until now. Now I was about to sacrifice everything for Tanner.

Tanner stood and came to me. He furrowed his eyebrows and reached out for my hands.

I let him take them, wanting to feel his touch one last time before I had to banish him.

“You okay?” he asked.

Of course he’d notice I was in pain. I squeezed his fingers. “Fine.”

“What did MaxMart say?” Tanner asked.

His hopeful gaze made me want to cry. Instead, I took a breath, retreated into Leona, and recited my prepared lie.

“MaxMart is too paranoid to allow any of the slides or data to leave with you.”

Tanner’s lips turned down.

I went on before I lost my nerve. “However, they understand and want you to know how much they appreciate

your participation in this project. Because of that, they'd like to pay you for a prorated portion of your time."

Tanner's frown deepened. "That wasn't in the contract."

"No, it wasn't." I forced my voice to remain even. Confident. "But they want you to understand that they value you."

They didn't value him, I did. Any bonus I got would go to him. He deserved to be paid for his work and devotion.

"They said that?" Tanner moved one hand to my shoulder. Instead of sending tingles through me, the weight threatened to buckle my knees.

"They did." Now for the rest. "The caveat is that you can't come back."

"Why not?" His other hand tightened around mine.

"Policy. Paranoia. Pick one."

He sighed. "So you'll have to finish without me?"

Without him. The words drove another spike into my chest. "I'll have Lyle spread out your lines. We'll manage."

"With only two sound booths?" He shook his head. "You'll never get finished by the flower deadline." He said flower with as much derision as I felt.

"MaxMart is aware. They understand." I smiled.

Tanner snaked a hand around my waist and pulled me to him. I reveled in the feeling of his body pressed up against mine. Of his steadiness. His musk. His light fingers as they stroked my cheek. "Thank you, Leona."

Rosemary.

I almost corrected him, but instead nodded, not trusting my voice.

Tanner leaned down and put his forehead against mine. "I owe you."

A lump rose in my throat. “You should go. James is ready to take you to the airport.”

Tanner gently tilted my chin up. His lips found mine, and for a moment, I let him sweep me away. One last chance to feel loved. Safe. Like myself.

When we parted, I smiled up at him. “James will be ready when you are.”

“Okay.” A look of hurt went across Tanner’s face as I pulled away from him and turned my back.

A wave of emotion rolled over me, and I had to hold onto the wall as I stumbled to my room. Tears stung my eyes, and my lungs hitched again and again. I barely made it to my bed and pillow before I let the deluge of pain loose.

Chapter 32

-Tanner-

James had taken me to the nearest airport, where I'd scored a quick flight to Philadelphia. Then I'd rented a car and driven the rest of the way. It had still taken me the better part of a day to get back to New York.

Every second of every minute had been consumed by one of two things: Rodney or Leona.

I couldn't get the haunted look in Leona's eyes out of my head. It had felt like she wanted to say something more but had let me go without doing so.

MaxMart's offer seemed suspiciously generous. I'd read the original contract several times, and they had no reason to pay me. It didn't make sense for business, even if it was a decent thing to do. One of the many voices in my head kept whispering that my dad had had something to do with it. He did know the CEO and had already used that to his advantage.

However, how would he have found out about Rodney? I rarely mentioned any of my friends to my family, and none of them had ever met. So how? Why?

Those questions churned as I parked the car and ran into the hospital.

Rodney had come out of surgery several hours before but was still in recovery. Myrtle had called me, told me which waiting room I should hang out in, and had asked me to come as soon as I could.

When I got to the waiting room, I found Paula Brook, chief editor for the publisher my friend Dakota worked for,

along with two women from the croquet group, Dorothy and Louise.

I hadn't expected to see the trio here.

Louise, a hunched woman with spiky white hair who wore a pair of pink designer overalls, stood and limped right for me. "About time," she grouched.

"Sorry, I didn't know I was on your schedule," I said. The two of us did nothing but banter, even in serious moments, apparently. She practically tackled me at the waist in a hug that could have broken me in half.

Paula followed Louise. She'd traded in her signature gray business suit and skirt for a pair of loose black pants and a blue blouse. Her graying hair sat piled on top of her head. "Dakota called us." The editor held out a hand.

I shook it. "Good thing I told Myrtle to call him."

Dorothy tottered over, her hair newly died grass green and slapped me on the arm. "Where have you been?"

"Working." I gave her a sour, but playful, expression.

Last Thanksgiving, these people had become my family. Warmth filled me as I hugged each one in turn. When I finished, I spoke to Paula. "Any news?"

She shook her head. "They pulled Myrtle in about an hour ago, and she hasn't given us an update."

"But he made it through surgery," I said.

"Yes, but he's not out of the woods."

Louise elbowed me, which mean she hit my hip. Which hurt because the woman had pointy elbows and knew how to use them. "His son is over there and hasn't stopped complaining about Rodney since he got here."

I knew Rodney had a strained relationship with his kids. It was something that confused me. Rodney was an awesome guy. Not like my dad who'd expected me to be a house slave after my mom had died.

“Leave it,” Dorothy said. “It’s none of our business.”

“He’s annoying,” Louise said.

“Let’s sit.” Paula caught my eye over the two older ladies and shook her head as if to say she’d been putting up with this for hours.

I would have to offer her my sympathies later. A quick glance at my phone showed nothing from Myrtle. Or Leona.

Not that I had expected anything from Leona. She was running a booth and wouldn’t have a break until tonight. I’d almost called her a dozen times during my drive, but it had been before five in the morning, and I hadn’t wanted to disturb her, and for some reason, a text didn’t feel like enough.

I’d have to speak to her later.

We sat across the waiting room from Rodney’s son, but the space wasn’t big enough for me not to hear the man on his phone.

“It’s just my dad. I’m not surprised. It’s not like he’s ever taken care of himself or anyone else.”

Louise rolled her eyes.

Paula jumped in. “Tanner, Myrtle said you were working on a secret project.”

That distracted Louise, and she narrowed her gaze at me. “What secret project?”

“Well, it’s secret,” I said.

That got me more glares.

Rodney’s son’s voice grew louder. “No, I don’t owe him anything. The only reason I’m here is because I’m still his emergency contact. He just got married again and his new wife hadn’t changed it. Now my wife won’t let me leave.”

Wow, this guy was a piece of work. The old ladies’ focus began to shift, so I leaned forward and put my elbows on my knees. “We were even at a secret location. In Maryland.”

“You’re terrible at keeping secrets,” Dorothy said with a snort.

“Maryland is a big place. You’d never find it.”

Paula looked amused. “Was this another voice acting project?”

“Yes,” I said. “Training videos for a company that cannot be named.” That was vague enough that no one would guess the truth.

“MaxMart?” Louise asked.

I blinked. “What?”

“Were you working for MaxMart?”

“Nope,” I lied. How in the world had she figured that out?
“Try again.”

“Car manufacturer?”

“Nope.” Hopefully she was just shooting in the dark.

Rodney’s son, who had finally ended the phone call picked up another. “No, honey, I haven’t heard anything.”

“We should have told you we were here,” Paula said. “You could have stayed in Maryland.”

I shrugged. “I’d have come no matter what.”

Even if it had meant not getting paid. The look on Leona’s face when she’d told me about MaxMart paying me despite breaching contract came to my mind. Something wasn’t right.

“No, I’m not staying. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” Rodney’s son threw a hand up. “Something about paperwork. I’ll go check with the nurse again.”

“He’s been bugging that nurse every ten minutes for the past two hours,” Louise muttered.

“No, you don’t need to bring the kids. They hardly know the man.”

I winced. He was obviously talking to his wife. If this was his normal attitude, then his kids needed to come meet Rodney, who would be a much better example of how to treat people than this guy.

“Can I go yell at him now?” Louise asked.

“No,” Paula said firmly. “Leave it be. It’s not your family.”

“But Rodney is a great guy. Who is this brat to say otherwise?” Louise jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

“You didn’t grow up with Rodney as your father. Things could have been very different back then,” Paula said.

Louise glared at the man, folded her arms across her chest, and let out a loud snort.

“Back me up.” Paula looked at me.

I didn’t say anything. All I could think about was my own father and how he’d treated me and how I’d told Eddie that I wouldn’t have left to visit him.

I easily imagined myself complaining to my friends in a similar manner as Rodney’s son.

What kind of person did that make me? I ran a hand down my face and sat back.

“What?” Louise asked.

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

I met her gaze. “About how that would be me if it were my dad having surgery.”

“You?” Louise blinked.

“Yup.”

The other two studied me. Paula spoke. “Someone else’s family dynamics are impossible to truly understand.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Are you saying that kid is justified?” Louise stabbed a finger at him.

Was he? I thought about it.

Rodney had told me he had regrets about his kids. Something about spending too much time working and not enough time at home to really connect. Especially with the oldest. I’d dismissed it as nothing more than normal issues. Maybe a few missed ball games or whatever. I’d never imagined the bitterness I heard from the other side of the room.

What could have happened to destroy a relationship between a father and a son?

I had my own example, but there were hundreds, if not thousands, out there.

“Well?” Louise asked.

Was Rodney’s son justified? I cleared my throat. “From his point of view, he might be.”

Both older women opened their mouths to protest, but I held up a hand. “I’m not saying he shouldn’t do something to fix it, but we don’t know what he’s been through.”

Paula nodded sagely while the other two glowered.

My phone buzzed and I drew it out of my pocket hoping it was Myrtle.

Instead, I saw Eddie’s name.

Eddie: Don’t ask me how I found out, because you’ll think less of me, but I just heard that Leona is paying you out of her pocket because Juliana refused to give you anything. Because we’re missing our “bud” goal and maybe our “flower” goal, Leona won’t see a penny from MaxMart.

“What?” The word exploded out of my mouth, and everyone turned to look at me. “Sorry. News from work.”

“Bad?” Paula asked.

“Maybe.”

“Anything we can do?” Paula asked.

I shook my head. This must have been what Leona was hiding when I left. I could call her, but she'd probably deny everything. Or hang up on me.

Rodney's son's voice filled the air. "I'm going to try to be home for dinner. I won't be here all day."

My thoughts turned to my own father, and a connection clicked in my mind.

My dad knew the CEO of MaxMart. If I used that, I could literally go over Juliana's head.

I'd never once asked one of my dad's friends for anything. I'd never accepted as much as ten dollars from the man before the cuff links, and I'd only taken them to get him away from the lodge.

Everyone had loved him when he'd visited. I still felt like it was an act, but what if it wasn't? What if he'd changed, and I never gave him the chance to show me? What if we ended up like Rodney and his son when it would be so easy for things to be different?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"This looks serious," Louise said.

I nodded.

"Want to tell us about it?" she asked.

"No. I'd better just do it before I lose my nerve." I stood and walked toward the door with my phone in my hand. Before I could stop myself, I scrolled to my dad's number and hit the call button.

He picked up on the second ring, a hint of panic in his voice. "Tanner, is everything okay?"

I took a deep breath. "Dad, I need a favor."

Chapter 33

-Leona-

I rubbed my eyes, careful not to disturb the prosthetics on my face, and stifled a yawn.

How long had I been sitting outside this sound booth? The clock told me almost ten hours. It felt like twenty.

“Leona?” Gabriella’s voice came through my headphones.

I blinked. Had she done the line again? “Sorry, uh, one more time?”

“Sure.” Even Gabriella sounded tired, and she’d been going strong since Tanner and I had broken a booth. Now even she was waning. Lyle had snapped at Eddie a few minutes before, and Brandi was curled up asleep in the corner.

Things had gotten tense since Tanner had left four days ago. But who was counting?

Since I’d let him go.

I shook that thought away and listened as Gabriella recorded her part again. It sounded great. The one before this had probably been adequate, but since I’d literally lost track of what we’d been doing, I figured this was a good thing. This was the last section we needed to get through today.

When she finished, I gave her a smile. “Nice job. Why don’t we take a break?”

“But we still have twenty minutes. We could get ahead.”

“I’m seeing double.” I waved her out. “It’ll be here when we get back.”

Gabriella shrugged, pulled off her headphones, and exited the booth. She came and leaned against the table and watched

Lyle directing Eddie. “You okay?”

I knew she was asking about being tired, and I was that, but even worse was the vast emptiness that I had to face each time I thought about Tanner. “As good as any of us are.”

“You’ve been working harder than anyone else,” Gabriella said.

“Not really.” Whenever I was working, one of the voice actors was as well. Then there were the sound techs and editors that were having to adjust their schedule to ours.

“I’ve seen your light on until late and then you’re up early exercising.”

That’s because if I give myself any breathing room, memories of Tanner fill the emptiness. “Just trying to make our *flower* deadline.” I put air quotes around the word flower.

She glanced at Lyle, then around as if to make sure we were alone. When she spoke, she did so in a low, conspiratorial tone. “You seem different.”

A tingle ran up my spine and my mind panicked, wondering if she had figured out my real identity. I spoke carefully as I saved everything and logged off of the computer. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve changed. Remember our first recording session?”

I barely kept the wince from my face. Leona may have softened a bit, but she didn’t wince. “I do, and I’m sorry about my behavior.”

“You weren’t wrong.” Gabriella shrugged. “And you’ve been awesome ever since.”

Where was this conversation going?

“I know we thought Tanner had attacked you in the booth, but now I figure he means something to you.”

My heart sped up, and I swallowed. “He’s an excellent voice actor.”

“And?” Gabriella pressed.

“And nothing.” I stood and headed toward the stairs.

“Come on, I started noticing the way you two looked at one another. I feel bad we accused him and then sort of beat him up. Especially since I think you have feelings for him.”

I had so much more than feelings for Tanner. I looked for him whenever I entered a room. Each time my phone buzzed, I expected a message from him. I strained to hear his laughter from the basement. Since I’d let him go, I’d never felt so alone. Not even James and his steady supply of my favorite chocolate bars had been able to make me feel better.

We reached the top of the stairs and my neck tingled. Gabriella was staring at me. I refused to look at her.

“Oh, girl, you’ve got it bad.”

Leona of old might deny it. As a matter of fact, she might tell Gabriella to mind her own business and keep things professional.

Not now. Leona was tired. Lonely. Sad. She needed a friend. So I sighed and shrugged.

“Once Brandi is finished with her recording session, I’m sure she’d be down for a show or something. Our room? Eight? Maybe more *Outlast*?”

Only years of training kept me from flinching, and only the desperate need for something besides being alone with my own thoughts allowed me to answer. “Sounds great. Thanks.” I’d have to talk them out of *Outlast*.

“Cool. I’m going to grab a snack and then not talk for a couple of hours.”

“How is your voice?” I knew Eddie had started staying silent between stints in the booth.

“Not bad, but I don’t want to strain it. We’re already down one voice actor.” She gave me a look of sympathy. “I wouldn’t want to be number two.”

“I appreciate that.”

“See you in a few hours.” Gabriella patted me on the shoulder then turned into the kitchen.

I’d had James start bringing food to my room so I could work. Also, so I didn’t have to look at Tanner’s empty space at the table. I headed there now, planning everything I could accomplish between now and eight.

James was just setting down a tray as I entered.

“Hey,” I said.

“Dinner is served.” He smiled.

“Thanks.”

James took a moment to study me as I threw off my shoes.
“You need more sleep.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Have you heard from Tanner?”

Leave it to James to get right to the heart of the matter.
“No, I haven’t. Considering I told him not to come back I’m not expecting to.”

“He’ll be in touch,” James said.

I wasn’t so sure. And if he did call, I needed to tell him the truth. There were a hundred plans for that swirling in my mind, but none of them had solidified into something I felt like I could do. One such plan was to make a video of me pulling off my prosthetics and saying, “Surprise, I’m someone else.”

Not my finest idea, but not being in front of him for the big reveal did have some appeal.

“He cares for you,” James said.

“He cares for Leona.” I flopped into the chair.

“You are Leona.”

I shot James an exasperated look.

“And Rosemary.” He smiled fondly. “When are you going to reconcile the two?”

“Not anytime soon.” I’d been hoping to do that quietly, after this project. Now, without the money I’d planned on, I’d need to do another year of producing before I could afford it.

“You might surprise yourself.” James offered me one last smile before he nodded and left.

I closed my eyes and lay my head back. I’d used the ritual of removing my prosthetics as the time to shed Leona since I’d first put them on. Now, after just a few weeks of being here, falling for Tanner, feeling loved, and even making friends, the line between Leona and Rosemary had blurred, and I couldn’t find a way to define it again.

Maybe I didn’t want to. Maybe I wanted to be myself, something I’d been avoiding ever since *Outlast*. Until Tanner, I hadn’t known who I was or who I wanted to be. Now I wondered who I would be if I left Leona lying on the table.

Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about this. I had a project to finish. Even if I wasn’t getting paid, everyone else still could.

After several hours of planning the next day, reporting to Juliana, and taking a cat nap, I almost didn’t go to hang out with the other girls, but as I glanced around my room, I found that I needed something else to look at. So I grabbed a chocolate bar and headed out.

As promised, Gabriella and Brandi had snacks and *Outlast* ready to go. It was the second half of the special we’d started the other night and I wanted to ask them to watch something else, but something Brandi said stopped me.

“There’s supposed to be a bit in here where they tell us what everyone has done since *Outlast*.”

“You didn’t watch it yet?” I asked.

“Nope. We were waiting for you.”

Lucky me.

I remained detached while the special showed the best moments of the first season, including several times the Beast had gotten the better of the other contestants.

I remembered both loving and hating being the bad guy. I'd never really been liked, so it wasn't a new feeling, but I had wanted something new. Friends. People who cared about me. That hadn't happened, at least not on the air, and after I'd outed the production company, I'd lost the few folks I had made connections with.

Dwayne's face made me smile. A few segments made me groan.

When they got to me, Rosemary, the narrator voiced-over images of me during and after the show. "The scandal Rosemary Bellemore unleashed before the season finale aired rocked *Outlast's* creators to the core. They'd sworn that members of the cast hadn't been given roles, but Rosemary told the public otherwise."

The view switched to one of the mobs outside of the company's building. There had been enough cameras that this one hadn't left me with broken bones. A few weeks after this, I'd been ambushed coming out the back door of a convenience store.

I hadn't pressed charges. I'd gone into hiding and stayed there.

"The backlash was brutal and drove Rosemary from acting and the public's eye."

A few fun scenes from the show that actually made me look good flashed by. "No one has seen or heard from her in almost five years."

Brandi jerked me out of the show. "Which is sad. She did everyone a favor exposing the production company."

"She did?" I asked in a strangled voice.

"Sure. They lied to their customers."

“Also,” Gabriella added, “she was the best bad guy they ever had on the show.”

That brought a smile to my lips.

“I wonder what happened to her.” Brandi gestured toward the television. “She had talent.”

Blood pounded through my ears. I’d only heard bad things about Rosemary. James monitored my old email account, and he said I still got hate mail from people who were just getting into the show.

“It would be cool to know who she really was, you know?” Gabriella said.

“Yeah.”

Maybe I’d let Tanner pull down too many of my walls, or maybe I’d been working too hard on too little sleep, but suddenly I had tears streaming down my face.

“Leona?” Brandi looked at me as if I’d sprouted horns. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and wiped my cheeks. “Nothing.”

Gabriella, who had been sprawled out on the floor, sat up and scooted to my feet. “You’re not okay. Is it Tanner?”

“No.” I sniffed. “Yes.” I swallowed. “Among other things.”

“Can we help?” Brandi asked.

“I don’t know.” Could they? What did I need? I looked at them looking at me and only then realized that I needed someone to talk to about Tanner. About Leona. About life.

“Try us,” Gabriella said.

Did I dare? They’d just been wondering what had happened to Rosemary. What would they do if I told them? What would they do if I *showed* them?

I licked my lips and took a deep breath. “Can I share a secret with you two?” I knew I was taking a chance here, but

these two had been willing to beat up Tanner for me. They'd been keeping tabs on me, and I thought this is what having friends should feel like.

“Of course,” Brandi said.

Gabriella nodded.

I'd only pulled my prosthetics off without the solvent a handful of times. It hurt, but it was the fastest way to remove them. I rolled my fingers against the glued down edges.

The two women watched.

When the fake skin began to pull away from my face, Brandi frowned.

“What are you doing?”

My heartbeat sped up. I felt as if I was at my first audition. I felt like Tanner was about to kiss me. When I got a big enough chunk that I knew the rest of it would come off, I said, “This.”

Chapter 34

-Tanner-

“You can stop looking at me like that.” Rodney gave me the stink eye.

“Like what?” I asked in an innocent voice.

“Like I might fall over.”

“But you might fall over.” I pointed at his shaking legs.

He snorted and took another step toward the bathroom. “I had surgery five days ago. I’m fine.” His free hand clung to the wall while his other gripped my forearm like a vise. In true Rodney fashion, the moment Myrtle had left the room to get some food he’d declared that he was going to the toilet by himself. Apparently, the nurses said he could, and if nothing else, the man was determined.

I’d hit the call button when he hadn’t been looking. I didn’t want to be responsible if anything bad happened.

Rodney, who looked frail wearing nothing but the hospital gown and a pair of compression socks, gave me a grin of triumph when he got his whole body into the bathroom. “See?”

The door behind me opened, and I heard a sigh from the male nurse. “What are you doing?”

“Peeing.”

I gave the man a pleading look, and he came to my rescue. “I’ll take him.”

“I’m fine,” Rodney said.

I handed the old man over. “We know.” The nurse and I exchanged a knowing glance before I moved back into the

main room.

According to the doctor, Rodney would make a full recovery. He'd been exhausted from the trip and had worked too hard after getting home, causing the heart attack. If he took it easy for a few weeks and followed a good diet, he'd recover.

I'd seen the diet and I wondered how long it would be before Rodney revolted. Or if Myrtle could get him to stick to it.

"You need to leave yet?" Rodney asked. The nurse had only partially closed the door.

"Not yet."

"You nervous?"

"A little." I shook my head in wonder. The man had just had open heart surgery, but he was asking about me. Maybe he was trying to keep his mind off his own problems, just like I was doing with mine. "Has Rod been in here yet?"

Rod was the son who had been in the waiting room.

"He dropped by long enough to tell me he put Myrtle as my emergency contact instead of him." The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable.

"I'm sorry."

The toilet flushed and Rodney grunted a few times as the nurse helped him back into the bed. "Don't be. It's my own doing."

I didn't know how to answer that, so I said nothing.

When Rodney got settled, the nurse gave me a nod of thanks, told Rodney not to get out of bed without him there, and left.

Rodney eyed me. "You need to tell your dad he's lucky that you're giving him a chance."

My insides twisted. "I guess." I'd called my dad the day I'd arrived and asked him to arrange a meeting with the CEO

of MaxMart. The CEO had been out of town until late last night and had agreed to come to lunch today. My dad hadn't made a big deal out of it, which had left me feeling off-balance. What was he planning?

"Rod has never given me a second chance," Rodney said.

"Your son might change his mind," I said.

"And pigs might fly."

We grinned at one another. "You never know." I held up my phone. "A week ago, I wouldn't have called my dad."

"Your dad wasn't on his death bed."

"I still may not have called." I held up a hand to forestall his oncoming argument. "Just don't give up, okay?"

He slumped and spoke in a soft voice. "I haven't."

"Good." I checked the clock on the wall. "It's time for me to go."

"Good luck to you, son," Rodney held out his hand.

"Thanks." I squeezed his fingers, then steeled myself for dinner with my dad and the CEO of MaxMart.

My dad hadn't picked the most expensive restaurant in town, which surprised me. The place sat in the top fifty, but it could have been worse. I'd told him I didn't have anything fancy to wear, and for once he hadn't offered to buy me a whole new wardrobe.

I tugged at the collar of the only button-down shirt I had with me as I stared at the front door of the restaurant. I was about to go against one of my fundamental rules: Never trust my dad. He'd stolen money from innocent people; he'd treated me like a slave after he'd lost his first fortune; and he'd then tried to make it all up to me with gifts and praise.

The year before, during his FRAB celebration, we'd gotten into a huge fight. He'd offered to buy me a place in

New York. I'd refused. He'd been drinking and had gotten belligerent about it. My oldest brother had joined in, and we'd gotten into a fist fight.

It hadn't been much of a fight, considering my brother was drunk, but he'd started it and I'd finished it. My dad had wailed that I was the worst son ever, so I'd walked out, telling him never to contact me again.

He'd reached out a few days later, begging for forgiveness, saying he hadn't meant it. After six months I'd started replying to his texts with one or two-word answers. I hadn't been surprised when he'd contacted me about FRAB this year. Honestly, he probably barely remembered what had happened.

Still, using his connections today felt like I was betraying myself. My dad wouldn't be surprised if I called and canceled. I could walk away right now.

Except this wasn't just about me. It was about Leona and the sacrifice she'd made for me.

I could do this for her. I closed my eyes and pictured her face in my mind. With one last inhale of the cool fall air, I walked inside.

The host took me straight to my dad's table, where I found him and another man talking like they were old friends. When my dad saw me, he stopped and stood as if I'd caught him doing something wrong. A grin spread across his lips, and he wrung his napkin in his fingers.

"Tanner," he said.

"Hey." I found my mouth dry and my heart racing.

The CEO—a thin man in his fifties with salt and pepper hair and an easy smile—stood as well.

My dad's gaze darted between us. "Tanner, this is Robert Anderson, CEO of MaxMart. Robert, this is my son, Tanner."

Where was my dad's usual bravado? I'd expected him to introduce us as loudly as he could in order to draw the attention of those around us. That way everyone in the room

would know that my dad had a relationship with the CEO of MaxMart. Instead, he kept his voice at a normal level.

“Glad to meet you,” Robert said.

“Same.”

We shook hands and sat.

The waiter arrived an instant later to take our drink order. I used the time to formulate my thoughts, and when the man left, I opened my mouth to speak.

Only Robert beat me to it. “You’ve been working on our training videos, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I hear things aren’t going as well as we’d hoped.”

“Every project has setbacks,” I said.

“A destroyed sound booth is quite the setback.” He spoke carefully.

“That was unfortunate,” I said. “And one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

He sat back. “I’m here to listen.”

My dad had been totally silent, which wasn’t like him. When I risked a glance, I found him watching me. He gave me an encouraging nod, so I talked.

“The incident with the booth wasn’t anyone’s fault, but I will admit that I was inside when it happened.”

Robert nodded. “So Juliana reported to me.”

Here’s where things might get hairy. “Do you know why I’m in New York?”

“Juliana said you had a family emergency.” Robert’s eyes darted to my dad. “Something about a grandfather.”

“A friend, but he’s like family.”

The waiter dropped off our drinks, took our orders, then left again.

Robert waved a hand. “None of this is news to me.”

Time to really dive in. “When I asked to leave, I offered to take some of the work with me and record it here in New York. Juliana refused.”

“We are trying to keep this very quiet,” Robert said.

“I know, but the timeframe is tight, and I honestly believed this would allow us to meet the main goal. Did Juliana tell you that?”

“She did not.”

“Did she tell you that Leona offered me payment for my work?”

“Payment?” His eyebrows furrowed.

I nodded, then shared what Leona had told me. Robert’s expression darkened and he shook his head. “I haven’t heard any of this.”

“I didn’t think you had, which is why I asked my dad to set up this meeting.” I gave my dad a quick smile. “If you loosen the contract a little then we’ll be able to get the project finished on time. I don’t need to get paid, since I breached the contract, but Leona does. She’s been working nonstop making sure this thing gets done.”

“I’ve only spoken with her once,” Robert said.

“I suggest you take time to do so.” The more I thought about it, the more everything Juliana had done felt wrong. “I also think you should talk to Juliana. She seems to be holding this project back while at the same time rushing it.”

Robert sat forward. “She’s gunning for my job.”

I blinked. “She’s what?”

“She thinks she should be CEO.”

That’s a twist I hadn’t seen coming. “Should she?”

“No. She’s not qualified.” He glanced at my dad. “She’s already tried to drag me down through a scandal, but since

nothing happened and I had multiple witnesses to corroborate my story, she had to back off. This might be another way of her getting to me.” Robert let out a huff. “I didn’t think she’d pull this project into our little war, but now that I know she has, I can cut her out of it.”

“You’d do that?” I asked.

“I would. As a matter of fact, I’d love your take on the situation. How hard has everyone worked? How can we get everything finished on time? And when are you going back out there?”

“Back? Me?” Leona’s smiling face filled my mind, and the spot where it felt like I’d gotten kicked when I’d left relaxed.

“Yes. You. If your friend is stable and you’re willing to leave him, I’d love to have you back.”

My dad beamed. I’d wished for that look from him for so long that a lump rose in my throat. I glanced between the two men and swallowed hard. “Rodney is good. Grumpy, but good. And a few other people have rallied to help his wife. I can go back tomorrow.”

Robert smiled. “Perfect. I’ll make the arrangements.”

I held up a finger. “But if we delay a day, and you can get me the rest of my slides, I may be able to finish my work for the project.”

Robert studied me. “Why? I thought the others were splitting your work between them.”

“I’m betting they’re starting to burn out up there. Besides, I like a job well done, and I’d like to finish this one.”

His eyes remained on me for a moment before he turned to my dad. “You’re right, he’s a good egg.”

“Always has been.” My dad gave me a quick nod.

I returned it.

It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Chapter 35

-Leona-

“I still can’t believe you ripped your face off,” Brandi said several mornings later.

“It was the fastest way to show you.” I switched from warrior one to warrior two and squinted against the rising sun.

Gabriella followed my pose progression. “You do know how to bring the drama.”

The three of us were on the same rise that I’d been on when Tanner had found me.

How long ago had that been? A week? More? It felt like months. Thoughts of Tanner made my insides twist, so I pushed them away and focused on the here and now. I reflected on the moment a few nights before when I’d pulled my prosthetics off. The looks on Brandi and Gabriella’s faces had been priceless. If I’d had a camera, we would all be social media sensations. As it was, they’d stared at me for a few seconds, said some rather colorful words, then broken out in squealing.

“You two were the dramatic ones, with all of that screaming.”

“Because you ripped your face off,” Brandi said again as she went into a new pose.

I shrugged. “What can I say, I wanted it to be impactful.”

In truth, I was still half expecting them to turn me over to Juliana, sans nose, and denounce me in front of everyone.

“Did you really end up with broken bones after that mob got you?” Gabriella asked.

“I did.”

“I get why you decided to hide,” Brandi said. “I caught hate from a handful of kids at a con once after voicing a bad guy who killed their favorite side character in a show. That was three days of ugly. I can’t imagine feeling like the whole world was against you.”

I nodded. We’d been over all of this a few times, but I understood the need to rehash things. These two had, after the squealing, listened to my story without attacking me, then they’d asked me dozens of questions. We’d burned through all the snacks, and by the time I’d gotten back to my room, it had been well after midnight. Every time they saw me, they had more questions, but they’d also offered support.

I’d been shocked when they asked if they could join me for yoga this morning. I almost wasn’t going to do it, but how could I skip it after my friends had decided to come?

Yes, friends. At least I thought this is what having friends was like.

“Tell us about Tanner,” Brandi said.

I blinked. “What?” I hadn’t mentioned him much.

Brandi, who had her butt in the air, looked at me from under her arm. “Does he know?”

I’d been avoiding this topic, even though they’d dragged the truth about the two of us out of me earlier. “No. I was too chicken to tell him before he left.”

“Are you going to tell him?” Gabriella asked.

“I want to.” I moved to downward dog. “But I’m not sure how he’ll react. He hates deception.” My stomach lurched as I thought about the proposed conversation. What would he say? How would he look at me? Would he have a reason to stay? Was I a good enough reason? The real me?

I wanted it to be.

“You should do it,” Brandi said.

“He’s gone.” I set my knees down and stretched my back.

“You have his number, don’t you?” Gabriella asked.

“Yes.” Of course I had his number. I’d picked up my phone three times that morning alone with the intent of texting him, but I didn’t want to interrupt in case the surgery had gone badly, and he was comforting a new widow.

“I bet he’ll call you.” Brandi stood and reached for the sky.

“Same.” Gabriella joined her.

I got to my feet and willed air into my lungs and space into my spine.

“Tell us about your project,” Gabriella said as she pulled one of her legs straight up next to her ear.

“Uh, that’s not normal. You know that, right?” I shook my head.

“It is for me.”

“I told you she was crazy,” Brandi said.

“Flexible,” Gabriella corrected.

I looked away, mostly because my own muscles were seizing up just thinking about what Gabriella was doing. I’d mentioned my project in passing but hadn’t had the chance to elaborate.

“Actually, I could use your help with it, Gabriella. It’s a show for kids. I sent it to an editor, and she said my dialogue could use some work.”

“What’s it about?”

I spent the next few minutes telling them, thrilled to be talking about it. Even if the timeline had been pushed back because of the disaster this project had turned in to. When I finished and we were cooled down and drinking water, Brandi spoke.

“Do you have investors for this thing?”

“No. Just me. I’ve been saving.”

Brandi and Gabriella exchanged a look.

“What?” I asked.

“This could be big,” Gabriella said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you have this incredible story about how you had to become someone else because of your old life. Your show is kind of about the same thing. People would eat that up.”

“I don’t want the show to be about me,” I said quickly.

“Not about you, just a tie-in to your life.” Brandi waved her hands. “Each decision we make affects everything else we do, along with those around us. A lot of people don’t feel seen and would like to disappear or remake themselves. You’ve done that. Your characters do that. It resonates.”

What she said made sense, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to go in that direction. I needed the show to take kids on a journey that they could learn from in their own way, not my way.

Gabrielle piped in. “I think what happened to you should be something you talk about.” She pointed at me and my lack of a fake nose. “When is the last time this face was seen in public?”

“Five years ago.” And I’d planned to keep it that way, at least until I’d started listening to these two. We rolled up our yoga mats and started back toward the lodge. I hooked a mask over my ear so I could put it on when we got close.

“Five years of living a fake life.” She quickly went on. “Not a bad life, but it wasn’t you. You said last night that you’ve felt lost for a while.”

Gravel crunched beneath our feet as we walked along the trail. “I have.”

“This could be huge,” Brandi said. “People loved your character on *Outlast*. Even now, you have a lot of fans out there. The world has calmed down about your interview, and

I'm sure you could get huge amounts of support from all over."

I bristled. "What do you mean, from all over?"

"Use crowd funding!" Brandi grinned as if she'd had the most brilliant idea in history.

My fingers tightened around my mat, and I had to force my jaw to relax so I could talk. "No thanks. The mob mentality has never done anything good for me."

"You said your show is a couple of years away from being made?" Gabriella asked.

"That's right."

"Do you want to play Leona for another year? Or two?"

Revealing my true identity had felt more liberating than I had imagined. A weight that felt like a pile of wet blankets draped across my shoulders had lifted. I'd been able to use my real voice. Smile my real smile. Laugh at something I thought was funny.

I'd been wanting that for forever. I longed to do the same in front of Tanner. Trying it in front of the whole world hadn't crossed my mind, and my palms began to sweat as I considered it.

"Think about it," Brandi said. "You'd have our support, right?" She looked at Gabriella, who nodded.

A lump tried to form in my throat, but I coughed and then reached for my mask. We were only a few dozen yards from the last turn to the lodge, and I didn't want anyone to see me.

Gabriella gave me the side eye. "You could tell everyone here."

"I don't want to distract from the project. We're going to miss our flower deadline as it is." I hooked the loop around my ear.

"I guess that makes sense."

My eyes drifted to the trees, and I thought of Tanner. Of my hasty mud mask and almost running into him. I grinned at the memory, then my mind turned to our time in the garage, and loneliness punched through me like I'd been shot.

I needed to text him. Call him. Talk to him. Touch him.

Did I dare? He was busy, and I'd basically dismissed him from the project. Would he answer if I reached out?

"Who's that?" Gabriella pointed toward the lodge.

My gaze followed her finger and I found two large SUVs coming up the driveway.

"Oh no," I muttered.

"What?" Brandi asked.

"That's probably Juliana." I'd pushed the other woman from my mind because I'd had enough to deal with. Now she was here and would likely spend an hour chewing me out instead of letting me get work done.

"Let's toss her in the stream," Gabriella said.

"Is there a cliff nearby?" Brandi inquired.

I held up a hand. "Let me deal with her."

"Ooh, you just slipped into full Leona mode." Brandi smiled. "That's kind of cool."

"And scary," Gabriella added.

They were right. I gathered Leona around me, squared my shoulders, and strode toward the vehicles that had parked near the front door.

I could handle Juliana. I wasn't in the mood for her games, and since I wasn't going to get paid anyway, she had nothing to hold over me.

The driver's door to the nearest SUV opened, and a man I didn't recognize stepped out. He wore a casual suit. He moved to the back seat and opened that door.

I expected a woman's leg to appear. Probably bare up to the mid-thigh and adorned with high heels.

Instead, I spied a man's leg clothed in nice slacks and expensive shoes.

I frowned. Had she brought back-up?

It didn't matter, Leona could handle back-up no matter who he was.

The thing she couldn't handle was the man who came around from the far SUV. Tall. Dark. Handsome. Awesome hair. Great smile.

Tanner lowered his sunglasses and looked over them. Right at me. I faltered and slowed.

He gave me a wink.

The man with the expensive shoes walked toward me. "Leona? I'm Robert Anderson. We've spoken on the phone." He held out his hand. "I think we have some things to discuss."

Chapter 36

-Tanner-

The shock in Leona's eyes after I winked at her was priceless. I wish I could have seen her whole face, but she was wearing a mask again.

Concern rushed through me. Was she okay? Had she been sick? Did she need anything?

Robert was saying something, but I couldn't take my eyes off of Leona. She wore one of her yoga outfits and had twisted her long hair up into a bun. Since I couldn't see her lips, my eyes dipped to her long neck, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to run to her, take her in my arms, and kiss every square inch of her exposed skin.

Leona's voice jerked me out of my fantasy. "I'm sorry, Mr. Anderson, if I'd known you were coming, I would have been dressed appropriately."

Robert laughed and went to shake her hand. "I'm the one interrupting your morning routine."

"Not at all." Leona accepted his hand.

I could barely see the crinkle of Leona's eyes as she smiled beneath her mask.

Robert turned his attention to Gabriella and Brandi, who had apparently been doing yoga with Leona. "And who are these lovely ladies?"

I watched as Leona made introductions. When Robert began shaking their hands, Leona turned her attention to me.

I'd had no idea what to expect from her. I'd hoped she would be both surprised and delighted to see me. The surprise was evident, but I couldn't tell what other emotions were

hiding under that mask. Gabriella and Brandi started asking Robert questions, and Leona headed straight for me.

This moment had played through my mind a dozen times since we'd gotten off Robert's private plane, and I still didn't know what I should say.

In truth, words felt empty. I wanted to hold Leona. I wanted to thank her for letting me go to be with Rodney and Myrtle; I wanted to tell her how much I'd missed her; and I wanted to skip all of that and kiss her until we were both out of breath.

I barely recognized my own thoughts as they cascaded in circles that all came back to Leona and how much I liked her. How much I'd missed her. How much I never wanted to leave her side again.

Leona stopped in front of me, looked up, and raised an eyebrow. "What's this all about?" Her tone remained firm, but I could feel the sneer under the mask.

My hand reached out for her, but I quickly brought it back. Now wasn't the time for public displays of affection, even if all I could do was stare at where I knew Leona's lips were. "Oh, you know, just hanging out with my new BFF Robert."

She looked over at the CEO of MaxMart and then back at me. "No, really, what's going on?"

A grin tugged one side of my lips. "I think he wants to tell you himself." I jerked my head at Robert who was walking toward us.

"Leona, do you mind if we step inside? I need to talk to you."

She narrowed her eyes at me as if to ask what I'd done this time, then she turned to Robert. "Of course. Follow me."

Robert gave me an exaggerated wink as he and Leona moved up the stairs and into the lodge.

A car door slammed, and my dad walked around the SUV we'd been riding in. "How did it go?"

When he'd insisted on coming, I'd almost pushed back. I didn't want him here again, but he'd really come through for me on this, so I hadn't put up a fight about it. We'd talked a little on the flight here, and although he had offered me the usual "anything you want, son," he'd taken my no at face value and hadn't pushed. I wasn't sure if it was a one-time thing or if he'd actually changed, but I had decided to give the two of us a chance to get to know one another.

On a limited basis, of course. I was still cautious and didn't want to let things get out of hand. Even if he'd told me he wanted things to be different between us. Better. Apparently, our fight the year before had spurred him in a different direction.

"Not sure how it went. We'll find out when they get done talking," I said to my dad.

Gabriella and Brandi joined us. I bristled a bit with the memory of them trying to beat me up and then glaring at me each time I walked into a room after the booth incident.

Brandi spoke. "Tanner, what's going on?"

I very much doubted they knew about the deal Leona had made with Juliana, and I didn't want to give anything away that Leona wanted to keep private, so I spoke in generalities. "Juliana has been removed from the project. Robert will be overseeing us from now on."

"But we're almost finished." Gabriella's gaze moved to the front door of the lodge. "It's only going to be a couple of days."

"Maybe less if you're back." Brandi said.

This I couldn't keep to myself. I'd spent hours in a sound booth in New York. "My parts are finished."

Both women blinked at me.

I fished a thumb drive from my pocket. "Right here."

"But I thought Juliana said you couldn't record when you weren't here."

My dad laughed. “We went over her head.” He eyed me. “For the good of the project, of course.”

The two women glanced between my dad and me.

Gabriella blinked and addressed me. “So, you’re finished?”

“Sure am.”

“That means we only have a day of recording left,” Gabriella said.

“Hopefully,” I said.

Brandi opened her mouth, then closed it.

“What?” I asked.

She made a face. “Nothing. I’ll let Leona tell you.”

My throat went dry. Was there something wrong? Had I waited too long to get back here? Should I have called? Had Leona decided she didn’t want me anymore? My eyes drifted to the lodge, and I wondered if I’d played this wrong after all.

Chapter 37

-Leona-

I was breathing hard, and it had nothing to do with the mask I was wearing. Not only was Tanner outside, which is what I wanted to focus on in every single way, but Robert Anderson was here telling me Juliana had been removed from the project.

What had Tanner done?

The urge to run into his arms had almost been overwhelming. I'd felt like a little kid who'd been offered a candy bar but had to not touch it for five minutes in order to get permission to eat it.

I didn't like waiting. I didn't like the unknown. I didn't like having to walk away from Tanner when all I wanted to do was talk to him. Hold his hand. Let him hug me. Then kiss him until I felt better.

Although without my prosthetics on, I wasn't sure what to do. Luckily, Robert had distracted me.

He followed me up the steps and into the lodge. We'd set aside a small study for private meetings or phone calls people needed to make, and I led him to it.

"Nice place," Robert said. "If I'd seen pictures beforehand, I might have joined you guys."

Just what I needed, another MaxMart manager looking over my shoulder.

When we got inside the room, I shut the door and waved for him to sit. Then I remembered my manners. "Do you need a drink or anything else?"

“Nope.” Robert settled into a wide leather chair, sat back, put his hands on the arm rests, and studied me. He wasn’t as tall as I’d imagined, but that could be because after hanging out with Tanner most guys seemed short. Neat black hair peppered with gray topped his head, and he sported the perfect five o’clock shadow. Dark eyes watched me.

I sat on the squishy couch and mentally rolled my eyes when it sounded like it was farting as my butt drove air from the cushions. What a great first impression.

Leona had commanded board rooms, conference rooms, and private investors worth more than some small countries. I shouldn’t be nervous about talking to this man, but I was.

“Are you feeling sick?” Robert pointed at the mask.

“It’s probably allergies, but the last thing I want to do right now is give a cold to one of the voice actors.”

“Good call.” He smiled. “You’ve done a great job up here, by the way.”

“Thank you.” How much did he know about the project? Had Juliana briefed him? Was he playing nice, and I was about to get fired or sued? Or both?

“You’re, what, a couple of days away from being finished?”

That was a sticky question. If we hadn’t lost a booth and Tanner, we’d already be finished. Is that what he was fishing for? I decided to allow him to lead me into whatever trap he was setting. “About that, yes.”

“Too bad about Tanner having to leave.”

This was most certainly a trap. “Yes, it was too bad.”

Robert smiled. I expected it to be predatory, but instead it felt kind. “You’ll be happy to know that his friend, Rodney, is doing well. He should be going home today.”

“Th—that is good news.” Why hadn’t Tanner told me this himself? Of course, I hadn’t reached out either. Maybe we

were both at fault.

Robert went on. “And you’ll also be happy to hear that Tanner has recorded the rest of his parts and is likely giving them to Lyle as we speak.”

I blinked. I tried to pause the moment so I could parse his words. Tanner had recorded MaxMart stuff while in New York? How had he gotten a hold of the slides and the script?

Then it hit me. I was talking to the CEO of MaxMart. This guy could get whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. “You got him what he needed,” I said.

“Sure did.” Robert looked pleased. “When he came to me and informed me about what Juliana had been doing, I knew I had to step in.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Tanner reached out to me through his dad, and when he told me what had happened, I pulled Juliana into my office.”

Comeuppance was one of my favorite words. It all stemmed from watching *The Mummy* with Brendan Fraser. The librarian in it used that word, and I’d sort of loved it ever since.

Robert continued. “When I finally got her to tell me everything, I took her off the project and strongly suggested she get a new job. Honestly, I’m not sure if she was trying to sabotage this project or get it through early in order to impress the board. She had plans within plans, and most of them have now imploded.”

My jaw swung open. He couldn’t see my mouth, but the surprise in my eyes must have been enough. He chuckled.

“There’s more to it than that, but suffice it to say that she will no longer be bothering you.”

The information took a moment to process. No Juliana. What did that mean for our contracts? For the bonuses? For me? Was he going to change the conditions or leave them as

they were? Would he stand behind Juliana's decisions or make his own?

I didn't have to wait long for an answer. Robert looked me right in the eye and smiled. "Whatever Juliana told you that wasn't in writing, consider it null. If your team can get this project finished within forty-eight hours, I'll honor the main deadline bonuses, including Tanner's, and more importantly, yours."

With this deal, I'd only have to save for a year before I could fund my show. Maybe less. "That's very generous of you."

"Tanner told me how hard you and everyone here have worked to get this thing done. MaxMart appreciates your effort and wants to reward you." He leaned forward. "Plus, when Juliana finds out, she's going to be spitfire mad and won't be able to do anything about it. Which, I have to admit, makes me all warm and fuzzy inside."

CEOs of world-wide, billion-dollar companies didn't usually talk like this. I found it refreshing.

"Comeuppance," I muttered.

"Exactly," Robert said. He stood and held out his hand. "If you don't mind, I'm going to stick around and watch you guys work for the day. I've always wanted to see a sound booth in action, and I'd love to witness everyone in their element."

I got to my feet and shook his hand. "It will be a pleasure to have you here."

When we broke contact, Robert grinned. "Oh, and I think Tanner wants to talk to you about something."

"Does he?" I tried to sound professional but wasn't sure I pulled it off. Mostly because my heart began thumping in my chest, butterflies filled my stomach, my mouth went dry, and I suddenly realized that I looked like crap and couldn't remember if I'd used deodorant before going out for yoga.

“He does.” Robert gave me a nod and walked out the door.
“She’s all yours.”

Tanner was right there? I resisted the urge to sniff my armpits, absently adjusted my top, and clasped my hands in front of me.

Tanner stuck his head in, and his smile warmed the whole room. “Did he tell you?”

“He did.” I barely kept my voice even. The butterflies tried to propel me forward while my feet stayed riveted to the carpet.

Tanner walked to me but stopped two feet away. “I heard that you were planning to pay me out of your pocket.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“A little birdie told me.”

I narrowed my eyes and vowed to find out who had been eavesdropping.

“I’m glad they did.” Tanner took a small step forward. “Because you deserve the credit for making this project happen.”

He looked so good, dressed in low jeans and a maroon button-down top that showed off his lithe body. I took a breath and inhaled his cologne, which in turn, left my head spinning. My eyes remained locked to his, because if I looked down a few inches all I’d want to do was kiss him.

“Are you sick?” Tanner indicated my mask.

“Sort of.” A lump lodged in my throat.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” He took another step closer. The foot between us felt like both a chasm and the thickness of a piece of paper. “Anything I can do?”

I shook my head, no longer trusting my voice.

Two paths lay before me. I could tell him I didn’t want to get him sick, go to my room, put my face on, then come back

down and try to pick up where we'd left off. Or I could lay my lie bare before him and see what happened.

He was already finished with his slides. If he freaked out, he could leave and it wouldn't matter.

Only it would matter to me. I needed time to think, so I spoke. "Thank you for coming back."

"Is it okay that I came back?" he asked as he moved an inch closer.

"Yeah. It's okay."

Tanner reached out for my hand. His fingers slid around mine, and I shuddered in the best way possible. "I missed you," he said.

This time I moved closer. "I missed you too," I whispered.

He traced my cheek with a finger, sending lightning bolts down my neck and spine. "Just how sick are you?" he asked.

I closed my eyes, gathered all of my courage, and stepped back. The hurt look in his eyes made my stomach twist, but I needed to decide what to do.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to hold him. I wanted to tell him everything.

Everything.

I reached up for the loop of my mask but didn't pull it off. "I need to tell you something."

"You have mono?" Tanner asked with a grin.

"Funny, but no." I licked my lips, then froze up. What could I say? How could I explain?

"What is it?" Tanner asked with concern in his voice.

There wasn't an easy way to say it and have it make sense, but I tried. "Tanner, I'm not who you think I am."

"You're not Leona Ward?"

"Not exactly."

He frowned. “Are you her twin?”

“You watch too many romance movies,” I said.

“Do not.” He folded his arms across his chest. I was losing him. I didn’t want to lose him.

“I am Leona, but I was someone before I was Leona.”

Now his eyebrows furrowed together.

“I had something bad happen to me, and I took on a new identity.” This felt like a scene right out of a spy movie.

“Witness protection? Pretty sure you’re not supposed to tell anyone about that.” He was trying to keep the mood light.

“Nothing like that.” I closed my eyes and decided to rip the proverbial band-aid off. “My real name is Rosemary Bellemore.”

Tanner blinked. “From *Outlast*?”

I nodded. “After everything that happened with *Outlast*, I needed to disappear, so I became Leona.”

“But you don’t look like Rosemary,” Tanner said. “Did you have plastic surgery?”

“No. It’s amazing what a fake nose will do for you.” I tugged my mask off one ear and let it dangle. My skin prickled as he studied my face. Nerves made my fingers twitch, and I went to put the mask back on.

Tanner’s hand came up and stopped me. His fingers gently guided mine to take my disguise off. When the other loop slid off my ear, I felt more naked than I ever had before. I wanted to cover myself, but Tanner’s fingers tightened around mine. Goosebumps formed in the aftermath of his gaze as he took in every hair, every mole, and every millimeter of my face. We’d shared sensual moments, but this felt like the most revealing thing I’d ever done.

“I knew I recognized you.” Tanner put his palm on my cheek and stroked it with his thumb.

“Y—you did?” How could he have?

A grin tugged his lips and he looked into my eyes. “I did, and you’re as beautiful as I remember.”

Had I heard that right? “What?”

Tanner laughed. “I had the biggest crush on you when you were on *Outlast*.”

“You did?”

His other hand came to my face. “Huge. Crush.”

“But I was the bad guy.” Tanner was the exact opposite of a bad guy.

“Apparently, I’m drawn to tough, driven women with a dark streak in them.”

This time I laughed.

Tanner gazed down at me. “I do have questions.”

The lump in my throat returned. “I’ll answer them.”

“How much of us was you?”

The question sounded nonsensical, but I understood his meaning. “I tried to stay in my Leona character, but you broke her down pretty quickly. Honestly, you’ve helped me rediscover who I really am.”

“And who is that?” Tanner stepped close to me, his chest brushing mine. My face remained cupped in his hands, and every nerve in my body tingled in hope and anticipation.

I loathed to say the words, because they felt cliché, but to me they were one hundred percent real. “I’m a woman who thinks she’s falling in love with you.” I waited for him to scoff or step away, but instead he wrapped an arm around me and drew me to him.

“Really?” Hope filled his voice, like a kid who’d just been told he was going to get the gaming system he wanted for Christmas.

“Really.” I smiled.

Tanner leaned down until our foreheads touched. “I’m glad to hear that.”

My heart doubled its beat. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” His voice had grown husky.

I managed to voice one word. “Why?”

Tanner’s lips lowered until I could feel the heat from them, “Because I think I’m falling in love with you too.”

We stared into one another’s eyes, and in that moment, I saw our future. Tanner and I, the perfect team. We’d take the world by storm, but he’d always be my everything. We could have a family. I’d be his biggest cheerleader. We’d live on love.

Our kiss was deep, long, and filled with promises that would never need to be vocalized. His hands held me close, and I pulled him closer. For the first time in five years, I wanted just one thing, and that was to be me so that I could be with him.

“You owe me ten dollars,” a voice said from the door.

“I think I do.”

I cracked an eye and found Gabriella and Brandi peering in at us.

“You two better wrap it up. Robert is calling everyone to breakfast.” Brandi said.

Tanner gave me one last toe-curling kiss before our lips parted, and I had to stand on legs made of jelly. Like the good man he was, he held me up. “Shall we continue this later?” he asked as he nuzzled my neck.

I giggled, then pushed him away. “You’d better keep your distance. I’ve got work to do and you’re too distracting.”

Tanner bounced his eyebrows. “Me?”

“Yes, you.” I put my mask back on, gave him a playful glare, then snapped Leona around me. Only I knew this would

be one of the last times that I would do so. Leona would be gone by the end of the week, and then I could be myself again. With Tanner.

Epilogue

-Tanner-

Rosemary checked her makeup in the mirror for the sixth or seventh time.

“You look stunning,” I said in my low and slow voice.

She shot me a glare, paced to the other couch, and sat. We were in a large room used to prep for interviews.

Much to both my chagrin and delight, she’d worn a pencil skirt and killer heels. She knew how distracting her legs were to me. Rosemary smirked.

“Shut up,” I said.

“What?”

In retaliation, because that’s how our relationship worked, I sauntered over to her, leaned down, and kissed her. Nothing scandalous, just a sweet, loving kiss that I knew drove her crazy.

“You’re not nice,” she murmured just before I moved my lips away from hers.

“I’m trying to make sure you don’t implode before this interview.” I sat next to her and took her hand. In the six months since the MaxMart project, Rosemary had worked tirelessly to get her cartoon ready for production. I’d never seen anyone so driven. Through all of it, she’d made time for us, and at this point, I was so in love I might never recover.

Which I was fine with.

Rosemary let out a long breath and burrowed into my chest. “I’m not going to lie, I’m terrified.”

I put my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “The world is going to love you.”

She took a few deep breaths. “You can’t know that.”

“I know that I love you. Does that count for anything?” I’d professed my feelings for this amazing woman on a daily basis and was continuously surprised that each time I did she seemed surprised by it.

“It does.” She straightened and looked at me. “I’m worried. The last time I addressed the public my life fell apart, and I ended up in the hospital.”

“No one is going to attack you this time. I’m here.”

“You think you can take an entire crowd of angry people?”

I waved a hand. “This isn’t a studio. We’re recording this for YouTube. No one knows where you live. Everything should be fine.” I didn’t want to promise her that no one would be angry about her deception. Living as a different person for five years was hardly healthy behavior, but Rosemary had gone back to counseling and was about to share her story with the world. “What you’re doing is important. It will help people.”

Rosemary smiled up at me, and I took in her blue eyes. She’d worn brown contacts as Leona, and it had taken me a while to get used to the lighter color.

Other than that, I hadn’t had a problem with the transition. Some men may have felt betrayed, but within two days of telling me the truth, she’d told me everything. It had made sense, and I’d guarded her secret until now.

The door clicked and Anthony, the man Rosemary had met at All the Voices conference, came in. His blond hair was fashionably spiked out and he wore a light shirt under a dark blazer.

I dragged Rosemary to her feet. She kept a hold of one of my hands and squeezed hard.

“Hey,” Anthony said. “Ready?”

She nodded. Probably not trusting her voice.

I gently pulled her forward and through the door to the studio they'd set up. It had the vibe of a small-town talk show, with two couches in neutral colors facing each other and a fake backdrop mimicking the inside of a house behind them. Instead of huge news cameras, there was a small digital camera on a tripod and a dark-skinned woman running it. She gave us a smile and moved to Rosemary.

"Here's your microphone. This isn't super high-tech, so it's just you and Anthony talking." She gave Rosemary an encouraging look.

"Thanks." Rosemary clipped the tiny device to her jacket lapel.

"Let's get you situated." The woman waved for Rosemary to follow her. She reluctantly let go of my hand and did so.

Anthony moved to me. "Rosemary tells me you've got a project you're considering us for."

I'd barely mentioned it to anyone, because we'd been so focused on this, but I nodded. "That's right. It's a set of videos to help older people understand how scams work and to protect them."

"Not our usual wheelhouse, but we'd love to help."

"I'm not sure crowdfunding is right for my project," I said.

"Why not?" Anthony shrugged. "Everyone has a grandparent or a great aunt. I bet we could fund it in a matter of days."

"Really?" I'd honestly put it on the back burner. One glance at Rosemary and I knew she'd been the one to tell Anthony about it.

"Really. Get a proposal ready and I'll look at it right away." He held out his hand.

"Thanks, man." I shook. Then I lowered my voice. "Be gentle with her. She's terrified."

“Hard to believe Leona...” He coughed and corrected himself. “Rosemary, could be afraid of anything.”

I watched the woman I loved as she got situated and smiled. “She’s more fragile than she seems, but she’s also tough as nails.”

Anthony nodded. “Don’t worry, we’ll stick with the script. And anything she doesn’t like we can redo or take out. It’s not like we’re doing this live or have an agenda other than helping her.”

“I know.” My brain knew it, but I’d watched Rosemary become more and more paranoid as she went out without her prosthetics on. So far, no one had recognized her, but even without the fake parts of her face she’d changed, she was just getting comfortable with herself again. I didn’t want this to set her back.

“You can sit over there. Try not to make any noise.” Anthony pointed to a nearby chair.

“Got it.” I settled in and kept my eyes on Rosemary. She gave me a shaky smile before turning her attention to Anthony.

We’d gone through the questions together. She knew exactly what she wanted to say. Neither of those things kept me from wanting to squirm on my seat when Anthony nodded to the woman with the camera, and they started recording.

Anthony spoke first. “Hello, everyone. Welcome to the most unique project we’ve ever undertaken. If you’ve ever felt like you wanted to be someone else, but still yourself, you’ll want to stick around and watch this.”

Rosemary sat up straight and squared her shoulders. I could practically feel her pulling her Leona persona around her. I caught her eye and shook my head.

Her expression softened.

I blew her a kiss.

She blinked, then turned to Anthony, who was about to introduce her.

“Many of you might remember Rosemary Bellemore from the first season of *Outlast* and the scandal that followed.”

Rosemary tilted her chin up as if daring the world to come after her again.

“She’s been off the radar for quite a while, and we’re here to tell you why and how she wants to help others who may be going through hard things.”

I watched as the most incredible woman I knew crushed the interview. My hand wandered to my pocket where I’d slipped a small box. Suddenly I was as nervous as she had been.

An hour, and three takes, later Rosemary and I were back in the dressing room. She’d wanted to scrub the stage makeup off before we left. She stood in the nearby bathroom with the door open.

We were meeting Gabriella and Brandi for dinner.

Part of me wanted to make a big scene out of proposing, but I knew Rosemary wouldn’t like that. She worried about a lot of attention, which I understood.

So I’d decided to do it here. Now.

As soon as I could work up the nerve.

“That was scary,” Rosemary said.

“Yeah?” I sat on the couch trying to talk myself into going to her. “You made it look easy.”

“Hopefully they can fix any issues in post-production.” She turned and laughed. “And I’m glad they pointed out I was licking my lips.”

“I thought you were just missing my kisses.”

She gave me a dirty look and went back to scrubbing.

My phone buzzed. I drew it out and found a text.

Josh: Don’t be a pansy. Do it!

I laughed.

“What?” Rosemary asked.

“Just Josh.” I knew I shouldn’t have told them my plan.

Another buzz.

Justin: Hurry!

Then another.

Bryan: Don’t you love her?

Like he was one to talk.

Still, they were right. As usual.

“Your friends?” Rosemary asked as she came out of the bathroom.

“Yeah. They’re dorks.” I put my phone down and stood.

Rosemary raised her eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.” I took a step toward her.

“You’re giving me that look.” She narrowed her eyes at me.

“What look?”

With one hand on her hip, she shook her head. “Spit it out. Did you invite someone else to dinner?”

My heart thundered in my chest, and my mouth went dry. However, looking at the woman I loved gave me strength. I put my hand in my pocket and walked to Rosemary.

She didn’t move.

I drew the box out and went down on one knee.

Her eyes went wide as I took her shaking hand.

“Rosemary Bellemore, I know I can be a lot to put up with, especially when I’m happy in the mornings and you’re not.”

She snorted. “It is annoying.”

“Do you think you can overlook it, because I love you so much it hurts.” I flipped open the box and held it up. “Will you marry me, Rosemary?”

I’d expected her gaze to go to the ring, but instead her eyes remained locked on mine. Tears gathered and spilled over as she stepped to me. Her hands cupped my face. “Tanner, I love you too. Of course I’ll marry you.”

Before I had the chance to put the ring on her, she leaned down and kissed me. There was no doubt about her feelings for me.

I slipped the ring on her finger, stood, picked her up, and twirled her around. She laughed, and it was the most wonderful sound in the world.

The End

If you’d like to read a hilarious couple’s interview of Rosemary and Tanner, (they are adorable) sign up for my newsletter [here!](#)

I email on Friday’s, and include new releases, great deals, book recommendations, and funny memes.

If you’re already signed up for my newsletter, check for the link to all of the couple’s interviews in the latest installment!

**If you'd like to read more Curvy Girl Romances,
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He's Just a Friend!

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He's Just a Friend

-Val-

Valarie checked her phone for the tenth time in five minutes. She had a quarter of an hour before the gallery opened. By some miracle everything was ready, from hanging pictures to the food upstairs.

Now she had to wait.

The gallery owner, Weston, jogged down the stairs and came to her. He moved like a man much younger than his fifty years and dressed like he belonged in a gallery in New York. "You might want to use the toilet before we get started. If things go well, you won't have time for a few hours."

"Good idea. Thanks." She gave the tall man a smile and headed for the back hall. Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor, and a floral scent hung in the air, until she opened the heavy bathroom door and went inside. Here a bland air freshener tried valiantly to stay ahead of the not so pleasant smells.

Once she finished, Valarie washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror.

Allie had helped her pick out the dress, and Val had to admit it made her lady curves, as Allie called them, look good. Really good. She'd sprung for a hair appointment and the girl had used enough product that the curls wouldn't be coming out for a few days. Make-up, check. Lipstick, check. Earrings...

Val gasped and touched an empty earlobe. She sent a quick text message to Allie. "Help!" Then she sent a picture of one of her unadorned ears. Before she returned to the gallery, she arranged her hair so no one could tell.

A buzz announced Allie's reply.

Got them. On my way!

Disaster averted.

Val's phone buzzed again; she checked it expecting to find a picture or something from Allie. Instead it was a message from work. She read through it and frowned. "Seriously, guys, you can't figure that out?" The guy sending the message was a senior software engineer. She was still a junior engineer. He should be able to trouble shoot one little glitch, but because she wanted to keep her job, and maybe even get a promotion soon, she smiled as she typed a reply, hoping it would block out the sarcasm that threatened to drip from her fingers.

"You ready?" Weston's voice sounded next to her, and Val jumped.

"Do you always sneak up on people?" she asked as she put her phone away.

"Just artists who aren't paying attention."

"I'll be more careful," she promised.

He laughed and pointed at the door. "You have a few people already lined up."

Val's thoughts froze. She felt her eyes go wide but couldn't do anything about it. The urge to look at the door battled with the urge to run and hide.

"The first one is the scariest." Weston gently took her by the elbow and guided her to her place in the middle of the oval gallery. "Are you coming to dinner Sunday night?"

"Uh."

"Don't tell me you forgot." Weston flashed his handsome smile.

"No, of course not." She had. He'd invited her to dinner with a bunch of local artists that were thinking about doing an arts festival. "I—yes. I'll be there."

“Bring a friend.”

Hopefully Allie wasn't busy.

“Or a date.” Weston gave her a wink. He stopped and let go of her. “Now, you stand there, smile, and look gorgeous.”

Look gorgeous? Suddenly the dress felt too tight and the heels too tall. Val longed for her sweatpants and fuzzy slippers. She managed a nod, sure her voice wouldn't cooperate.

Weston left her next to one of her favorite pieces, which rested on an easel atop the middle of the three pedestals that ran down the center of the room. She forced a smile before she looked at the door.

To her surprise, a group of about ten stood outside. She didn't know any of them. Maybe Weston did. Val's stomach began to twist, and she was glad she'd skipped dinner.

“You can do this,” she said through her own gritted teeth. “They're just people.”

Weston opened the door, and the people came in.

“Just nice people who probably won't make fun of you,” Val said to herself.

It had been years since her art had been on display. She'd been shocked when Weston had called her after she'd sent him a sample piece. Val had figured it would take her at least a few months to get into the gallery stroll, but Weston had liked her stuff so much he'd immediately invited her.

If she could sell a few pieces here and add that money to what she could save over the next few months, she could move into a new place and set up an actual art studio. She might have small dreams, but she had dreams.

To Val's surprise, another group came in, then another. They moved through the room, making quiet comments about each drawing that Val's ears couldn't quite pick out, before moving on to the next one. Val did her best not to tap her finger or bite her lip.

An older couple—so cute Val wanted to draw the way the two of them clung to one another for support—got to her and the woman smiled.

“Are you the artist?”

Val had thought this moment would be scary. She’d expected her heart to jump into her throat and her stomach to twist into knots. Instead, the woman’s kind smile and sparkling brown eyes eased Val’s fears, allowing her to take a breath and nod. “I am.”

The woman moved closer to Val, as if telling her a secret while still holding on to her husband. “Well, these are extraordinary. You capture the light in people’s eyes as I’ve never seen before.”

An unexpected swell of pride and joy ballooned in Val, and she had to swallow it back before she could answer. “Thank you so much.”

The woman patted Val’s arm. “My dear, thank *you* for sharing with us.”

Her husband gave Val a huge grin.

“Now, we’d better feed this guy before he gets hangry.” The woman rubbed her husband’s small belly.

It took Val a moment to get any words past the lump in her throat. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“I hope to see you here again.”

Do not cry. Do not cry. Val kept chanting in her mind. It would ruin her makeup. That’s it. The makeup.

“Who was that?” Allie appeared at Val’s side as if by magic. Her tall, slender, half-Asian roommate wore the perfect little black dress and heels.

“Just the cutest couple ever,” Val said, carefully wiping her eyes.

Allie held the gold hoop earrings out. “Allow me.”

“Please.” Val’s hands were shaking so badly she wasn’t sure she could be trusted with a sharp object, however small it may be.

“This place is packed,” Allie said. She gave Val a quick hug. “I’ll be upstairs if you need anything.”

“Rescue me from Jeremy when he gets here.”

“You got it.” Allie moved out of the way for another couple who wanted to say hello.

They were followed by a group of teenagers who were from an art class. Then a local man who was looking for someone to illustrate the covers of his books.

Val got lost in it all. She smiled and laughed. Gave advice and took some. Thanked everyone for coming and waved at the old couple as they left.

“It looks like things are going well,” a familiar voice said.

Val took a deep breath and went through her bullet point of actions to deal with Jeremy. Turn. Smile, but not too wide. Do not get close to him. Do not touch him. Do not encourage him in any way. If Allie didn’t come to the rescue in one minute, excuse herself.

If you googled software engineers online, Jeremy was the image that would appear. More round than not. Glasses that were at least five years out of style. Long dark hair to make up for the lack of it on top, and a smile that gave most people the creeps.

Jeremy was a nice guy, one of the most helpful at work, but his ego was a bit big for her taste. He’d been trying to get Val’s attention for a year, and no amount of hinting she wasn’t interested had gotten through to him. Still, she could be gracious. “Hey Jeremy, thanks for coming.”

At least he’d put a button-down shirt on instead of a geeky t-shirt.

Most people looked at the art. Jeremy didn’t bother. Instead he stared at her as if she were the most beautiful girl

he'd ever seen.

Which would have been flattering, if she was interested.

"Sold anything?" he asked.

"I have no idea. People go through the gallery for that. I'm supposed to stand here and look pretty." Probably not the best thing to say in front of Jeremy. Oops.

Jeremy leaned in. "You're doing great."

"Oh, thanks."

He stepped closer.

Val inched back.

"Are you having fun?"

Val could see people behind him wanting to talk to her and tried to side-step around him. No luck. Between his round belly and her round butt there was no getting through. She'd have to try something else. "I'm having a great time. Would you mind if I talked to the people behind you?"

Jeremy spoke over her. "I've never done the stroll before. Is the food upstairs free?"

Val leaned around him and held up a finger indicating to a girl she'd be right with her. "Yes, totally free."

"You want me to get you some?" Jeremy stepped closer again. Val retreated, but ran into one of the pedestals.

She'd sworn to be nice, but it might be time to be assertive. Where was Allie? Val took a breath, but someone beat her to it.

"Val?" A man leaned around Jeremy. A specter from Val's past, and one she never thought she'd see again. Blue eyes. Trim frame. Short blond hair. The smile she could never forget. Basically, a Greek God. Nathan Kelly looked almost exactly as he had the last time she'd seen him, ten years before.

Memories flooded Val's mind. They'd spent so much time together in high school. They'd had so much fun. A grin tugged at her lips, as Nate held out his hand.

She shook it. Words barely formed. "Nate, what are you doing here?"

Find out what happens next [here!](#)

A Note from Karly

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