

A close-up photograph of a woman's torso. She is wearing a red lace bra with black straps. Her hands are resting on her chest. A man's hairy hands are visible, touching her waist and hips. The background is blurred with bokeh lights.

BILLIONAIRE PLAYBOYS

PLAYING

Dirty

TORY BAKER

PLAYING DIRTY

Billionaire Playboys

Book 1

TORY BAKER

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“Write what should not be forgotten.”
— Isabel Allende

ONE

Parker

“WHO’S THE GIRL?” I ASK EZRA, MY BUSINESS PARTNER AND childhood best friend. We are standing inside The Met, drinks in hand, each of us wearing a suit worth too fucking much—thousands scratching five figures—and the kicker is I’m not usually one to put on a Brioni on a Saturday night, for a charity gala no less. I take a sip of the amber liquid in the crystal-cut tumbler, appreciating the burn as the bourbon travels down my throat while my eyes never leave the girl on stage. *Girl* isn’t the term I’d use to define her. The curves of her body leave little to the imagination in the dress she’s wearing, defining every slope of her body. She’s a woman to the core.

“Nessa Taylor, which is odd because Millie is meant to be up on stage tonight, yet Nessa is in her place,” he responds, a question in his tone. I quirk my eyebrow. My gaze doesn’t meet Ezra’s, though. It’s currently locked on the beauty whose name I was just given.

“And she is?” Forty-one years old, and here I am, asking about a woman whose background I could probably delve so deeply into I’d know the exact date she started her menstrual cycle with one quick phone call. Not that I feel the need to do that deep of a dive into Miss Taylor’s background.

“Only daughter to Ed and Maria Taylor from Taylor and Associates Software.” I don’t respond. The company he speaks of has been around for nearly thirty years, rightful billionaires themselves, making headway when cell phones

became smart phones long before their times, and judging by the smirk on Ezra's face in my peripheral vision, I'd say he can tell I'm more than intrigued.

"And where is Millie?" I soak in the vision on the podium, not moving from my position by the bar, knowing these damn events bore the fuck out of me, the only thing that will keep me occupied besides the beauty before me is the expensive bourbon. Who I now know is Nessa is a sight. Dark chocolate hair swept up in some kind of meticulous style, showing the slope of her neck, which is soft and delicate looking. Eyes that are such a vivid green I can see them from this far back, dark kinky eyelashes surrounding them. A plush lower lip my body is begging to see what it'd feel like beneath mine, wanting to see what they'd look like wrapped around my cock. My gaze travels lower. The white fabric of her dress dips low, displaying a tantalizing set of tits that has me licking my lips. Her waist is narrow, hips flaring out, and a long shapely leg is peeking from the slit of her dress with every step she takes.

"No idea. Millie said she'd be here, something about this being the only time you'd ever see her on any type of auction block, not wanting to feel like a cow being sold at a meat market." His response shines a light on exactly what Millie is to him. Huh, it seems my best friend has a vice after all. There's definitely more to the story that he's not willing to talk about right now. That's okay with me. There will come a time when Ezra lays it all out. Hopefully this time, it won't be with his fist hitting the next available surface or my face. My friend has a wicked fucking left hook. I drop the subject, not willing to be his next poor and unsuspecting victim.

"You better get your paddle ready. The bid is already at sixty thousand, Parker."

"I've got sixty thousand going once, going twice..." I'm knocked out of my thoughts of Nessa displaying her body on a podium much like she is now, with not a stitch of clothing on her body except for the heels. My imagination has run wild all while I almost missed my opportunity with the beauty in front of my eyes.

“Fuck.” The word tumbles from my lips. My hand reaches inside the breast pocket of my suit jacket, finding the paddle, raising it as a ring man walks in front of me, his face lighting up. He knows we’re about to get into a bidding war, except I’m not going to let it get that far.

“Sixty-one to number seven-five-seven.” He points towards me. The other gentleman bidding on Nessa is clearly older than even me, bald, sagging skin around his jaw, and a paunch stomach.

“Sixty-five thousand,” the man old enough to be her grandfather volleys back.

“One hundred thousand.” Silence seizes around us. Ezra’s face doesn’t give a hint of what he’s thinking, but I know he’s internally salivating for the moment when we’re alone to figure out what the fuck I’m thinking.

“Going once, going twice, any other takers?” No one says a word. Sure, this is for charity, but it seems only the old man was willing to go so far. “Sold to number seven-five-seven for one hundred thousand. If you’ll follow the ring man, we’ll get everything taken care of,” the auctioneer says. I dip my head in acknowledgement, not even looking at him. It seems Vanessa Taylor and I are stuck in a staring contest, one I’m not willing to break, not until I’ve got this lust-induced haze I find myself trapped by under control.

It’s not until she leaves the stage that I look at my friend. “Tell me again why we’re here?” I ask Ezra.

“It’s for a good cause, and clearly a certain brunette has caught your attention. You’re welcome.” He claps me on the shoulder, tosses his drink back, and leaves me where I’m standing.

“Motherfucker,” I say to his retreating back. I walked right into what seems like a trap Ezra created.

TWO

Nessa

“STOP FIDGETING.” I ROLL MY EYES AT MY MOTHER’S command, as if it were her who just stood in front of over a hundred people, watching as two men volleyed back and forth, spending a fortune for one night. Who spends that much money on a date? I mean, it’s for an amazing cause, helping parents while their child who is battling cancer. Plus, I also work there, so a double win. What I wasn’t expecting was the man who won. Tall, dark, and handsome doesn’t begin to describe the unknown man.

“I’m not squirming, more like trying to conceal the fact that I gorged on food before realizing it’d be settling in my stomach like a lead weight.” The Italian grinder I ate before realizing I’d be standing in for Millie is the culprit. My close friend, well, more like a sister, couldn’t make it. There are some major regrets on gorging on the delicious sandwich that consists of the softest bread, a variety of meat—turkey, ham, prosciutto, capicola, salami—plus the provolone cheese, topped with lettuce, tomato, and onion, and the spectacular condiments they toss the vegetables in before putting it on the bread. It’s freaking magnificent, except for right now that is. I was smart. The meal of the night where New York’s wealthiest and finest come to spend fifty thousand dollars on a plate barely contains any food, literally two springs of asparagus, an ounce of mashed potatoes, and maybe a few bites of whatever meat they deem appropriate. It’s why I ate before getting here, also the reason why I’m bloated. I run my hands down my

body, trying to move the fabric of my dress to hide my lower abdomen that is currently a food belly.

“Smart girl. I’ll be begging your father to take me for food afterwards. Try as I might, the board refuses to allow us to use a different catering company, or God forbid, a buffet. They act like it’s a horror to do such a thing, yet they’d still spend the same amount for the write-off, let alone the money we fork out for having an open bar. They could save the money on the atrocious caterer and put that money into Cures for Children. Maybe we should fire all these schmucks.” I laugh, finally getting the ruching to lay at the right angle to hide the fact that I overate and refuse to wear shapewear of any kind.

“Mom, a hundred thousand? Who is this man, and damnit, why does Millie have to get sick on this particular night?” I tack on the last sentence, almost feeling bad, except for the fact Millie is groaning in pain, shivering, body aches, fever, the freaking works. We were together only days ago. She wasn’t feeling bad, until the early hours yesterday morning. I received a 9-1-1 text telling me that there was no way she’d be able to make the event if she was too sick. I pivoted, telling her since it was my idea in the first place, I’d be her replacement.

“I don’t know him. We can ask your father if you can get him away from all the people stealing his time tonight. I need a drink, maybe ten,” she replies.

“I’ll be there right along with you, drinking my weight in alcohol but the time tonight is over.” Speaking of, I look around for one of the waiters who usually walk around with a tray of champagne. Now, I’m second-guessing this dumb idea of mine to orchestrate what we’d be auctioning. Instead of it being the boring and usual, like vacations, spa days, jewelry, sports tickets, or some kind of art, oh no, I’d have to go against the grain and do something entirely different. My grand idea to have the wealthy bid for dates to the super elite of the elite is slowly backfiring

“It is a shame that Millie can’t be here. What’s wrong with her anyway?” Mom asks, changing the subject as she waits with me until the mystery man appears to pay for his winnings, the

only reason why my nerves aren't as strung out as they could be.

"Some kind of flu. She has a fever, aches and pains, the works." I reach for a glass of champagne as a waiter makes his rounds, thankful for the liquid courage I'm about to toss back like I'm shot-gunning a beer at a frat party.

"Poor thing. Maybe next time, she'll be able to do this." The auctioneer calls for the next item up for auction. I had a feeling auctioning date nights would be a hit, and that theory was definitely proven right. I had a feeling it would in our circles, one I'm thankful I'm not completely entrenched in, the gold diggers, the women who attempt to trap a man with a pregnancy, and yes, there are some men who will have no problem using their charm, you know, like the movie where the man swindles women out of money, somehow managing to get away with it. I'm talking zero charges and the money is long gone and they aren't getting it back.

"We'll see," I murmur under my breath. It took a lot of convincing as it is; doing it over again will be impossible. I turn around, coming face to face with the man who is a full head and shoulders taller than me, has dark black hair and eyes that are just as dark, if not darker, a clean-shaven face, broad shoulders, tapered waist, and the fit of his suit pants molds to what I'm seeing are thick muscular legs. The suit in question looks like it was made especially for his body, not that I should doubt that it wasn't or the fact that it likely costs more than my Alexandra Vauthier dress, a dress I would never pay for out of my own pocket. Frugal is my middle name. It was a gift from my parents, my mother especially. She knows I'd attempt to pull out last year's dress to re-wear it, a major faux pas in these circles. Sadly, in the social circles we run with, not only would our family receive backlash, but social media would kick up a storm. It's bad enough that a two-page article was written about me going my own way instead of working side by side with my father. I love him, and if it were a do-or-die situation, I probably would. The loving parents I have adore me as I do them, especially my father, who is the techy person of the family. Any kind of computer and their inner workings, along with cell phones and their applications, he's all over it.

As for Mom and myself, we barely use ours to its fullest capabilities, an annoyance in my dad's eyes. He doesn't understand that we'd much rather use a paper planner instead of the calendar in our phones. We are who we are. My mother had a job working beside my father through my school years, having the flexibility to raise me instead of someone else, while Dad worked all hours of the day.

Now she works tirelessly at the charity she founded from the ground up after losing my baby sister to leukemia. It was devastating to our whole family, and this was the outlet Mom needed. We all rallied around her, too. It created an even closer bond between us, a bond so strong that even once I was off doing my own thing, being a typical teenager, pushing her away without the realization that I was doing it, she never admonished or tried to change what I was thinking or doing unless it was harmful to my mental, emotional, or physical wellbeing. For the most part, it was Millie and me riding around in one of our cars, listening to music, shopping, and eating when we weren't in school. Mom's charity, though, it's near and dear, one that helps so many in need, one that gives me joy as it helps so many others, yet it also hurts the deepest part of your heart. A charity for cancer, and not just any cancer either—childhood cancer. Two years into working herself into the ground, I knew exactly what I wanted to do once I graduated high school—nursing with a minor in business. If Mom ever stepped down from her roll, which I know she will eventually, that is if Dad ever retires, I'm more than willing to step into her shoes and take the reins.

“Hello, I'm Vanessa Taylor. You can call me Nessa, though.” I hold my hand out, slowly, attempting to introduce myself after staring at the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on for longer than normal.

“I know.” Okay, I guess we can add cocky and arrogant to the adjectives besides handsome. Awesome. What I don't expect from the tone of his voice is how he has no problem slowly undressing me with his eyes, and how I seriously need to get my head examined because I'm absolutely not the least bit upset about it.

THREE

Parker

“PARKER. PARKER HUDSON,” I RESPOND WATCHING AS HER body heightens with desire, the slight blush along her cheeks, the way goose pebbles dance along her flesh, and the more obvious would be the tightening of her nipples. Nessa can’t blame the air conditioning either, since I was witnessing the conversation between her and her mother. I didn’t let myself be known, rather staying in the dark shadows of the room as she rattled off more information than I was trying to find out, especially about Millie. Ezra will no doubt want to know, and I’ll give it to him, for a price.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Hudson.” I’ve got to hand it to her; she’s not what I expected. Of course, a woman willing to auction herself off in the form of helping children with cancer should have given me a clue. Her hand is soft, cool to the touch, and has me wanting much more than the date I’ve spent a fortune on.

“Parker, please call me Parker,” I respond, reluctantly pulling my hand out of hers when it’s the last thing I want. No, I’d much prefer bringing her closer, pulling her chest against mine, feeling the way her body comes alive when I’m near instead of watching it like I am now.

“Well, Parker, thank you for your contribution. If you’ll excuse me, I think there’s a gentleman who’d like to get your information. Then he’ll send over the details. From there, we can schedule our date.” As she speaks the last sentence, a deeper blush forms on her cheeks, the way she started the

conversation, keeping it more businesslike than I want, I'm glad to see she's unfazed.

"See you soon, Nessa." I take a step closer; she stays rooted to where she stands, a slight tremble going through her body. The dress does me all kinds of favors, showing me how she reacts to my presence as well as my words. My head dips lower. Even in her high heels, Vanessa is still a good six inches shorter than me. I'm almost one hundred percent sure she thinks I'm going to take her lips with mine. I don't, though. Instead, I graze her cheek. Her small intake of breath glides over my face, and the scent of something soft and sultry permeates the air surrounding the two of us. I inhale as much as I can to tide me over until I see her again. It's over before it began. Now isn't the time or the place, but it will soon. When there aren't prying eyes, whispering gossip among the elite, or for the next magazine article to do a four-page spread about a light kiss.

"Okay." Her voice is breathless. The ring man who helped me during the auction is making his way towards us. I nod in reply to Nessa, leaving her while taking care of the hefty charitable deduction.

"Mr. Hudson, if you'll come with me, please." I don't turn around until Vanessa does, wanting another look at her beautiful body, knowing it'll be my fist I fuck tonight as I use my imagination about all the ways I'm going to have her in my bed. "Here's the paperwork you'll need to sign and instructions on how to make the wire transfer. After it's been verified, I'll release Miss Taylor's number. You can make plans from there."

"Thank you." I take the paper, glancing over what would happen if I couldn't complete the wire transfer, how it'd be forfeited, and the charity could come after me for a percentage of the bidding amount. A bunch of legal jargon about this not, in any shape or form, being a payment for any sexual relation. The fuck? It's a sad state of affairs when it needs to be put in writing. These rich cock suckers can pay for sex anywhere else. I'd be willing to bet money half of them do, not that I'm

judging any of them. If the woman is willing, making a living, they aren't being taken advantage of, then have fun.

“Done.” I sign my name with a flourish, pull my phone out of my pocket, pull up my banking app, and instead of doing a wire transfer that could essentially take five to seven business days, I pay the fee to have it delivered to Cures for Children immediately.

“Thank you. I'll go verify that the money went through then find you when it's done to hand off the information.” We shake hands and part ways. I'm heading towards the bar, since my time with Nessa has come to an end for the night. Ezra will no doubt be there. Plus, I have some information he'd like to know in regard to Millie. I make my way, nodding my head to some, shaking hands with others, playing nice when necessary. This whole night isn't my idea of fun. If it weren't for our other business partners, Theo and Boston, who are both out of town for two different reasons—one on vacation, the other closing a deal on scooping up another floundering business, re-strategizing and making it a success.

“Get everything squared away?” Ezra asks as I approach him. He's standing at the bar, two tumblers in front of him, pushing one in my direction.

“Yep, it seems your Millie is sick, by the way.” I take a sip of my drink, the burning sensation giving me a moment of reprieve from the hunger that stems from Vanessa Taylor.

“She's not my Millie.” Staying quiet as he denies what we both know is the truth is easier said than done. I've known Ezra forever. Forming a bond with your friend when you both come from the wrong side of the tracks and growing up together does that to two young boys. Now we're self-made billionaires, something no one would have ever expected. All they saw were two young boys, working to help my mother and Ezra himself to make ends meet in any way they could. It was by sheer luck and a shit ton of determination that we were both accepted into an Ivy League College as well as received a full-ride scholarship. The debt that most incur while attending a prestigious school never came. We worked the entire time, starting our company while still in school. The four of us—

Ezra, Theo, Boston, and I—were roommates in the dorm on campus, and while Ezra and I didn't have the startup money like Theo and Boston did, they never held it against us. Ezra and I had the hunger, the thirst, and the drive to succeed. Not saying Theo and Boston didn't, because they did, busting their balls right along beside us. The only difference was, they had a fallback plan where we didn't. Now, ten plus years later, we're in the black, making a bigger headway each year. Our business is expanding and soon, we'll be branching out around the country.

“Whatever you say, Ezra, whatever you say.” I turn around, listening to the auctioneer once again. This time, there's nothing that holds my attention quite like Nessa did.

“I'm going to plead the fifth. Now, what do you say we spend more money? You can't be the only one to bring something home.” Too bad I don't tonight. Soon, though, very soon.

“Remind me again why we're here?” I change the subject, ready to leave before the meal is even served.

“Besides the fact that it's a tax write-off, that it's a great way to network, and you need to quit being a damn recluse?” Childhood friends, college roommates, business partners, and what does he do? Call me out because I'm not like him. I'd rather not deal with this type of bullshit. Behind the scenes is more my speed, staying out of the headlines, having zero social media presence, and not dealing with people who are willing to throw you under the bus to get ahead.

“Being a recluse is better than pretending like our money is actually going to benefit anything good. Look at this place, renting The Met. You tell me if all of this money is actually benefiting anyone.” These things are a joke, one that I've avoided like the plague, except for tonight. I take a healthy gulp of the bourbon, feeling the burn as it slides down the back of my throat, knowing I'll be needing a couple more of these to get through the stuffy bullshit.

“Actually, you'd be shocked to know that everything is donated, the plates cover the cost of the venue and food, and whatever is left goes right back into the charity, along with all

the money they're raising with the auction," Ezra's states, shocking me that this is a charity that isn't full of crooked CEOs taking the money and only a small percentage goes where it's needed.

"Well, fuck me running. I never would have thought." I'm at a loss for words. "What are you going to bid on?" The paddle everyone was given is in Ezra's hand. My own has been retired to the trash after bidding and winning on Nessa.

"Did you even read the email I sent you or the pamphlet they handed you as we walked in?" Ezra's tone is incredulous. I ignore him. If it's not work, it ceases to exist in my mind. He should know that better than anyone.

"I can't say that I have. If it weren't for Boston heading down south, I wouldn't be here." I was given notice yesterday that I'd be required to attend. Our company, Four Brothers Inc., had acquired two tickets, and there was no way Ezra was going to let fifty thousand go to waste even if it was for charity, so it was up to me to be here, on a Saturday night no less.

"Yes, we've heard. All of us have. In fact, I'm pretty sure half of the state has, for that matter. Now, shut up and play nice." He never did tell me what he was going to bid on, and I don't do as Ezra suggests. Instead, I turn my back, taking another healthy sip of my drink. The fact that I'm wearing a tie on a Saturday along with a suit should tell him more than enough. Even if it means working, you won't find me wearing this attire. Not on a weekend at least.

"Yes, Father." I smirk, knowing it pisses Ezra off when I say something to that effect. I know how to dig at my friend and thoroughly enjoy doing so every chance I get.

FOUR

Nessa

TOO MANY GLASSES OF CHAMPAGNE LATER, WHICH IS definitely not my usual drink, heels discarded, and the charity event finally winding down, and The Met is quiet, thank goodness. The only people left are the caterers and cleaning crew. I'd like to say I'm helping them. The sad fact is I'm not, instead pouring over the numbers we brought in, analyzing what did the best so we can cut the smaller stuff out next year and give our audience what they want. Usually, this would be Mom's job, but Dad asked if he could whisk her away, saying if he didn't get real food in her stomach soon, she was going to gnaw off her arm. I completely understand that sentiment. My grinder sandwich is slowly leaving my system. With the way the extra dry yet super sweet champagne is sitting in my stomach, I'll need food, water, and aspirin in my body, and soon like.

"We're done, Miss Taylor. The food that was leftover was sent to the shelter like you requested," Marni, the owner of the catering business, lets me know. Last year, it came to our attention how much food was still being thrown away after we allowed workers for the event to take what they wanted. So much was left, enough to feed at least fifty plus people. This year, Mom and I found a shelter not far from The Met and asked Marni to make sure it was delivered while still warm so it wouldn't spoil.

"Thank you. We truly appreciate your hard work," I tell her, even if I still think the food isn't worth the price we pay.

“Always a pleasure. Your mom took care of the invoice. See you next time.” Then Marni’s off without waiting for a reply. I sit back, the laptop in front of me, my eyes happy with the numbers I’m seeing. In no time at all, there will be a lot to help families who desperately need it. Money for things like hotel rooms, service animals to bring happiness to a child’s eyes, financial support, and a new wing to expand on the hospital. Which is sad in itself, having to expand a hospital for pediatric oncology. It won’t stop there, though; my parents want to do more in any area of pediatric care, and I’m going to help them every step of the way. I close my laptop, ready to call it a night before it’s too late to order a car. It doesn’t take me long to pack up my things, and since the caterer is gone, there’s no reason to stay. The cleaning service we hired has handled our events before, as well as a plethora of others. I slide my feet back into my high heels, my body protesting at the thought of walking, immensely. It’s as if all of the adrenaline from tonight is starting to drain, and I’m left feeling bone tired.

I grab my oversized shoulder tote that holds everything I could possibly need, minus a pair of flats—rookie move on my part—have my phone in hand to pull up the app to order a car, and head down, blissfully unaware as I walk out the doors to the building. Home, that’s where I want to be and I’m bound and determine to get my to my studio apartment that is in walking distance of Central Park. Believe me, when I scoped the place out after graduating from nursing school, I was tempted to take my parents up on their offer to upgrade to a different building, one that had a small balcony to sit outside and drink a cup of coffee on the days I’m not working nights. I didn’t, though. I held firm in saying no. My parents may be billionaires, but that’s not my money, and while yes, I have a trust, and investing in real estate would be the best way to utilize it, I wanted to do this on my own. The only thing I did allow them to help me with was furnishing a few things and the deposit, promising to pay it back. Mom and Dad ignored my comment and told me I did enough, made them proud, not asking for any and all handouts. They put money aside for my schooling at a young age. Going away to an out-of-state college wasn’t something I wanted, a homebody through and through, and to

be away from my parents? No freaking way. So, I stayed put, lived at home, did what I wanted with Millie next to me, only she wasn't in nursing school. Millie preferred a different avenue, took classes for business while working at a bookstore that has a coffee shop attached to it in the hopes that one day, the owners will sell it to her.

“Umph.” I walk into a hard body. A scent that is familiar from earlier tonight surrounds me—dark, woody, unlike any cologne I've ever smelt before—making me wonder if this is Parker Hudson's natural scent. Oh, to be a man, to do little to nothing with your hair, use a bar of soap for your body and face, clothes you throw on and know they'll look good because do men ever really have a day they feel bloated?

“Careful, Nessa.” His hands wrap around my upper arms, holding me until I'm steady on my feet. Stupid heels. If we weren't in the city where there's a heavy foot path, I'd be tempted to go barefoot.

“Thanks.” I take a steadying breath. “And so we meet again. What are you still doing here?” I ask without saying hello. All night, my mind was on the mysterious man. After he left the area where we handled the funding, I didn't see him again. My parents were mingling with their friends as well as some of the new faces I've never seen before. It made it hard to ask my dad who Parker Hudson is, where he came from, and why I've not seen him in any other social settings.

“I had a meeting. Didn't want to take it while in the car and dealing with the road noise. Why are you still here?” My eyes move from the black-on-black fabric that I know if I were to press my hands against it would be the softest material ever, and meet Parker's. When he introduced himself earlier, Parker was aloof, gruff, and to the point, doing things to my body with just a touch, much like he's doing now. My core tightens thinking of how he's gripping my arms and what else he's capable of holding while we're in bed together.

“I had to finish up a few things, make sure the caterer was set, which leads me to here. Do you want to share a car?” I ask, bolder than I'd usually be with someone I just met. If it were at any other event, I'd probably never suggest it, but since he

had no problem spending so much money for a date, I think he's a safe bet.

"I've already got one coming." That deflates the hopefulness in my chest, thinking I'd get a chance to get to know the man before we go out on a date, one without a set time limit.

"Oh, if you'll excuse me, I need to do the same thing." I recover while stepping back, my feet, calves, thighs, and lower back pissed that I'm putting them through hell.

"Nessa, that doesn't mean I'm unwilling to share a car with you." His hands are still on my arms. One slides away while the other moves lower, until he's got me in the crook of his body, guiding me out of the building without me saying another word. One thing I'm coming to learn about Parker Hudson is that while he doesn't say a lot, his body language says enough. He's also one to go after what he wants, and clearly, that includes me.

FIVE

Parker

I OPEN THE CAR DOOR FOR HER, HAVING GIVEN MY DRIVER THE night off after he brought me to the event. Giles doesn't usually work on the weekends, knowing I prefer to stay at home if I'm not at the office. Groceries can be delivered, my building has a home office as well as a gym, and the need to be seen isn't for me. I leave that task to Ezra, Theo, and Boston these days. Too many years to count, we were a different set of people, working hard, playing harder, making a name for ourselves that none of us saw coming, one that has stuck even now that we're older and wiser. It's a rarity to see any of us coming and going from a club. Having a new woman on our arm each night has long since come to an end for any event. That saying *young, dumb, and full of cum*, we were that. Money was coming in waves, investments were paying off. We all saved and were smart when it came to certain areas of our lives, except for partying.

"Where to?" I ask Nessa once we're both in the back seat and the door of the ordered car is closed, a service we usually only use for our company. I justified it with tonight being a work event, having no idea the vixen sitting next to me would rock my world.

"West 38th and 11th Street." The driver nods, then he's pulling out of the loading zone. I watch Nessa as she allows herself to relax, head tipping back on the headrest, eyes closing, allowing me to get my fill of her. Her hair that was in some kind of low sideswept style has loosened, spilling out. My hand itches to finish the job, to feel my hands tunneling

through it as I lift her head, lips meeting hers and kissing her for the first time. An instance I'd like to happen tonight. It won't, though, not yet. It's too soon, and I'm not trying to scare her off before I even have her. The rise and fall of her chest has me thinking she's fallen asleep, a fact Ezra would laugh about if he knew that I've stunned her into slumber by not conversing with her. The joke is on him. There's something to be said about the stillness, not feeling the need to have a mundane conversation, knowing what someone is saying without speaking. My gaze follows the length of her body, only stopping when I realize the slit of her dress has now risen up to her upper thigh. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. My cock has other ideas. It wants me to move Nessa until she's straddling my waist.

"Are you okay over there?" The woman beside me stops what was about to be a full-blown fantasy that had the potential to come to life.

"I am. I assumed you fell asleep." The ride to her place isn't long in terms of mileage; it's the traffic in New York that slows you down. A problem I usually have, especially when I'm heading into the office on any given day. Tonight, that isn't the case. We'll be making it to her place entirely too fast for my liking.

"Nope, just resting my eyes. The last two hours have gotten to me, not to mention today has been a day of non-stop going. I'll be glad when I'm in my bed, the blackout curtains closed as I sleep my Sunday away." Just when I thought I could get my semi-hard cock to calm down, she has to involve a bed. I don't respond, watching as she lifts her head, hands doing what I only wished mine were doing only moments ago as her delicate fingers pluck the pins out, one by one as the chocolate strands fall down, the soft curls blocking my view from her tight pebbled nipples now.

"I didn't realize you were the one running the charity event tonight. Congratulations. I'm told it did amazing and that all the proceeds go towards the organization." I recall Ezra nearly biting my head off with my pessimistic attitude towards tonight. It's why I'm usually the last one they'll have to press

events or a charity event. The last thing we need is negative publicity, and my penchant for calling it like it is isn't always welcome.

"Thank you. I can't take all the credit. My mother is the ringleader, along with many others. The date portion was my idea, though." The blush I saw earlier tonight tinges her cheeks once again.

"I'd say it was successful. There were plenty of open wallets at the ready." There was no way I was going to let Vanessa be taken advantage of by some old stodgy fucker. The thought of her on a date with the other bidder has me clenching my fists.

"Well, judging by my numbers, next year, we'll know what to do more and less of. I'm afraid spa vacations as well as artwork are going to be out of the picture." She puts the pins from her hair into her bag, probably the biggest one a woman could choose without it being called luggage.

"A travesty among women and men, I'm sure." The tone in my voice is sarcastic. Spending money on art that will one day become valuable isn't my idea of smart spending; it's more of a gamble. Unless, of course, it's a piece that already holds value.

"A pity, really," she plays into my words, a smirk on her face. My hand that was fisted has loosened. We both have turned toward each other, and I can feel the warmth radiating off her body.

"Hmm." My finger glides along the flesh of her leg, unable to resist the alluring temptation. I watch her eyes the entire time, reading her body language to see if I'm taking things too far too soon.

"Parker." There's soft subtle tone to her voice, one I'm going to want to hear in more than one way. I stop myself from traveling further up her thigh. That doesn't mean I'm blind. The way her slit is hiked to her hip, I'd bet another hundred thousand she's bare beneath the white fabric of her dress.

"Ahem, Mister Hudson. We've arrived at our destination." We're interrupted by the driver, probably for the better, too.

I'm not sure I would have stopped, unless Vanessa wasn't game that is.

"Thank you. I'm going to walk Miss Taylor up. I'll call you when I'm making my way back." Unnecessary parking tickets billed to the company is not a discussion I'd like to have brought up during our next meeting.

"Will do." I open the door and slide out, hand at the ready for Vanessa's. I want to soak up the last of her presence for as long as I can, not knowing which of the fifty some odd stories she lives on.

"You don't have to walk me up. There's an attendant," she tells. As soon as I have her next to me, my hand is going to her lower back.

"Then I'll walk you inside. Hold on a moment, please." Our car is still idling at the curb. I open the door once again. "I won't be long after all." I'm sure the driver can hear the annoyance in my tone that plans have changed.

"Of course, Mister Hudson," he replies, ever the professional. I back out of the car, take my place beside Nessa, hand going to her lower back once again, and guide her to the apartment lobby all the while trying to figure out a way to stretch this night out further.

Nessa

I'M NOT SURE HOW I SHOULD FEEL, IF THIS IS APPROPRIATE OR if it's not. Needless to say, I'm out of my element completely. Which makes no sense. I'm used to being around wealthy individuals. The only difference between others and Parker is that he makes me feel something no one else ever has. No, I'm not a thirty-two-year-old virgin. That doesn't mean I give my body away freely. The handful of boyfriends I've had in the past meant something to me. Did they ever make a spark of energy flow through my nervous system like the man beside me? Absolutely not. The tingle running through me right now with only his hand on my lower back is telling me Parker Hudson is unlike anyone I've ever known before.

"Thank you again for the ride." I guess small talk would be a good idea right about now, as he opens the door.

"You're welcome." His tone is deep and rich. As I lose the heat from the palm of Parker's hand that was on my lower back, I'm aware that his presence seems to loom over me in a protective way.

"Well—"

"I'll be—" we talk at the same time.

"Go ahead." I nod. Parker's hand reaches up. My eyes watch his movement the entire time. Hope blossoms inside me. Is he going to kiss me? Is he going to tell me he can't wait for our date that he paid for? Or maybe he'll demand that he sees me to my door. Which probably isn't something a woman should hope for. We may move in the same circles, but until I know

exactly who Parker Hudson is, I shouldn't hope that he pushes this further. Yet.

"I'll be reaching out when the charity releases your number. Are you sure you'll be okay getting to your door safely?" His fingers move the hair that's fallen over the side of my eye. Parker's hand doesn't leave my hair. Instead, the long, thick fingers push through until they're on my shoulder and his thumb casts along my collarbone. A place that shouldn't feel erogenous. It shouldn't make my body tremble, my knees quake, or my core tighten. And I'm sure Parker can sense exactly what he's doing to me. He'd be oblivious not to see it; this dress doesn't conceal a whole lot, a downfall I should have seen from a mile away after meeting him earlier tonight as well as when I tried it on. The formfitting fabric meant that while it had a built-in bra, it wasn't padded, and panties were a no-go after trying on the plethora of panties I own. Thongs were also a no, even seamless totally did not work. Nothing did. It meant going bare. Thankfully, I didn't spend every moment with Parker this evening. If that were the case, this dress that costs a fortune would be toast.

"I'm sure. There's a passcode you have to enter for each tenant," I assure him. "If you have your phone handy, we can bypass the wait. I'll give you my phone number now. Essentially, it's up to the winner and date to set up a time. The funds were verified when I left tonight. Not that I expected there to be a problem." I'm holding my breath at the end. Probably didn't need to bring up the money. It can be a touchy subject with some, and judging by the expression Parker is giving me, it is to him as well. "Or we can wait. It's completely up to you." I give him the out as well as I hold my breath, watching as his body relaxes a little bit with each passing moment.

"We can do that." Parker takes his phone out of his suit jacket, one that fits him like a glove. It's clearly tailored made and accentuates his body in all the right ways. I watch as the phone recognizes his face and it unlocks before he hands it to me without checking it for a missing text or call that is more important. Never in my life has that happened before. My last boyfriend would never willingly hand over his phone without

checking it first. There's one reason out of a million he's now an ex. I quickly go to his phone log, type in my number, hit *Call*, then hang up, adding my name to the number while simultaneously having his now as well.

"There you go." I hand his phone back. He gives me a smile, one that's more of a grin. There was no way to hide what I was doing. Sue me. I'm a woman who doesn't answer a phone number that's not saved in my phone, essentially doing us both a favor.

"I'll be calling you soon, Nessa. Until then." He dips his head again. This time I know, down to the marrow of my bones, his lips are going to press against mine. I tip my head towards his, but Parker does the complete opposite of what I'm expecting—his lips touch the side of my mouth, there and gone in a matter of moments, leaving me in a stupor. I'm rooted to the spot, wondering if he really just did that, probably aware that I was making myself look like an idiot, feeling things I shouldn't all along.

"Fuck you, Parker Hudson," I say to his retreating back in a whisper-soft tone. Two can play whatever game he's after. I'm not an idiot. He felt it. There was a hunger in his eyes, a grumble in his voice when we first met, and maybe this is an issue of his own he should work through. Well, too bad for him. He can take his hot-and-cold attitude and shove it where the sun doesn't shine. I turn around and head for the elevator, wishing like hell all I had to do was mash the button to get the door to open instead of having to be patient. Putting in a code and waiting is the last thing you want to do when you're ready to be alone with your thoughts. I'm not that lucky, though. I type in my code, stand, and wait until the elevator dings, doing my best not to turn around, refusing to give Parker any kind of reaction. Two can play this game.

SEVEN

Parker

“I FUCKED UP.” EZRA AND I ARE IN THE RING AT THE GYM WE prefer. Both of us in our gloves, shorts, and nothing else. An outlet we found early on in our lives, me to protect myself against my father, the man who had no problem raising his fist to my mother. It’s why I was taking my anger out on anyone who dared cross my path, Ezra included. Which is how we became friends, both of us a product of our childhood. His because of his mother preferring drugs over taking care of her eight-year-old son. My mom did the best she could, shielding not only myself but also Ezra if he was around when dear old dad made an abrupt appearance from one of his three-day benders. Whereas Ezra was always the optimistic one, I was jaded to the core. I saw the way cops wouldn’t help my mother out when they were called by our neighbors. The look of pity. It didn’t matter that she took out restraining orders. By the time help would come, he was long gone. A repeated cycle that happened entirely too long for my liking. Ezra and I were fourteen years old the last time my old man showed up. We grew up, we worked out, and because we were little assholes, the fights happened more and more, allowing us to home in on our plan, and it worked. That night, I might have gotten my ass beaten, bones broken, and skin bruised while Ezra held my mom back so Dad wouldn’t hurt her while simultaneously calling the cops. This time, with a child involved, things escalated. Instead of him running off right before law enforcement arrived, he was so deep into beating me down that he didn’t hear them coming. It was worth it, all the pain, the recovery, to see my mom shed that layer of her life. She

took Ezra in. No more foster homes or a boys' home that Ezra was threatened with time and again whenever he got into trouble. It was during those years we formed a plan, one that wouldn't have my mom working two jobs to make ends meet, Ezra wanting to give back for all she did for him.

"Care to elaborate?" he asks as I dodge a hit he was aiming at my head, thankful we aren't as stupid as we once were and use the protective gear the gym provides for us.

"I took Nessa Taylor home last night." It's my fist to his stomach now, catching him unaware, and he stumbles back a step or two. I watch as my best friend's face takes on a look of disbelief. "Don't look at me like that. You of all people know me better than that."

"Are you telling me you didn't fuck her? I want the words spelled out, not that you took her home and leave everything up in the air." I'd be annoyed if it were anyone else questioning where I did or didn't put my dick.

"I didn't fuck her. I didn't so much as kiss her." A point that pissed Vanessa off, as well as my dick. The fucker wouldn't go down, no matter how many times I took matters into my own hand, from the shower I took last night, painting the marble wall with cum. It didn't help. When I woke up this morning, the first thing my mind picked up was the way she could fill out a dress, owning the room up on stage, and how she had no problem giving me the knowledge that she wanted more when I dropped her off. It was hard to deny her, that's for damn sure.

"I don't see the problem here." We've only just begun, and Ezra stands back, chest heaving, hands on his hips, annoyance written all over his face.

"She wanted more. I left her with a chaste kiss and exchanged numbers. I'm pretty sure there will be only the one date, which I paid for. It's not boding well at all in my favor." Vanessa doesn't know that I made it to the door before I looked over my shoulder, waiting until she disappeared in the elevator. Not so much as her giving me a final look. Her back was what she showed me, all the proof I needed to know she wasn't thrilled with me being a gentleman.

Ezra doesn't say anything. He's mulling things over, his eyebrows arched, pulling his thoughts together, analyzing me and the situation to death like any good friend will do. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing. Word on the street is Taylor will be looking to sell his business or merge with another. It would be wise not to fuck it up. I was going to bring it up at our next meeting once Theo and Boston are back in town. His app building skill along with our e-commerce site, it would be smart to tap into his side of things and vice versa. Of course, that's merely from a business standpoint. The friend side of this equation is going to make you aware that not everyone is *her*." Anger surges inside of me. Ezra must see that it's taking root, too, since he readies his stance.

"I know Vanessa isn't her. She has nothing to do with that part of my life. I'm over and done with that part, but since you want to bring the past up, it's like you're looking for a reason to get your ass handed to you. This is the way to do it." I take a deep breath, attempting to center myself, not that it will work in any way, shape, or form. There was a time in my life when I wasn't a recluse, when I was young, wild, and carefree. That all changed with *her*. It took years to get over what she did to me, how I was taken advantage of, how it was Ezra, Theo, and Boston who took me out one night, showed me the proof. I got rip-roaring drunk and kicked her out of my place the next morning once I was sober. That's why I've put a shield around who I spend my time with. It's the epitome of the phrase *once bitten, twice shy*. "We're not bringing *her* up, not now, not ever again." Ezra's doing what he does best, poking the fucking bear.

"We'll agree to disagree. Now, take your best shot. It's what you've been after all along, texting me at an ungodly hour this morning." That's how we finish out our morning, hit for hit, jab for jab, landing one after another, an even match. We were both after using our fists to numb the pain, me from my past, and Ezra he's either here for the fuck of it or is battling his own demons. One thing is for certain: he'll tell me when he's good and ready, not a second earlier.

EIGHT

Nessa

I SIT UP IN MY BED AFTER A NIGHT OF TOSSING AND TURNING, the sheets a mess around my thighs, the comforter dropped to the floor, my body aching like it ran a marathon. Except I didn't, would not, and will not ever subject myself to running of any kind. My body is a mess from the sheer torture of clothing, shoes, and being on display for too many hours to count. I should have known sleep wouldn't have come to me easily; it was hopeful at best, thinking my adrenaline from the charity auction would come crashing down. It didn't. The opposite is what happened. It probably would have if not for Parker Hudson. He was like a wrecking ball against an activist group, not caring who or what got in his way. And damn myself for feeling as much as I am after only just meeting him. It was too late last night and too early now to call Millie, which is on my list of things to do today. Once it's a normal hour and the sun isn't slowly creeping above the building in the distance. Forgetting to close my blackout curtains was nobody's fault but my own. If I were working nights, I'd never forget something as simple as closing the heavy drapery. My mind wouldn't be a jumbled mess from what the magazines and headlines call the billionaire playboy recluse. Whereas his other friends or business partners are seen coming and going, posing for the cameras, Parker is nowhere to be seen for at least the last ten years, well, except for his one and only social media sight. Still, there are hardly any posts. The bare minimum is all he has.

“Screw Parker Hudson, screw every delicious inch of him, screw his scent, screw his deep and luscious voice, screw the molten lava eyes and perfectly groomed hair,” I tell the empty room, stretching my arms above my head. Even that causes a twinge of pain. Weird, I figured my lower back, legs, and feet would burn like wildfire. It seems my whole body is going to give me hell today. It’s either that or whatever Millie has, she essentially handed off to me. I get out of bed, my whole body protesting, which is never a good sign. “Damn it, Millie.” I feel a chill sweep through my body, really hoping it’s my body that is just run down, grabbing my phone off the dresser in my bedroom as I make my way to the door. A hack I did when I started working nights, then going back to days like I’m a vampire one week and then a human the other. My phone would go off, lighting up, not to mention I’d play on it for hours, do work that could wait when I needed to sleep. So, I put the charger on my dresser, and it’s where it rests when I’m in bed, the healthiest habit I probably have to this day.

I look at the display. Not seeing anything pressing, I leave it where it is. Mom will call me later, at a more reasonable time. Parker has my number, though it’s doubtful he’ll use it after the way we parted. That leaves Millie, and if I’m only feeling half as bad as she is, I hope my best friend is in bed. The remnants of last night’s outfit are still in the pile on the floor in the bathroom. My bag is by the front door. The way my luck is running, the contents are spilled out of it, shoes long forgotten because as soon as the elevator doors closed, that was the first thing I took off. There were no more pretenses since I was in the comfort of my own home. Last night, I took quick shower, not bothering to wash the mountains of hairspray out of my hair, the main focus being on washing the sweat away along with the makeup. God, the amount that was necessary to wear is in actuality what I’d wear all together for a year. This morning, I’m going to take my time, or as long as my weary body allows me to. Then I’ll get out, grab a bottle of Gatorade, swallow some pain relievers, and be one with the couch. The fact that coffee, an energy drink, or even a Dr. Pepper doesn’t sound good to me is all too telling.

“Crap.” The light in the bathroom is bright. I avoid the mirror because I’m a damn mess in the worst of ways. The plus side of sleeping naked is, it’s one less thing to tackle. I turn on the water, loving that hot water is instantaneous, and step right in. I should have known nothing was going to go my way after getting that text from Millie. It was my dumb ass that went over there, bringing saltines, ginger ale, chicken noodle soup, thinking she was pregnant because her period didn’t come. It looks like it was something else entirely, and now, judging by the shivers I’m getting underneath the scorching-hot water, it’s my turn. I wash my hair with shampoo, arms dragging ass, but there’s no way I can’t finish the job, especially with the mountains of product in it. Which means I’m going to have to scrub it twice, not to mention condition it. The plus part is while it’s sitting, I can enjoy letting the hot water run down my body while relieving some of these aches and pains. I get to work, my mind replaying the whole stupid encounter with Parker, wishing like hell I could banish it from my memory. Taking care of my hair should be my only concern. Well, that and my face, along with my body. Instead, I’m sitting, praying like hell this is some weird sinus thing, change in pressure in the air, maybe the weather is doing something wonky. Because if this is a fever, I’ve just shared my yucky germs with over two hundred people, one of those being Parker Hudson, and the worst part of the equation will be, I’ll be the first one to reach out to a man who had no problem shutting me down. No woman wants to look desperate, and sadly, that’s exactly what I’ll look like in the worst way possible.

NINE

Parker

I'M SITTING AT MY DESK IN MY HOME OFFICE AFTER EZRA AND I went what seemed to be twelve rounds in the ring, both of us conceding when we were finally worn the hell out, then we called it done. We were both hungry, and our bodies were feeling like the forty-year-olds we are. A quick shower, changing into our clothes, and we headed to the diner around the corner, where we talked some more. Ezra went into detail on how he'd like to present to Taylor exactly what Four Brothers could bring to the table if this were to work out the way he wanted. I was all for it. Ezra was the frontrunner along with Boston. Those two could charm the panties off a nun with one look alone. After a breakfast that consisted of eggs, bacon, waffles, and black coffee, a much better outlook on how to fix up one major fuckup on my part, we went our separate ways.

I pull up Nessa's contact, hit the call button, and bring the phone up to my ear. It rings a few times. I figure she's still asleep after the event last night. She may not even answer.

"Hey, just the person I needed to call, except I fell asleep. Shit." Her voice is husky. I chuckle at the unladylike language she uses. Other ladies in this three-ring circus would never.

"Hello, Nessa, I was unsure if you'd even answer the phone when I called. Did I wake you?" Her voice sounds as if she's been asleep for more than the twelve hours since I dropped her off inside the building.

"Not really, no. I woke up this morning sick. I'm going to kick my best friend's butt. Feel free to do the same thing when

you're also sick like I am now," she mumbles into the phone. I can hear her teeth chatter as if she's freezing. It may be New York, and while it's still cold this time of year, she shouldn't be freezing in her own apartment.

"I don't get sick. I'm on my way to your place now." I put my computer on sleep mode and stand up, my desk chair slamming into the bookcase behind me. I look down at the clothes I'm wearing; they're decent enough. A pair of gray sweatpants, a black cotton tee. All I need to do is grab my keys, wallet, and put some shoes on my feet. Then a quick stop at the small grocery store that will have everything she'll need to get back on her feet.

"No, Parker, you can't. You'll get sick, and then I'll feel even worse. It's bad enough I potentially spread my germs at the event last night, but maybe I've spared you. Stay home. I promise I'll call you as soon as this fever goes away." A yawn escapes her, letting me know I'll be losing her if I don't get a move on things.

"I won't get sick. Send me the code to your place. I'm assuming you've got not a single thing to see you through this. There's no way you're going to be on your own through the worst of it." I don't leave room for her to argue, and truthfully, I doubt she's got the energy for it.

"I'll be fine. I'm going back to sleep now."

"Nessa, either give me the code, or I'll be banging on your apartment door after I bribe the attendant," I tell her.

"Whatever, bossy pants. It's eight-six-seven. Bye, Parker." The distinct click in my ear has me seeing red.

"She hung up on me. What the fuck?" My hand runs through my hair, pulling at the ends, annoyed that the one woman who makes me feel anything at all has shut me down. Though not pushing things any further last night when Vanessa was more than willing didn't help either. I'm jaded, through and through.

I walk through my brownstone, gathering what I need, knowing I'm going to be hoofing it to the parking garage where my car is stored on the rare occurrences I use it. One of

these days, I'll buy a home not in the city, have a garage, and not need to go into the office every day. That time isn't now, but it will be soon. I'm not getting any younger, and my body tells me that after every session with Ezra. It doesn't take me long until I'm at the front door, sliding my wallet in my front pocket, keys in hand, phone going back to my ear. I'm about to get a ration of shit for the call I'm about to place. It doesn't take but one ring until she answers.

"Hello, Parker." I know that tone. She's fishing, which means someone has already called and given my mother the lowdown.

"Hey, Mom." I walk the two blocks to where the parking garage is located, a few more steps until I'm at my Aston Martin. I'll either need to wrap this conversation up quickly or talk to her the entire time I head to the grocery store.

"Have any important news to tell me about a certain friend?" Only Mom would allude to a woman without openly saying it.

"I take it Ezra has made his normal Sunday phone call. Good. I can spare you details since he's hellbent on divulging my information. Vanessa Taylor is her name. She's also sicker than a dog and refusing help. I know we were all going to have dinner tonight. Is there any way we can reschedule and for you to send me your chicken noodle soup recipe?" I ask, hitting the button on the key fob to remote start my Aston Martin DBS Volante with a sleek black interior and exterior, a fortune for a car that doesn't get to be driven as much as it deserves.

"Don't worry about dinner with me. We can reschedule whenever. I can even come into the city for lunch this week, make it easier on you."

"Hold on, Mom, I'm going to lose you as I get in the car." One of the reasons I was hoping this would be a short call. Now that I'm seated in the car, I'll no doubt be on the phone for the foreseeable future. I love my mom, don't get me wrong, but I'm not much for being on the phone unless absolutely necessary. I spend a lot of time on it as it is for work, never mind the fucking computer. "Okay, I'm back. We can do lunch; that might work better. Ezra is talking about taking Four

Brothers into something bigger. It could potentially mean that my weekends won't be my own."

"That's fine. If Wednesday is good, I'll make the trip down, have lunch with my best boys, and maybe Theo and Boston will join us as well?" She's fishing again. I have to give her credit; Mom is good at what she does.

"I'll make my schedule clear as I'm sure will the others. You know if you'd allow me to buy you a place in the city, it would make life a shit ton easier." No matter what Ezra and I do, she won't give up the small place we all grew up in. We wanted her close, but Mom pushed back and told us this was the place that held great memories, not allowing any of the negative to hold her in a dark place.

"Not happening. Maybe if you boys would find good women, settle down, give me a grandchild or two, then I'd be more apt to move. As it is, if I were to move, I'd still only see you once a week, if that. No thanks. I'll stay where I have friends around me and where my work is." Another thing about my stubborn mom, she doesn't have to work. The house is paid off, her car is, too, insurance and phone are in my name. Ezra handles the utilities, yet still, she works part-time at the church daycare. You'd think she got enough of kids that way.

"We'll table this subject again. Can you send me the recipe, or a picture of it? It won't be long until I'm at the grocery store. Also what she'll need in regards to drinks and medicine. I don't know the symptoms, minus a fever and her teeth chattering." Pain reliever will help, of course, plus fluids to keep her hydrated. After that, I have no idea.

"I'm getting the recipe book out now. I'll add on what she'll probably want or need." I guess not getting sick is a blessing and a curse. I'm thankful because I never missed a day from school or now work, but also pissed because if I had any inkling, I'd know exactly what I'd need, keep it on hand, and cut out the time it takes to stop at the store and then have to fuck with a parking spot near Nessa's place.

"Thanks, Mom. Love you, and whatever day you come into the city, pack a bag. Spend a couple of days. It's been a while,"

I offer, hoping she'll take me up on it.

“You're welcome. Let me look at my schedule, but that should be manageable. The message is sending. Love you, son. The next time I have to hear about any important news from Ezra, you'll catch my wrath.” Clearly, the rounds we went this morning weren't enough to knock some common sense into his head. I wonder how he'd feel if I brought up a certain woman named Millie to Mom like he brought Vanessa up to her.

“Will do. Talk soon.” I hit the end button right as I'm reaching the grocery store that's close to Nessa's house, thank fucking God.

TEN

Nessa

THE DOOR OPENS AND SHUTS, RIGHT ALONG WITH MY EYES. I think I'm hearing things. Does this flu or cold thing that's going through my body have me hallucinating.

“Son of a bitch,” I hear a male voice grunt and something being bumped. That has me sitting straight up in my bed, body protesting as a shiver works its way through me. The sheet and comforter are more than likely soaked through from the fever that keeps coming and going. Though I'm completely and totally screwed. My genius idea to sleep naked is flopping right about now. There isn't even a robe, a shirt, or a spare blanket. Which leaves me with taking the sheet and comforter with me as I pat my hand on the bed, looking for my phone before I stand up. The tissues in my nose to stop the draining once I lay down are a whole other look that no one should be privy to. I reluctantly take them out since I'm not going to be in bed. There are still noises coming from the kitchen, like banging around, the open and closing of a cabinet. My hand finds my phone, clenching it tightly while I wiggle out of my bed, taking the deep rich-tone fabric with me, sheets that were an absolute splurge but worth it to the say the least. The comforter is crushed velvet in an apricot color, the perfect weight whether it's summer or winter. Really, when decorating my apartment, I chose to live in it before going gung-ho, only buying the necessities, then putting my stamp on it a little at a time.

“Where does she hide her cups in this place?” I know that voice. It's been in my head way too much recently, making me

realize it wasn't a dream that he called me, where I told him I was sick and Parker demanded my code for the door. Now that I know who's in my house, relief washes over me. It doesn't stop me from walking down the small hall in nothing beneath my sheets that I have wrapped around my naked body. I'm going to blame the fever, my nose being plugged up, body kicking my ass. Technical turns for a nurse, I know.

"Parker, what are you doing?" Crap. Now my throat is hurting, as if razor blades are scraping me from the inside out. I could seriously kick Millie's ass right about now.

"I told you I was coming over. Why are you out of bed?" I stumble back a step. The man who had no problem shutting me down, who said he'd come over, although I vaguely remember him asking or telling me that he was, is standing in my kitchen. Canvas bags are covering my counters. That isn't the only thing that has me confused. It's like Parker has two very different sides to him. The man I saw at the gala is completely different to the man who stands before me. Gone is the nearly ten-thousand-dollar suit, there's no tie around his throat, and what I'm sure were designer shoes last night are not on his feet today. He looks, dare I say, normal.

"I asked you first." God, talking is going to be out of the question today, as well as work. I'm due to be on shift later tonight, and there's no way I'd ever attempt or contemplate dragging my ass in there for one reason alone—the kids. I work at the same hospital our charity is associated with, so it was imperative that we made as much as we could to help families in need.

"And I'll tell you as soon as your ass is back in bed. Jesus, woman." Parker, who was making a ruckus a few moments ago, now has a box in his hand, glasses perched on his nose. The fabric of a basic cotton shirt is stretched over his broad chest, he's wearing gray sweatpants, his ankles are crossed, and he's leaning against my counter without a care in the world.

"I'd argue this case more, but I feel like my throat has tiny gremlins scratching their way out." I keep my voice low,

barely above a whisper, trying to see if that gets rid of some of the pain. Too bad it doesn't.

"Fuck, you're worse than you let on. I'll help you back to bed then get your medicine ready." There's only one problem. If he helps me into bed, Parker will realize I'm naked and, well, that would be hard to explain.

"I don't need help. I'll just take a shower, change the sheets, and go back to sleep. Thank you for bringing everything over, but you really should leave. No one should feel this way willingly." He tosses the box on the counter, the box of what I can tell is medicine, and prowls towards me, glasses coming off, the arm of the glasses hung in the collar of his shirt. I should back up, turn around, and run for my bedroom, an impossible task with the gobs of extra fabric surrounding me.

"Vanessa." He makes it to me in a handful of steps, less than my own would take with his long legs. A man on a mission is the only way to describe him. My head tips back the closer he gets, and my breathing gets choppy, though that could be from being sick. At least there's an excuse, even if I'm squeezing my thighs together, core clenching, and my nipples... Jesus, could they please not choose this very moment to make an appearance? "I'm staying. I don't get sick, and no way am I leaving you when you're barely lucid enough to remember talking to me on the phone." I furrow my eyebrows wondering how he knows. "Babe, you wouldn't be wearing your bedsheets as clothes if you knew I was coming. Go do what you need to do. I'll work on your bed sheets, then the soup. Once you get out, I'll have your medicine and lemon lime soda ready for you. They were out of ginger ale as well as a few other things. Seems half the damn city must be sick." I blink as unwanted tears are making a presence.

"Thank you," I croak out. Parker chooses that moment to cup my cheek. This man in front of me is not the man from last night. He's softer, sweeter, and I'd be lying if I said he wasn't giving me emotional whiplash.

"No problem. Now go." He drops his hand to my shoulder, the other meeting the other side of my neck, spins me around, and

swats my butt. Too bad I could barely feel the pat. I'm not telling Parker that, not yet at least.

ELEVEN

Parker

I WATCHED AS VANESSA LEFT ME, A TRAIL OF BEDDING IN HER wake, only turning away once she was in the bathroom, the door closed with her inside. The fact that my cock decides to rear its head at the worst of times isn't helping matters. Thankfully, with Nessa in the shower, it'll give me time to do what I told her I was going to as well as calm myself down. That theory went out the window when I heard the water kick on, wanting to know what she looked like dripping wet, and not from the shower. I got a hint of her essence last night, the moment we met. It was like her body was singing a song only for me.

“Get it together. She’s fucking sick.” I readjust myself. I’m wearing the wrong pants to keep things hidden. The last thing I want is for Nessa to think I’m some teenager trapped in a man’s body who can’t control himself. The chicken noodle soup will not be as good as my moms, since I’m cheating with the ingredients because most things were out of stock. I got the precut onions, carrots, celery, and garlic, then it was to the meat aisle. There wasn’t shit. Literally, it’s like all of New York decided they were going to make every soup imaginable. I detoured, grabbed a rotisserie chicken, then the last ingredient—bouillion. Another call to my mother was necessary, since I had to deviate from her original recipe. There was liquid broth, bouillon cubes, bouillon powder, and then some kind of gel-like consistency that was more concentrated. If there’s ever a next time, I think I’ll send a car for my mother to come into the city, make as many batches as

possible, and have it just in case. I fill a pot with water, add the vegetables to it, then set the stove to medium heat. Now it's time to get Vanessa's bed remade. I forgot to ask where her spares are, which means snooping will be required. I should have asked. Maybe I'll wait to finish the job until she's out of the shower. For the time being, I can at least strip the bed. My pockets are full of my keys, phone, and wallet. I discard them on the counter, so they don't fall out in Vanessa's bedroom.

"Mom, I'm okay. I was letting you know that I'm calling out of work," I hear Vanessa talking on the phone as I'm heading into her bedroom. Apparently, she didn't take a long shower, thank fuck. My cock and I are definitely appreciative of that. I take the pillowcases off the pillows, a damn ton of them. I must have counted six, and none of them are decorative like most women have, my mother included. The others could very well be hidden in a closet or something for all I know. "Running a fever, sore throat, chills, body aches. I'm sure it's the flu and it'll have to run its course. I hope Millie is feeling better at least."

It seems two of the four of us have our eyes set on someone. The only difference is, Ezra isn't giving information willingly, and payback is going to be a bitch once I figure everything out. Two can play that game; calling Mom and gossiping before the sun was even up.

"Parker's here, adamant about making sure I'm okay. I'll tell you more later." There's a pause. I smile as I continue my task. "I'm fine. He's a nice guy, and hopefully, no one else gets this crap. Now, I'm getting off the phone. My throat is killing me, and my fever is coming back." I hurry along, grabbing the used tissues I found littered on her bed, knowing if she sees them in my hands, she'll be embarrassed, and that's the last thing she needs. The pile that needs to be washed is by the door, a task I'll deal with once she's back in bed.

I walk back into the kitchen. The small apartment is the perfect size for someone who is single. The only reason I keep my barely decorated brownstone, the ridiculous square footage, is for investment purposes. The only reason I'll stay is if the housing market drops, but even then, I could rent it and

triple my money back in no time. It doesn't take me long to dump the trash in the bin, having figured out where everything was when I first came in. Then I'm washing my hands and checking the pot on the stove, if the vegetables are done enough, before shredding the cooked rotisserie chicken, along with the noodles.

"Parker." Vanessa's voice carries through the apartment. My eyes move until they land on hers, clad in an oversized hoodie with Columbia University in faded letters. It looks like it was once hers when she was in college. Her legs are devoid of any clothing, and I have to get ahold of myself at the thought of her possibly not wearing anything beneath the sweatshirt.

"I have your medicine. Don't worry, I asked the pharmacist what you should take. The sore throat is throwing me for a loop. Maybe we should go to one of those minute clinics or a walk-in clinic?"

"Thank you. You're doing so much for me, too much, really. Please, you can head home. I really don't want you to get sick, and a clinic isn't necessary. It's probably a virus, which means it has to run its course." She's got her hands covered by the cuffs of her sleeves, which makes her look younger than the thirty-two years I know Vanessa is. Yeah, I did my fucking homework once I got home from my time with Ezra.

"I don't get sick," I tell her again. Maybe she forgot me telling her on the phone and needs to be reminded. The pills are on the counter. I pick them up and tear through the foil until the pills pop loose, grab a glass from the cabinet, press the glass to the ice dispenser until there's enough in it since the soda hasn't had enough time to cool in her fridge, and then pour her a glass. "When I say I don't get sick, it's been well over twenty years since I've had so much as a cough." I make my way towards her, holding out the pills until she gives me the palm of her hand to drop them in.

"There's a time for everything. It's been years since I have been, too. So, I guess it was time. Which sucks because we're already short on nurses at work, and I'm not helping." As soon as she tips her head back, placing the pills at the back of her

throat, Nessa reaches for the glass, and yet again, my mind is in the goddamn gutter.

“I’ll take my chances. Now, ass on the couch. I’ll make your bed once you tell me where the spare sheets are.” Vanessa Taylor does what I least expect. She rolls her eyes and spins on her heel, ass shaking as she walks towards the couch, and fuck me, she’s got nothing on beneath the hoodie.

“Bathroom closet. I’ll never be able to repay you, and you won’t leave, but I’m too tired and hurt too much to argue.” She sits down on the couch, lifting her legs up on the coffee table, grabs a blanket, and slowly sips on her drink.

“Good, and I’m not doing this for repayment.” I don’t tell her the real reason, of how she makes me feel for the first time in too many years to count.

TWELVE

Nessa

THIS STUBBORN MAN, HE'S BOUND AND DETERMINED TO GET this stupid virus. Then he'll have the man cold. We all know what that means. He'll be on a war path or bemoan day in and day out how it's the worst cold ever. I may not have had a boyfriend for a while, given I took a hiatus after the last one's life goal was to live in his parents' house until they died and have a place to live without paying any bills, let alone have a permanent job he could hold down for more than three months. That's a subject I prefer not to touch on, especially because there's a certain man who has his body wrapped around mine, leg wedged between mine, my back to his front, Parker's warm hand on my lower stomach. The man cold I remember is definitely from my father. It could be the smallest little thing, and he'd complain for days on end. Meanwhile, Mom would have the same side effects, acting like nothing was wrong.

"Are you feeling any better?" Parker asks behind me. I don't even know when he got in bed with me. The last thing I remember is falling asleep on the couch after he was adamant I drank more of the lemon lime soda and ate a bowl of soup, focusing on the broth to keep me hydrated. I was dead to the world, which means my mouth was more than likely open since my nose is clogged one minute and draining the next. Parker is definitely not seeing the good side of me this weekend.

"I think so. Time will tell. At least I'm not working today or tomorrow." I'd sent a quick text to my lead nurse, and she said

to play it by ear. “I can rest, do laundry, and maybe get my appetite back.” I move slowly until I’m on my back, unsure how to navigate this. The man did give me mixed signals. Doing a complete turnaround within twelve hours has me hesitating what comes next.

“Good. The laundry is done, the bedding at least; not sure what else you have to do.” Parker goes up on an elbow, his beautiful face hovering above mine. His five-o’clock shadow is in full effect, making him look even more gorgeous. He’s lucky, waking up without looking like a disheveled mess.

“Parker.” I close my eyes for a moment to gather my thoughts.

“Stop whatever you’re thinking and whatever you’re about to say. I’m here because I want to be here. I’m going to get up, grab a quick shower, and work from here today. If you’re fever free today, I’ll go back to work at the office.” There’s no room for compromise, not with how he has everything lined up. It’s succinct and to the point. If this is how he handles problems in the office, solving them with a few words, it’s no wonder he’s a billionaire, and at such a young age.

“Fine. Thank you for taking care of me. I’m truly grateful. I will ask that if there’s some way in the future when I’m not sick, think of a way for me to repay you, and please allow me to help.” His hand sweeps the hair off my forehead. The soft intimate moment makes my insides quake, which isn’t necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. When I got out of the shower, all I could think about was getting Parker to leave. The clothes I chose to wear weren’t what I’d keep on if I knew he’d be staying the remainder of the night. An old hoodie, no bra, a pair of boxer shorts, and socks.

“That we can agree on. How about toast this morning? Your body has to be begging for real food.” When his lips go to my forehead, I figure he’s trying to feel if my fever is officially gone. He lingers, though. I feel the plushness of his mouth, wishing I could finally feel them against my own. “The way your body was shivering on the couch, there was no way I was moving you in here by yourself, not when adding blankets still didn’t help. Your body has to be depleted of the soup and drinks you had. If the toast helps, I’ll order lunch in.” He pulls

back, methodical to the bone, a complete type-A where I'm definitely a type-B. This could get interesting.

"Coffee sounds amazing, to be honest. Not sure how smart that would be on an empty stomach. So, yes, toast and hot tea would most definitely work." I start to sit up. Parker's hand hasn't left my lower abdomen the entire time. His eyes move from mine. I take a deep breath squeeze my legs together. He has an effect on me. One that takes hold of me, consuming me from the outside in, and I know if I weren't sick, Parker Hudson would easily consume me, body and soul.

"Christ, one touch, that's all it takes, and you light on fire for me." The once heavy presence of his hand leaves an emptiness in its wake. A small mewl leaves my lips, telling him without saying the actual words how he makes me feel. "Soon, Nessa, soon. We have to get you feeling better. I'll take you on that date. Truth be told, regardless of the auction, nothing would have stopped me from pursuing you, not one fucking thing." Wow. I'm stunned stone-cold silent, unsure of how to respond and left wondering if Parker even wants one. Instead, I watch as he unfolds from my bed, noticing his clothes are a wrinkled mess from sleep. That isn't what captures my attention the most. Nope, that would be the tenting of his pants. Maybe he doesn't understand a woman's obsession with a man in gray sweats. But let me tell you, it is fan-yourself hot. Add the fact that he's not doing a single freaking thing to conceal the fact he's long, lengthy, girthy, and I am never going to recover.

THIRTEEN

Parker

TRUE TO MY WORD, I WORKED ON THE COUCH THE ENTIRE DAY yesterday. My assistant brought my laptop and a change of clothes, along with lunch. Nessa sat on the couch beside me and turned on the television, some reality show that had me glancing up from my work to the nonsense she had on, which entertaining at best, without a storyline to be seen. That didn't stop her from settling down in her corner of the couch, opposite of where I was sitting, and curling her legs beneath her body. When she started to dose off, I moved things around, took a break from work, placed her legs on my lap, massaging her legs and calves until she drifted off. Only then did I finish my work, allowing Nessa to rest peacefully, knowing if her fever didn't return, there was no way to weasel my way into staying another night. Plus, I did need to get home, make an appearance in the office, and check in with Ezra, Theo, and Boston instead of texting them in our group message.

What I didn't expect was to wake up this morning, freezing to the bone and feeling awful. I sent a quick text to Ezra to let him know I'll be out for the next couple of days. His response said he hoped it was worth it. Fucker. I'm not bothering giving him the satisfaction of a response.

"Hey, Mom." She answers right away. Calling her was the right thing to do. If not, she would have to hear the news from Ezra, get upset, and yell at me through the phone.

"Hey, honey, what are you up to today? Back with Vanessa?" Her voice is always cheery, no matter if it's six o'clock in the

morning or now, closer to eight. A morning person through and through, unlike myself, who doesn't converse unless absolutely necessary unless it's via email.

"Nope, it's my turn to have whatever Vanessa had. I figured I'd call you before Ezra did. I'll be home for the next couple of days." One, two, three, and there she goes.

"Oh, Parker, you haven't been sick in so long. Take care of yourself. Better yet, why don't I take the day off work, travel down, and stay for a few days just in case you get worse?" I take a deep breath, loving that she's offering to drop everything to come down here, and while I love having her here, I really don't want my mother to get sick.

"Mom, don't. Then you'll get sick and miss more work. The daycare needs you." She lives for taking care of children. I firmly believe had she not been saddled with my father, things would have been different, starting with having as many children as she possibly could.

"Parker Matthew Hudson, are you trying to keep me away from my son, a son I birthed?" Mom is laying it on thick, and if I don't shut this down, she'll call Ezra, and he'll have her at his house so she can keep an eye on me through a window if need be.

"No, I'm not. How about we put our plans on hold, and you come down on Friday if I'm better? Then we'll resume our plans and you can stay for the weekend," I offer, though I'm shooting myself in the foot because now my date with Nessa will have to be pushed even further out if Mom accepts.

"Alright, when you put it that way." Thankfully, she agrees with me.

"Okay, I'm going to get off the phone and get some sleep. Love you, Mom."

"Love you. Feel better." We both hang up.

The next task is to call Vanessa. She's still home from work today. The hospital told her they'd rather she take more time off instead of carrying anything lingering around. Another thing about Nessa that I learned, she works at the same

hospital the charity sponsored, working with children day in and day out, seeing families and children have good days and bad days, watching as some go home recovering completely while others go home to say goodbye to their children. I don't know how she handles it as well as she does. My phone is pressed to my ear as I listen to it ring on the other end until Vanessa answers. I could have texted her like I did Ezra, and I would have if I thought she wouldn't question me. I knew that wouldn't be the case, so calling her was a necessity.

"Hi, I wasn't expecting to hear from you this early." I look at the clock, realizing it's not even nine o'clock in the morning. I waited as long as I could after calling Mom, my body fighting sleep. I grimace at the thought my call may have woken her up.

"Hey, I didn't wake you up, did I?" I ask before jumping into the reason for calling.

"No, I've slept so much lately that my body had me up as soon as the sun was shining." An interesting fact, since her room was dark yesterday morning when we woke up. She must have opened the drapes at some point when I wasn't looking.

"And you're still feeling better?" I'm unwilling to admit that my own throat is scratchy or that my fever has yet to break since I woke up nearly two hours ago. The pain reliever I had on hand is doing absolutely nothing.

"Much. Thank you again for taking care of me, Parker." I hear the gratefulness in her tone, and I'm reluctant to give her the bad news now more than ever.

"Anytime, Nessa. I'm going to have to reschedule our date we hoped to have tonight." I'm more than annoyed at the fact.

"Oh, no." Her voice softens. "Is it work and that I took you away from it yesterday?" I could take off a fucking month without anyone blinking an eye. Sure, they'd give me hell because they'd be picking up my slack. The only difference between me and the others is, I'm a workaholic, meaning the only time I take time off is when it's a national holiday. Still, you'll find me in my home office.

“No, sweetheart. It seems the man who never gets sick is now feeling it today.” I wince, knowing the woman on the other end of the line is going to blame herself. She takes a deep breath of air. “Don’t, Vanessa. This is no one’s fault but my own. You warned me, but nothing would have kept me away while you were sick. I’d do it all over again, okay?” I move until I’m on the couch, hoping the grocery delivery will actually be early for once. Sure, I only placed the order thirty minutes ago, but I also paid for expedited shopping and delivery.

“Damn it, Parker. I told you to stay away.”

“I very rarely do what’s expected of me,” I reply. There’s a reason I’m where I am today. It wasn’t from giving in or giving up.

“Well, then, it’s your turn to give me your address, and I’ll come take care of you. I mean, it is only fair. Plus, it’s not like I can get what is technically still in my system.” Vanessa isn’t backing down, not that I mind the fact that she’s willing to use her days off to spend playing nursemaid.

“I’ll text it now.” All the while, I’m looking down at my cock. The fucker is hard as a rock at the thought of Vanessa taking care of me, knowing that if I have my way, she’ll be in my bed tonight, my hands on her skin again, her ass cushioning my cock.

“Good. I’m glad you see things my way. I’m gathering the necessities now, and then I’ll be on my way.” I’d offer to order her a car. She won’t accept it, though. Thankfully, I’m not near as bad as she felt. The fever is a bitch, but the sore throat and body aches are more of an annoyance than anything.

“See you soon,” I respond, ready to close my eyes for a moment.

“Less than an hour, and I’ll be there. Keep your phone on you in case, okay?”

“Alright.” We hang up. My head meets the back of the couch, needing to sleep even though I got a full night of rest.

FOURTEEN

Nessa

“PARKER, CAN YOU HEAR ME?” I MADE IT IN RECORD TIME. I caught a taxi right when I was leaving my building, bags loaded down with medicine, a change of clothes, toothbrush, and the leftover food he was feeding me. I figure if need be, I’ll scrounge around his place to make something else. The toothbrush was a definite to pack. I had a spare at my place, but who knows if he does. That leads me to the here and now, standing on the stoop of his brownstone. It’s freaking beautiful, nothing like what I was expecting for a billionaire bachelor. I almost took a second glance at the address he texted me, when I gave the taxi driver the address. Even he let out a low whistle. Yes, my parents have money; they live less than three blocks away from Parker’s place. That still didn’t mean I was immune to the wealth. Humble, that’s exactly what I am. While other adults my age from some of the same social circles are living off their trusts, riding the coattails of their parents, I could never. Not only that, my parents also wouldn’t allow it.

“Parker!” I knock and ring the doorbell one last time, ready to put down the bags I brought plus the ones the delivery driver was dropping off when I got there, in order to call his phone in case he fell asleep, when the door opens.

“You’re going to wake up the dead with all that beating on my door, babe.” My jaw drops. One, Parker stands before me in nothing except for another pair of sweats, this time in black. Two, he called me babe. What has me slack-jawed is that he’s missing one important piece of clothing: a shirt. There, in all

his glory, he stands shirtless. My eyes sweep back to his face, taking in everything that is Parker Hudson, hair a tousled jet-black mess, more beard than a five-o'clock shadow, tiredness written all over his face, meaning I for sure woke him up. Why couldn't his house have an access code like mine does? It would have been easier on him. Now, I'm standing here, taking in the chiseled muscled display, the smattering of hair along his chest, and the deep V in his lower abdomen, attempting not to drool.

"Full hands. Clearly, you were sleeping. I'd apologize, but it's kind of hard to get inside when you don't have a key or a lock that has a code." He backs up, one hand on the handle, the other grabbing the bags that are loading me down on one side more than the other.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep, but after I made a few phone calls, my energy was zapped. I'll get you a key. There's a spare in the kitchen. Codes can get hacked. Not thrilled about the possibility of unwanted visitors inside my space." I step inside the doorway, head tilted to the side. Parker is standing there waiting until I'm out of the way so he can close the door. Meanwhile, I'm wondering if this is real life.

"They can be hacked?" A dumb question even to my own ears once I say it out loud. Anything can be hacked if someone wants in badly enough. I follow Parker through the house—white walls, a wall here or there that showcases the brick that's on the outside of his house, light wood hardwood floors beneath our feet, making me feel guilty for wearing shoes in his house.

"Yeah, I'd have had yours replaced if you didn't have the slider bar, which isn't much, but it'll do something in a time of need. That needs to be in place, Vanessa, all the damn time." He places the bags on the marble-countertopped island, the waterfall edge making a statement, along with the stainless-steel appliances.

"Hmmm, is that what it's for?" I joke. I usually always have it locked when I'm home alone, but I was so out of it after the charity event that I barely made it to the shower then to bed.

“How are you as energetic as you are? Lifting my head took it out of me.” I swear some people have it so much easier.

“I took medicine when I woke up. It’s wearing off now. My symptoms are mild compared to yours. Still feel like shit, though.” I take over what he was doing, diving into the bag with the medicine, doing exactly what he did for me only yesterday morning. It takes me longer. Parker looks like the need to take over is killing him slowly, but it’s out of the package, and I’m opening the ice-cold lemon-lime can of soda. Yes, it’s the middle of the day, but traffic was light, and I packed an icepack to keep everything from spoiling, just in case.

“Toast or soup?” I ask next after he swallows the pills, making it look sexy as he’s doing it.

“Nothing. You, me, and the bed. All I want to do is sleep. Maybe after a nap, I’ll have an appetite.” The husk in his voice is not due to tiredness; it’s lust, desire, and he yet again has my body tied in knots, on the edge of a cliff, waiting to see what’s going to happen next. “Key for you.” He holds out the silver metal after rummaging in his drawer for less than a second. Can the man be any more perfect? I bet he doesn’t even have a junk drawer with how fast he was able to locate it.

“I’d give you a key, but well, you have the code, so I guess we’re even,” I tell him. Parker has a chef’s kitchen, and given the opportunity to bake or cook, I’d take full advantage. I place my oversized purse I’m still carrying on a barstool. There’s no need to unpack it right away. I’m wearing leggings and an oversized shirt that has long sleeves. Though if Parker wants me in bed, I’ll definitely be looting his clothes for something different. He puts enough heat out to keep a whole room warm.

“We are.” I quickly put away the cold stuff. Everything else can wait. Parker watches the entire time, waiting until I’m finally done, then clasps my hand with his and leads us out of the kitchen, through the living room. I’m barely able to take in the rest of his place, making a memo to do that as soon as Parker isn’t sick and ready to collapse.

“Parker, I can’t keep up.” For every two steps of mine match one of his. People with long legs suck. They can see over the wheel of a car easier, clothes shopping is easier, and when walking, they can get there in half the time.

“I’ll just carry you.” There’s a grumble to his tone, and he stops us in our tracks.

“Oh, no, you don’t, big guy. You’re sick, have a fever and all of that jazz. Walking a tad bit slower would help.” I don’t offer for him to let go of my hand. Greedy, that’s exactly what I am when it comes to Parker holding any part of my body. He doesn’t respond. What he does do is slow down, thankfully, because the stairs are in sight, and I would no doubt trip going up them while trying to keep up with his pace. And a staircase it is. Three flights we go up. If someone ever wanted to retire at Parker’s house, an elevator would be a necessity. Still, he somehow manages to make it look effortless, and I’m the one with the perfect view. The shirt he isn’t wearing gives me all the access my heart desires to pant after him, a back that is as muscular as his front, the two indentations in his lower back, all the way down to his firm ass. Yep, I’d say Parker Hudson is one hundred percent perfect, even if he can give you mixed signals at times.

FIFTEEN

Nessa

TWO DAYS, THAT'S HOW LONG PARKER WAS DOWN FOR, THE same as me, though all he did was sleep, drink, eat, shower, and repeat.

"Parker, go take a shower. I'll take one in the spare bathroom," I tell him when it seems the worst of what we had has finally run through him.

"I can wait, or you can get in there with me." There's a playful tone in his voice, yet I know he'd like it all the same. The whole time I've been here, he never wanted me far away from him, not even in his sleep. He'd hold on to me like he was scared I'd leave him.

"No. Now, go shower. At least allow me the time to snoop around your house. A girl has to see if there are any hidden skeletons in this place." I've ventured around in between bouts of him sleeping when I could manage to wiggle out of his grasp during his naps without disturbing him.

"I've got nothing to hide. Next time you're here, you're in the shower with me." It's not a threat; it's a promise, a promise laced with a hunger that makes my thighs clench, my nipples pebble, and has me thinking about how we woke up not long ago. My head was on Parker's chest, leg hitched over his hip, the palm of his hand inside my panties holding the cheek of my ass. It was hard to miss that both of us are like octopuses in our sleep; it didn't matter if one turned one way or the other did, we were both glued to one another. The one thing we haven't done yet, that has me befuddled at one moment and

understanding the next, Parker Hudson has yet to kiss me. He's kissed my forehead, my cheek, and even my collarbone, which—hello! —might be my favorite of the three. Especially when he's behind me, waking me up with the softness of his lips before licking the area before nipping at it with his teeth.

“That's what they all say.” I roll my eyes, attempting to leave the bedroom before he talks me into staying. The third-floor bathroom is calling my name; it's beautiful in its own way but nothing like the master bathroom. That's also where the laundry room is and where my clothes currently reside in the dryer. It's a good thing I thought about packing a spare set because they were needed, not that I didn't pilfer a shirt or two from Parker. I often brought the collar of one to my nose to smell his unique scent when he wasn't looking.

“Hey, Nessa,” Parker gets my attention when I'm at the doorway. I turn around, still wearing his shirt and my boy shorts from last night. He's only got a towel wrapped around his waist, working fast from when only seconds ago, he had on what I'm not realizing is his favored loungewear of sweatpants.

“Parker.” He's literally trying to kill me from desire.

“Us taking care of one another, spending our nights and days together, doesn't constitute a date. The next chance we get, I'm taking you out, and we'll either end up back at your place or here.” I'm perpetually going to need to bring a change of panties with me wherever I go. A look, him talking, feeling him pressed against me. It literally doesn't matter; Parker has my panties soaked.

“You name the time, I'll be there.” I walk away. If I don't, I know what will happen. I'll run to him, leap into his arms, forcing him to hold me, and then I'll break. We'll shower, he'll do things to my body, things I've been fantasizing about. Parker on his knees behind me, my ass tipped up as he spreads the folds of my pussy with his thumbs, holding me open as he eats me. Or I'm the one on my knees, in the shower or his bedroom, one hand cupping his balls while my mouth slides along his shaft. The daydreams are endless, and they play in my mind all the damn time.

I'm heading down the stairs, ready to hop in the shower after I grab my clean clothes that I tossed in with a set of sheets. It was only fair that I took care of Parker like he did me. So, for me to ask for time to snoop around his house, that was a joke. I've been up and down all the floors of his four-story brownstone. The house is tastefully decorated, less color than I would have. I'm what they call a maximalist. I like color, furniture, artwork. The more the merrier, whereas Parker seems to veer more towards the minimalist style. The man doesn't even have curtains. To be fair, he does have this really cool setup where, with the push of a button, the windows can go from semi-tinted to full on dark mode, not letting so much as a streetlight peep through.

"Parker, are you upstairs?" I hear a woman's voice call out. My stomach sinks to my feet. He couldn't have, right? I mean, there's no way he could be gone from a woman's life for nearly five days without her checking on him.

"Parker Hudson, I know you can't possibly still be sick. Okay, fine, don't answer me. I'll send Ezra up." Jesus, I feel like I'm living in an alternate reality, stuck in limbo on what I should do. Do I hide, or do I meet this woman head-on, rip the Band-Aid off before it goes too far? Thankfully, a few more steps will bring me to the bathroom, where I can quietly shut the door as well as the world because I'm truthfully at a loss for words. My thoughts go on a wild ride. Is the reason he really doesn't have a keypad for his front door because people can hack into it, or does he just not want it for some other reason? Though, if that were the case, would Parker really be ballsy enough to give me a key so easily?

"Parker, yo, you okay?" I hide out in the bathroom, slowly creeping until I'm behind the door, my back to the wall, where I slide down, my ass meeting the cold marble flooring, head tipping back. And I guess this is where I'll be for the foreseeable future, because try as I might, I can't see Parker doing something like this. I think back on the way he took care of me, how he holds me against him, how we just seem to mesh together so effortlessly. The tears I was trying to hold back seem to come from out of nowhere, kind of like this whole fiasco of me hiding in the bathroom instead of facing

things head-on, a characteristic trait I wish I had. I'm not assertive. I'd rather hide and ignore the situation instead of looking it in the face.

"What the fuck are you doing here? Where's Nessa?" There's a frantic tone to Parker's voice, the thudding of steps beating rapidly as he rushes down to meet Ezra and what I assume to be a woman who's important to him.

"Vanessa is here? Son of a bitch, you didn't tell me that, or I would have kept her from coming down a day earlier." Fuck, fuck, fuck. The plot thickens, and not in a good way.

"She's been here all damn week." Parker sounds pissed. Me, I'm kind of heartbroken, but it's time to dust my emotions off, pull my big girl panties up, and face whatever is out there.

"Parker Matthew Hudson, Ezra Hudson, what are you two getting into? I swear it's like you're still teenagers." Great, now she's joining the shindig, and the bad part is, I can't not like her. If she's like me in this case, the poor woman has no idea what Parker is doing.

"Hold on!" Parker yells down the stairs. I roll my eyes and stand up, unsteady on my feet. Hello, emotional overload. "Ezra, swear to God, do not go looking for Vanessa in that bathroom, or I'll kill you." His footsteps sound heavy on the stairs and stop in front of the bathroom.

I take a deep breath and open the door. "I'm right here, but I think it'd be best for me to grab my stuff and head home." I conjure up the words, managing to keep the emotion from clogging my throat. I'd pat myself on the back, except that would not help matters right now.

"Why? Ezra is going back downstairs, or his eyes are going to be permanently glued shut." There's anger in Parker's tone.

"Yep, I'll just be downstairs. See you two later." He turns around whistling. Neither of us says a word. My arms are crossed over on my chest, and I'm trying to stay as emotionless as possible, but it's not happening. Parker studies me, no doubt reading what I'm trying to hide.

“Shit, Nessa, I’m so sorry. If I knew they were coming, I would have warned you. Ezra and my mom are known to butt into every aspect of my life without warning.”

“Wait, did you say *mom*? I thought—” I stutter. “I thought that was a different type of female.” I wiggle my eyebrows, the need to cry abating. Now I’m going to deal with a whole other set of reactions when it comes to the man in front of me.

“What? Fuck, no, babe. I get that you don’t know me that well, but I would never, scout’s freaking honor, I’d never, ever do that to any woman, least of all you.” He moves towards me. My fight-or-flight instinct is in full effect. I walk backwards. His hand moves, cupping my cheek, traveling towards the back of my neck, to hold me in place, not to hurt me. Nope, it seems Parker is all about protecting me.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect. It was so weird. One minute we’re completely fine, then the next a woman is calling out for you. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions.” I close my eyes for a second, trying to gather my wits.

“You’ve got not one single fucking thing to apologize for. You don’t think if roles were reversed, I’d be thinking the same thing?” He dips his head, licking his lips as he does, and I think I’m finally about to feel what his mouth can do to mine.

“Parker! I’m heading to Ezra’s. Call me later, and for goodness sake, next time, I’m meeting Vanessa!” I giggle.

“Fucking finally. I’m going to kiss you now, then I’m going to show you exactly what I wanted to do with you had you taken a shower with me.” He kisses me. No, scratch that, Parker Hudson takes me, effortless coaxing my lips to open, tongue sliding inside, and controls our first kiss. Nearly five days later, after sleeping together this whole week, I finally get what I wanted, and it was well worth the wait.

SIXTEEN

Parker

ONE TASTE OF HER LIPS, AND I'M FUCKING CONSUMED, READY to get on my knees, rip her panties off, and take from her. Nessa's scent invades my senses, begging me to taste her, which is exactly what I'm going to do. "Up, babe. Taking you to bed," I mutter against her lips. "Don't fight it. I'm not weak. If it gets too much, I'll tell you." Vanessa was gearing up to challenge me, but I'm shutting that shit down. I cup both cheeks of her ass, fingertips sliding beneath the shorts that make her ass look that much more amazing, squeezing and pulling her closer towards my aching cock.

"Parker." I'm unamused at the thought of letting her mouth go. We'll be lucky to make it up the flight of stairs and to my bedroom before I taste more than her lips.

"Fuck, the way you say my name in that breathless tone, Nessa. It only makes me want you more." My hands pull her closer, allowing her to feel my length pressed against her pussy. The thin fabric covering her center would be no match to me ripping them off her body. A quick tug on my own fabric, and my cock could slide right in, especially with how wet she is. The heat on the tips of my fingers as I move them inward, spreading the cheeks of her ass to get as close as possible, attests to that.

"Hurry." Her fingers tug at the strands of my hair at the nape of my neck. Good thing she's as desperate for me as I am for her.

“Almost there.” I can see the door to my room, almost cursing the fact that so many stairs are involved. The only good thing about this equation is that every step and jostle gives both of us a tease of what it would feel like if she were flat on her back or pressed against a wall, my cock sliding through her slick folds, making sure it works her clit as her wetness coats my length.

“Shirt off.” We’re finally inside my room. My legs meet the edge of the bed, which is still a rumbled mess from us waking up. Shit was hitting the fan, and I can’t believe I fucked up and didn’t tell anyone Nessa would be staying with me. What happened is a sign to take my keys back from Ezra because this has his name written all over it. He likes to conspire with Mom to make my life harder.

“Pants off,” Vanessa responds as I toss her onto the bed, watching as she bounces and lets out a giggle. It doesn’t take her but a split second to get up on her knees with little to no effort, hands closing around the hem of my shirt she’s wearing, slowly sliding it up one delicious inch at a time.

“I wasn’t looking to fuck you today, Vanessa. I take them off, I can’t guarantee that won’t happen.” She doesn’t seem to mind, not when the slow seduction she is currently tempting me with comes to an end, and she whips the cotton shirt over her head, allowing me to take in her beauty. A blush hits her cheeks, not from embarrassment or shyness. Oh no, Vanessa is full of pent-up desire.

“You act like I’m not the one who has all but thrown herself at you. That first night should have given you that inclination.” She arches an eyebrow. All bets are off now. My eyes take in the rest of her body, not that I haven’t looked. Believe me, I have. I’ve also felt her, the way she doesn’t have a single fucking problem not wearing a bra, her nipples tightening anytime I so much as brush my hand against her heated skin.

“Oh, you’re going to get it now. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” I push my sweats off my hips, stepping out of them as she drops to a hip, tits bouncing as she does, pink-tipped nipples tight, and damn, her fingers are working at the waistband of her boy shorts, about to bear her body to me.

“I can’t wait.” The fabric barely leaves her before I’m grabbing her ankles, pulling her until her legs drop over the side of the bed. I crawl up and settle my hips between her legs. I’m going to take my time, taste every delicious inch, starting with her lips. I don’t bother responding. With every breath she takes, my chest rasps against her chest, feeling her tight, pebbled tips as my mouth seeks hers while I hold her head in the palms of my hands, slanting my lips across hers. She allows me to take over. The dominant side in me peeks its head out, wanting to take my time but also hurry all at once.

“More,” Vanessa breathes into my mouth. My cock glides along her slit, wetness coating me along the way. She hikes her legs over my hips, and I feel her feet dig into my lower back.

“Patience, Nessa, patience.” I move away from her lips and coast down the slope of her neck, stopping at her collarbone. I know exactly what I’m doing. It’s her tick, the one that has her lifting her hips, attempting to notch her pussy at the head of my cock. I pull my hips back. I’d love nothing more than to slide deep inside her, but that’s not happening until I get a taste of her sweetness right from the source. I lick, nip, and suck enough to leave a light bruise on one collarbone before moving to the other, matching the marks.

“No,” she grumbles when I move further down her body, my cock leaving where we both want to be so much. I can wait, though. Vanessa, maybe not. Instead of responding, I wrap my lips around a nipple and pull it in deep, until my tongue has it suctioned to the roof of my mouth. She squirms beneath me. Her hands that were holding on to the messy sheets beneath our bodies move to my hair, tugging and gripping. The nipple I’m not lavishing with my mouth, I use my fingers on, pinching and pulling, trying to emulate what I’m doing on the other side. With the way she is moving around, it won’t be long until her patience is shot. Either that, or she’ll come without me using my mouth on her cunt. A thought I’ll be saving for a later date. I’ll see if she can come from nipple play alone.

“You want more, babe? I’ll give you more.” I move to her other nipple, allowing the air to do its job on the wetness I left

in my wake, knowing that the sensation will only have her needier and greedier than what she already is.

“Says the man who won’t lower his head further or give me his cock.” She arches her back. That’s when I leave her nipple. It seems my kitten is letting the claws come out, getting mouthy. If I had planned this any better, I’d be lying on my back, her thighs on each side of my face, licking her from clit to ass, seeing just how much of a dirty girl she can be, all while she takes my cock to the back of her throat.

“Next time, I’m going to give you something to do with that mouth of yours, Nessa, maybe with my cock, maybe with one of my ties,” I tell her as I kiss a path down the center of her body, stopping here and there to lick or softly bite the skin of her stomach.

“I’ll take your cock. Not so sure you want a thousand-dollar tie ruined by my mouth.” I lay my forehead on her lower abdomen, breathing her in, soft earthy scents mixed with the underlying tones of coconut.

“Don’t give a fuck about a tie, a suit, any piece of furniture. Having that memory seared to my mind, it’d be fucking worth it.” I lift my head, letting her see the truth in my facial expression.

“Duly noted. Maybe next time?” she questions. Her hair is a mess, from both of our hands, and I’m thinking I’ve met my match in every way possible. I dip my head, having dropped to my knees along the way.

“Definitely. Feet flat on the mattress, Nessa.” I help her situate herself until her thighs are spread open, heels touching her ass, opening her up for my view. I flick my tongue along her slit, my hands on her inner thighs making it impossible to close them as I take my first taste. A groan leaves me. After waking up, feeling her pussy on my body, her heat, and smelling her scent, I’ve got her right where I want her, open and willing. I drag my tongue down to her entrance, pushing inside, drinking right from the goddamn source. It’s liquid fire to my tongue. One taste will never be enough. Fuck holding back. I’m going to take and take until there’s no more left.

“Oh God, right there.” I open my eyes, having closed them to enjoy my time with Nessa and her perfect pussy. One of her hands cups the back of my head, pushing me closer, while the other hand is working her nipple, her head thrown back, eyes closed, chest heaving with each breath. I redouble my efforts. The edge of my teeth rasps over clit. I take my hand off one of her shapely thighs, my thumb gathering the wetness and traveling down until it’s at that forbidden entrance as my mouth works the rest of her.

“Parker, Parker.” My name is a prayer leaving her lips, one where I’m her god. My thumb slides in, barely, and I feel her pussy clench down on my tongue. A flood of wetness leaves her body, and I don’t stop until she comes down from her orgasm. My fucking cock is rock hard, ready to slide inside Vanessa.

“You ready for me, baby?” I ask, using her thigh to clean my face, placing a kiss as I do so before standing up. She slowly sits up, not responding. The hunger in her eyes tells me all I need to know. She drops her legs over the edge of the bed, I grab the condom that’s on top of the nightstand, making a fast job of it with her. Nessa’s body is yearning for more. The second I’m sheathed her hand is wrapping around my length, taking over, tongue lapping at the tip, and she’s rocking my whole damn world.

SEVENTEEN

Nessa

WE DIDN'T LEAVE PARKER'S HOUSE AT ALL, LET ALONE HIS bed, after he gave me not one but two orgasms with his mouth. Then it was my turn to make him come. I did just that with my mouth and hand, his body locked tight as I used every trick in my book to make him come hard and fast. I was annoyed when he pulled me off his cock when he started to come, until he painted my face and body with his cum. It was hot, hotter than I've ever expected, and in all honesty, it had my core clenching.

It's a miracle he even let me leave his house this morning. It was only because I needed at least a few hours to get ready for our first date. Parker suggested I order whatever I needed for tonight, going so far as to say I'd need the spare stuff here anyways so I wouldn't live out of a bag while I was at his house.

"Hey, Mom," I say into the phone. I called her after I got home and unloaded my bags. I'm going through my closet to figure out what to wear. My mom is my best friend, even more so now that I'm thirty-two. I don't talk about my love life, or what used to be the lack thereof. Parker has reignited a part of me that was lying dormant and that solely has to do with him. *BP*—"Before Parker"—I'd use a toy or my hand on the rare occasion. The sex drive that other women have, it was non-existent, but after meeting Parker, things changed.

"Hey, sweetie, you sound much better. Are you working this weekend?" I'm about to ask if we can FaceTime when my

eyes land on the little black dress in the back of my closet.

“Nope, I was only scheduled for the days I was sick. I offered to pick up other shifts, but so far, I’ve not been needed, which seems weird with this virus running around. What are you and Dad up to?” I take the dress out of my closet and drape it on my bed. Next will be shoes, and while I absolutely hate high heels, there’s something to be said about what they do for your legs and ass.

“That is , and who knows? He’s getting home earlier and earlier these days. I may see if he’d like to go out. There’s a new show out I’d like to get tickets for. Now that you’re back home, what’s on your agenda?” We share locations. There was no denying where I was the past two days. I also called to give her a heads-up on my way to Parker’s to let her know what was happening in this whirlwind romance; there’s no other way to describe the relationship between Parker. And believe me, he made sure I knew that it was a relationship many times, in his words and in the way he shows me.

“I’m only home for a few hours. Parker is bound and determined for us to go on our date.” Getting the charity date out of the way was his idea, even though I rolled my eyes and told him in no uncertain terms I didn’t care about that at all. It was definitely more for him than for me.

“Oh, it seems Parker is not messing around. I remember when your father and I were young. The memories... What are you wearing?” I go back in my closet, looking for the perfect shoes. This conversation is going to take a while, so I put her on speaker phone.

“The black dress you bought me two years ago, the long-sleeved lace overlay that hits mid-thigh,” I jog her memory. She is always out shopping. It’s not my idea of fun, plus, like I said, re-wearing dresses doesn’t bother me. It’s the others who try to make something out of nothing.

“Finally. You’ve yet to wear that, and it’s perfect on you. The black heels you have, they buckle around your ankle. Keep hair down, in either a sleek straight look or soft waves. Top it

off with a dramatic eye and nude lips.” See what I mean? Even before I ask for advice, Mom knows.

“Thank you. That was my next question. I’ve got to jump in the shower, scrub my hair and shave. There wasn’t a whole lot of time for me to take care of all the areas while I was at Parker’s house.” Yes, we have that relationship. One where I overshare, and she thinks nothing of it.

“Oh, dear, my suggestion is the waves. It’s faster than blowing it dry and having to flat iron all those layers of hair you have. Do you know where you’re going?”

“Emilio’s.” I tried to explain to Parker that I didn’t care where we went. A stroll around Central Park while eating a hot dog from a cart would be fine with me. Of course, he went into this long rant, saying it wouldn’t do for a first date, that was for a Sunday afternoon stroll, not dinner.

“Wow. Well, I’ll make sure your father and I stay away from there tonight. It does make one wonder if he did his research, or did you tell him Emilio’s is your one birthday present you request a year?” I love Italian food, any and all. My parents go to Emilio’s once a month. Both of them hating to cook now that it’s just the two of them. As for me, it’s a treat, mostly because I’m out on my own and can’t afford it, but also, overindulging would mean I’d need to do more cardio than I already do at work, and that is something I’m highly allergic to.

“He asked earlier this week where my favorite place to eat was. I had no idea he’d make reservations.” One thing I’m learning about Parker is to expect the unexpected.

“Smart man. They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. What they don’t realize is, the way to a woman’s heart is to listen with open ears.”

“Wise wisdom. Also, I didn’t get to tell you, but I kind of sort of met Ezra, who is like his brother, and almost his mom.” I go into detail about the incident, being embarrassed and how Parker wasn’t mad that I jumped to conclusions. That also means his mom is in the city this weekend, staying with Ezra

until tomorrow, when she'll go to Parker's, and he wants me to meet her.

We continue our conversation with Mom pouring herself a glass of wine and me lying on my bed giggling as we talk. As soon as this phone call is over, I'm going to be moving and grooving. Waiting till the last minute to get ready while catching up with my mom is going to put me behind. Hopefully, Parker won't mind. A girl needs to decompress after all the wild sex we've have the past twenty-four hours.

"Alright, Mom. I've got to get ready. I'll call you tomorrow or send you a text. Which reminds me, I still need to text Millie." She checked in a few times, and I responded. Apparently, whatever she had was ten times worse than what I suffered, so maybe it was something completely different. Either way, I'm going to carve out time for her.

"Okay, have fun. Love you, honey," Mom says.

"Love you, too. Stay away from Emilio's tonight, please. I promise you'll meet Parker soon."

"I promise, and yes, make that happen soon." We hang up the phone, and then I'm getting my butt off the bed to get ready, starting with a shower.

EIGHTEEN

Parker

I PUNCH THE CODE INTO THE ELEVATOR ACCESS PANEL IN Nessa's building, the same one you use for her door. I didn't bother to call or text her that I'm here, albeit a bit early. Once Vanessa left my house, everything became too quiet, too empty, and I found I was not a fan of it. The fact that I'd missed a solid week of work, choosing to finish out my week at home instead of heading into the office seemed like the right idea. That might change if Nessa doesn't go home with me tonight. My mind kept wandering back to earlier this morning, waking up with Vanessa in my arms, not a stitch of clothing between us. It didn't take much to lift her leg on top of my thigh, spreading her open and sliding in. She was yet to be fully awake. That didn't mean I wasn't willing to take advantage, and take advantage is exactly what I did. Fucking Vanessa lazily until she was awake, on the brink of coming, my hand full of her tit as I pinched her nipple, her body arching before finally crashing over the edge. Only then did I pull out. I hated that I was losing her heat, wanting to come inside her, but birth control was yet to be talked about, and no way was I taking the option away from her.

It doesn't take the elevator long to take me up to her floor. No one was in the small, enclosed space with me, a small favor, since I have to make sure my suit jacket is covering my hard cock. The sound dings, the doors open, and I'm stepping off to take the short walk towards the end of the hall. I type in the passcode again. Stupid fucking things. It's like asking for

someone to walk into your place a fuck ton easier than a normal key would make it.

“Damn it,” I grumble beneath my breath when the door opens, meaning she doesn’t have the second lock in place. She and I are going to have words, or I’ll be moving her out if this place faster than she can fucking blink. “Nessa, babe, you ready?” I ask into the small space. Where my house looks like I just moved in, Vanessa’s place looks lived in. Though, the past couple of days, my house has looked more like a home than ever before. Would I be wrong to move her in this week? Maybe. Would I give a fuck? Not even close.

Nessa doesn’t respond as I step inside. I close the door behind me, making noise in case she didn’t hear me call out her name. I’d hate for her to come around the corner and lose her balance because I’m standing in her place unannounced.

“Babe!” I call out again as I walk down the hall, stopping in the doorway when I see Vanessa. She’s standing in front of her full-length mirror, in heels, a dress that’s unzipped at the back, black, short, and tight. A long-sleeved second skin, hair draping down in soft waves pulled to the side while she fiddles with her makeup. She is so lost in what she’s doing, she has no idea I’m leaning against the jamb of her bedroom door, looking my fill. The high heels she has on elongate her already slim, muscular legs and accentuate that heart-shaped ass. One that I’m ready to sink my teeth into, especially now that I know my girl likes how I play. I cross my arms over my chest, cross my ankles, and watch her like a lion as it stalks its prey, thinking about all the dirty ways I’m going to have her in one of our beds tonight.

She does one more swipe of her lipstick, dragging it along the top of her lip, then doing the same to her bottom lip. It doesn’t matter what she does—it could be a laugh, a smile, a touch, every little thing she does hits me in that spot I thought was dead and destroyed by another person. One who I once saw a future with, one who did me wrong. Now, standing here, watching Vanessa, being surrounded by her this week, it’s shown me that she was made for me, and I was made for her.

“Parker.” She finally notices me, unaware of the thoughts I’ve got running through my mind. I watch as she takes her fill of me, much like I’ve been doing to her for the past few minutes. A blush appears on the apples of her cheeks when I lick my lower lip, suppressing the need to say fuck it to our plans of dinner tonight and have my meal on her bed, head buried between her legs as an appetizer, then fucking as many orgasms as I can out of her before finally letting go and coming myself.

“Christ, babe, not sure I’m willing to share you with the outside world in that dress and those heels.” Vanessa turns around, showing me the front. The dress covers her from her upper thighs to her throat. I smirk, wondering if she picked it out because of the marks I’ve left along her collarbones. Tonight, when I peel her out of the dress, will tell me all I need to know.

“I told you we didn’t even have to go out. You’ve got a dream of a kitchen. I’d have no problem cooking a meal with you instead.” She walks towards me, a slow sensual dance as she takes her place in front of me.

“Next time.” It pains me to admit her idea is a hundred times better, and I’d probably agree, but that thought niggles in the back of my head that Vanessa deserves a man who can take her out, show her off, and not be the recluse he’s known to be.

“Okay, can you zip up my dress?” she asks, her tone so low it’s barely above a whisper.

“Of course.” I stand up straight as she turns around, pulling her hair off to the side in case it gets in the way. The tip of my finger travels from the nape of her neck, watching as her skin pebbles along the way. It’s a damn shame to cover up her smooth, soft skin. I reach the base of her spine, a slow tempting torture for both of us, and pull the tab up. Slowly. She turns back around yet again. “Christ, I want to take your lips.”

“They’re yours for the taking, Parker.” It doesn’t matter that she took all afternoon to get ready for our date or that I

watched her line and gloss her lips for five minutes. Vanessa wants me just as badly.

“We do that, we’ll be late. It’ll take you ten minutes to fix it all over again for me to mess up.”

“Once again, we could have stayed home. I need to grab my bag, then I’m ready.” She walks to her bed and grabs the small clutch. My hand goes out to take hers once she’s back in reaching distance.

“I’ll be kissing you later, and more than your lips, baby.” I hear the deep breath of air she takes. My words turn her on. I’ll be taking advantage of the fact that my woman loves when I tease the both of us.

NINETEEN

Nessa

“MR. HUDSON, MISS TAYLOR, YOUR TABLE IS READY, IF you’ll follow me.” Parker’s hand is on my lower back, possessively holding me as close as possible while we walk. He was pissed when his phone rang two minutes into the ride on our way to the restaurant. He apologized, but I told him it was fine. Still, he was annoyed. The call took the entirety of the ride. My gaze was on Parker, taking in how he commanded the conversation, a dominating man in every facet of his life. When he noticed I was looking, he held my eyes while dealing with whatever catastrophe was happening on the other end of the line. Parker knew he was controlling the situation like he does in any and all things. The fact that we had someone driving us to dinner, no partition in place, was the only thing holding me back from launching myself at him, or for him to demand me to take my panties off and sit on his cock. I would have, too, very easily, since this dress is another skin-tight one where lines would be visible even with the lace overlay.

“Parker,” I utter his name so low that the maître ‘d won’t hear us. I’m noticing that as we walk by the other guests, most have stopped what they’re doing. There’s no talk, no eating. It’s almost pure silence, which is odd for a place like Emilio’s. The reason I love this place besides the food is also the atmosphere. It’s light, not like the stuffy places you’re accustomed to when it comes to money.

“You okay?” he asks, understanding, squeezing my side as we’re taken to the back of the restaurant, where the crowds aren’t so thick.

“Here’s your table. Please enjoy your night at Emilio’s,” we’re interrupted. Parker holds the chair out of me. It’s soft, supple, and on wheels. A great idea because with the amount of food everyone seems to consume as well as the unique drinks and rich wines, I’ll need it in order to push away from the table. A definite necessity, at least for me.

“Thank you.” I situate myself, waiting for Parker to take his seat across from me. I take the opportunity to look at the man who steals my breath, makes me dizzy with need, and while we only met this week, I know he’s the man for me. His eyes hold a hunger in them as he moves his hand across the small intimate table. I give him mine, locking our fingers together. The one thing missing since our time earlier this morning is the stubble along his jawline. It’s gone. I loved that when he kissed my collarbones, my lips, or between my thighs, I was left with the feel of a beard burn along my skin. He’s wearing another custom Brioni suit perfectly tailored for his body, this one a dark gray supple fabric with a black shirt beneath. Parker wears the suit; the suit doesn’t wear him.

“Tell me, Vanessa, what were you going to tell me?” he nudges again. My head tips to the side. The restaurant has gone back to eating and talking. I’d be a fool not to see that quite a few people have their phones out, pointing them in our direction.

“Is it always this way when you go out?” I ask. My father may be a billionaire himself, but we never had to worry about cameras flashing or people gossiping as we walked into a restaurant. Which is exactly what just happened, along with the stares. Talk about different worlds. That’s more than likely because my parents shielded me from the press, staying in their bubble and not stepping out of line in any way, meaning I didn’t either. A rebellious teenager I was not, a rule follower to the core in any and all things, a lot like my father minus his techy side.

“Babe, I don’t go out enough. I leave the publicity shit to Ezra, Theo, and Boston. I’ve had my fill more than enough when we first broke out, hitting the fortune five hundred our first year as Four Brothers was a shit show. Our lives were ripped to

shreds. Nothing was left out from our pasts. It's a wonder we're all still standing. Our bond is what it is because of it, and it taught me a lot of valuable lessons along the way."

"Okay, I mean it makes sense." I'm saved by the waiter who steps up to our table.

"Good evening. I'll be your waiter for this evening. Can I get you started on a bottle of wine or one of our house cocktails?" He has a white towel draped over his arm. Parker pulls his hand away from mine, not in a mean manner but in a way that exudes control.

"Thank you. We'll have Giacomo Conterno Barolo Riserva Monfortino, the 1955 if you have it, and for the appetizer, we'll have the roasted tomato bruschetta with pancetta." The waiter nods. Meanwhile, I arch my eyebrows, letting Parker know what I think about him ordering for us without asking if I have an opinion. Not that I'm picky, but I do like to attempt to ruffle his feathers. He sees what I'm doing, much like he always does. It doesn't faze him. Parker is completely unbothered. He exudes control in every aspect of life—at work, in bed, when we're in public. It's in everything he does.

"We have the 1955. I'll go put your order in and return with your waters. If you'll excuse me." Emilio's chef is known for his flare of new ideas, new daily recipes, which keeps me begging to come back with my parents on each birthday. I'm also starving, so while I should be annoyed that Parker ordered for me, I'll bite my tongue because food is my priority.

Parker nods his head, letting the waiter know that he agrees. "I should have reserved us a booth. Remind me the next time I suggest we eat out that you were right." Most women would take the opportunity to say *'I told you so'*. I'm not going to; it's not necessary. The way he's looking at me, licking his lower lip, tells me all I need to know. Losing his hand when the waiter approached our table felt like losing his presence even though he's sitting right across from me. I'm out of my seat without a second thought, moving into the chair next to his. His face tells me he likes that idea, and so do I.

“Much better.” I cross my legs. The hem of my dress slides up, showing off more thigh than I’d be comfortable with if it weren’t for Parker devouring me with his eyes, let alone when I watch as he places his palm on top of my thigh, wiggling his fingers until he has them right where he wants them. There’s one thing about Parker Hudson: he always gets what he wants.

TWENTY

Parker

“HANDS AND KNEES, NESSA.” DINNER WAS AWKWARD AT times, but Vanessa didn’t let it bother her, and neither did I. The moment we walked through the door to my house, we shed our clothes as we rushed up the flight of stairs, I watched as Nessa became completely bare to me, the scent of her body permeating the air, making me want to take my sweet time in tasting the wetness I’m sure is coating the lips of her pussy. Now we’re in my room, my eyes locked on how she’s crawling up the bed exactly how I like her.

“Don’t make me wait, please.” She arches her body, pushing her ass towards me, humbling me with the way she gives herself to me so freely. I drop to my knees behind her, smelling that tantalizing scent straight from the source as I blow a puff of air against her wet cunt. The glistening of wetness paints her outer lips and the inside of her thighs. I watch as her body quivers, not responding to her plea. I’m going to make my presence known when she least expects it, or until I can’t wait any longer. Knowing myself, it’ll be me who caves first.

“Parker.” The sweet way she’s begging for my lips, tongue, and fingers has me cup the globes of her ass, pulling them a part. Vanessa likes the rasp of my tongue along her forbidden entrance, loves the way my thumb will press in until her body gives way and it sucks my digit inside. My tongue slides out, lapping a circle around her clit, teasing the fuck out of both her and me. I could have her coming in less than two minutes, and I will this first time. I flatten my tongue. Taking her from

behind like this gives me all the room I need while allowing Vanessa to focus on nothing else. The only thing she has to do is chase her orgasm and keep her pretty thighs spread while I fuck her with my mouth. I get the taste of her I've been dying for all night.

"Parker, don't tease me." She rocks her body, asking me to flick my tongue along her clit. Another thing I've learned about Vanessa—the woman has no problem being vocal or telling me exactly what she likes, how she likes it, or when she likes it. I stop at the entrance to her cunt, thrusting my tongue inside her, mostly for myself.

"Hmm," I hum against her core before I pull out and then lick the rest of the way until I'm tonguing that sweet forbidden entrance. The way she pushes her ass back, my dirty girl likes her ass played with. One day soon, my cock will be sliding in and out of her tightness. A toy attached to her pretty clit to make her orgasm skyrocket.

"Fuck me, God, fuck me, please." It's hard to deny her when she begs so prettily. I lick her from clit to ass one last time before getting off my knees. My cock is hard and ready, thickening with every taste I've gotten of her, pre-cum leaking from the tip.

"You ready for this, baby? Ready to feel us skin to skin, no more latex between us, just my cock and your pussy, my cum coating your pretty cunt?" I grip my length, squeezing it and pinching the tip to stave off the need to come the second I'm inside her.

"Yes, damn it, Parker. I've been ready. No foreplay was necessary. I've been dripping wet for you all night." This morning, Nessa asked if I would be opposed to getting rid of condoms. She had just finished sucking me off, swallowing my cum down her pretty mouth, when she mentioned she was on the birth control patch, which I had noticed on her lower back off to the side. I'd just gotten tested, the results being handy, when I had my yearly physical, and for life insurance purposes, tests are mandatory. Nessa didn't have hers, but I knew with her working in the hospital, there was no doubt she was telling me the truth. My cock was rock hard the minute we

agreed upon it, but she needed to go home, get ready for us to have dinner together tonight. My dumb-ass idea. I could have fucked her in the kitchen, against the counter, her bouncing on my cock as I fed her dessert. We're definitely not going out again in the near future, not until some of this thirst calms the fuck down, at least.

"The foreplay was for me. I haven't had your cum on my tongue in nearly twelve hours. My marks have already started to fade, and by the end of the night, they'll be back." My hand glides around her hip, sliding until it's lying flat against her lower stomach. My other grips my cock, lining the head with the entrance of her pussy. I want to bring her up, until her back meets my front, so I push her knees down further on the bed, spreading her wider for me.

"Well, as delicious as it was, this is what I've been waiting for." She backs her ass up, taking my length deeper. I'm having a hard time remaining composed. I swear I can feel every single flutter, the soft wetness sucking greedily at my cock until it's delving deeper inside of her.

"Goddamn, Nessa." I'm completely seated inside her. The rippling of her pussy tightens along my cock. My hand travels up the length of her middle. She gets the hint, body coming up until I can reach her collarbones. My mouth immediately attaches to one, and her body immediately responds. Her flesh pebbles, there's a hitch in her moan, and the way she's rippling along my length, it won't be long until I can't hold back.

"Parker, more," she pleads. I keep my mouth attached to her collarbone, hand sliding up until it's in the center of her chest. My hips rear back, and I take her body. The sound of us together, the heavy breathing, the wetness that meets me with every thrust, and the slapping of skin.

"You ready to come for me, babe?" I ask, feeling that damn tingling at the base of my spine. I'm not necessarily ready to come, wishing I could prolong this a bit longer. That's not going to happen, not this time at least, probably not the next time either.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chants, then she comes on my cock and pulls me right along with her.

“Fuck, Nessa, you’re everything.” I detach my lips from her skin, whispering into her ear as my cum unloads inside her cunt. This woman is going to be everything, and if it meant playing dirty in a bidding war to get here, I’d do it ten fucking times over.

TWENTY-ONE

Nessa

“I’M A HORRIBLE FRIEND,” I TELL MILLIE ON THE OTHER END of the line. I’m just getting off work, the first of working night shifts for the next three days. It was supposed to be a twelve-hour shift, but it quickly turned into nearly fifteen. The nurse who was relieving me called, frantically apologizing. Her babysitter bailed on her last minute, and she was scrambling. I was understanding. There’s no way I was going to be upset after last week, when I needed to be covered, and the nurse who was late probably covered my shifts as well.

“No, you’re not. You didn’t go dark. We texted the entire time you were sick and even when you weren’t. I’m still sorry I got you and Parker sick.” What I thought could be a pregnancy scare from my best friend ended up being a virus. That still doesn’t account for her not having a period the same time as me, and while I’m a nurse and know things, she asked me to drop it, so I did.

“True, but still. Are you going to be at work tomorrow?” I ask. She works at this cute coffee shop I love, only a few blocks in the opposite direction of my house from the hospital.

“Yep, I’m opening and closing every day this week.” I’ll kill two birds with one stone, seeing my best friend as well as grabbing coffee and a new book to read. The shop has the cutest little bookstore off to the side. Last night, my lunch break was so boring because I didn’t have a book to read. The hospital’s cell service is spotty, the Wi-Fi is even worse, and I was too tired to walk down the block during the hour I had.

“Good. If my shift doesn’t run over, I could go for a Millie special. Decaf, though.” I yawn as I walk towards my apartment. Parker wanted to have a car waiting for me when my shift was over. We had words. I won that round. I only live a brisk fifteen minutes away from the hospital. He wasn’t thrilled, but it was a hill I was going to die on to get my way. There was no reason to have a car and driver waiting, today especially. He’d have waited hours for me when he could be doing other things.

“I’d love to see you, you know that. Is Hudson letting you up for air today?” I laugh into the phone. Attempting to go home was funny at best. Anytime I’d bring it up, he’d practically tie me to the bed, wring out another orgasm from my body, and then said if I left his house, he’d only follow me home.

“Barely. Hey, I have a question that you may be able to help me answer.” The end is in sight. Four more blocks, and I’ll be in the comfort of my apartment, able to wash the day away, close my blackout curtains, and pass out.

“I’m all ears.” Some might be annoyed that Millie is on the phone at work. Not me. The girl is a multitasker through and through, an AirPods in her ear to talk to me while making the most intricate drink known to man. I really hope she’s able to pull the funds together to buy *The Coffee Shack*.

“We went to Emilio’s, right? Well, it was different.” It’s the only way to describe it. “People stopped what they were doing, no eating or talking, cameras at the ready. Which I get because of Dad, you know, but it was like they had never seen Parker Hudson before. So, being the nosey person I am, I asked. His answer was vague at best, another moment that I probably shouldn’t have asked out in the open, where eyes and ears are prominent.” I take a breath because I’ve dominated the entire conversation, and I want to make sure Millie is still with me.

“Keep going.” She knows me so well, too well, really.

“Anyways, Parker made it seem like his past was all about learning lessons. Like I said, vague. I need to bring it up again.

There was a tightness in his jaw, plus the fact that once the conversation was over, it was over.”

“Well, you know I’ve spent time with Ezra. The story I have, which I can’t delve deeply into, it’s not my story to tell. Their childhood was rough, and by rough, I mean Parker and Ezra were the ones to get themselves and Parker’s mom out of the equation,” Millie proceeds to tell me before continuing, “It was so bad Krista adopted Ezra, raised him as her own. Anyways, fast forward to their twenties, the Four Brothers are at the top of their game. Something happens. Ezra wouldn’t exaggerate during our pillow talk, and I didn’t ask. One day, Parker is enjoying being in the limelight, the next he’s pulling back. He’s done with being the frontrunner besides Ezra, Theo, and Boston. All the articles vanish from thin air, you know, a Mr. Taylor type scenario because these men are that good. Now you tell me, what makes a man do something like that?”

“A freaking woman.” Millie goes quiet when I hit the nail on the head, meaning she’s got a customer in front of her. I remember the run-in with Ezra and Parker’s mom, Krista. A scenario that could have avalanched into the worst volcano eruption ever. Parker took care of that without getting upset, seeing me through the issue at hand. There’s something to be said for a man who can heal his own trauma and not bring it into the next relationship he finally decides to have.

“Bingo.”

“Damn. Some woman did him dirty. Too bad our work schedule is going to make it hard to even talk to him about it this week.” I’m walking up towards my building. Never have I ever been more annoyed with having to work nights than I am right now.

“When will you bring this up to him? Also, you heard not a freaking thing from me. Ezra told me this during the late-night hours, so if you can make sure I’m free and clear, that’d be freaking awesome.” And the plot thickens. It seems my best friend has been holding out on me.

“You got it. I’ll text or call tomorrow. If things go as planned, I’ll be there around eight or so. Love you!” I’m opening the door to my building, perfect timing to end our phone call.

“See you soon. Love you.” I wait to hear her hang up the phone. “No, not you, sorry.” I laugh. The phone clicks off, and all I have left to do is get inside my apartment, text Parker, shower, and pass out. Thank goodness.

TWENTY-TWO

Parker

“I’M OUT. I LIKE THE PLAN, DON’T GET ME WRONG. IT WOULD make the most business sense, but I’m not touching this at all. I’ve got too much to lose,” I tell Ezra, Theo, and Boston in the meeting room at Four Brothers headquarters.

“You’re pussy-whipped. Never thought I’d see the day,” Boston jokes, sitting back in his seat, feet on the mahogany wood table that he insisted on putting in this place. Ostentatious, ridiculously expensive, and he’s got his shoes on it.

“Maybe so, but that’s my pussy you’re talking about, so shut your damn mouth.” Boston knows when to stop, thankfully.

“Good call. You need to talk to your girl. Let her know I’ll be point on it. She knows Millie and I are something. Don’t label it, because I’m not dealing with my relationship right now. We’ve got enough to deal with.” Ezra’s in full on business mode. The comedian, mother hen getting in your business, and gossip monger is long gone. In its place is my brother before me. Key points of the presentation are on the screen. A portfolio with our investments, comparables, and the last ten years of showing that we’ve been in the black sits in front of each of us. I don’t bother opening it. There’s no need. Ezra’s got this locked and loaded.

“It’s solid. If the merger happens, it means we need to look at expanding,” Theo, the silent one of our group, says, probably because the rest of us have no problem taking over when necessary.

“Agreed. Set up an appointment. I’m going to Vanessa’s. I don’t want to blindside her with this before I’ve been formally introduced to her parents.” It was sheer luck I was able to convince my mom that we were still getting to know one another, and she shouldn’t be coming over after she and Ezra walked into my place without calling or texting first. They’ve since lost their key privileges. That doesn’t mean Ezra hasn’t made a duplicate. Sneaky fucker.

“Not so fast. We still have business to talk about. I want to tell you my idea if we expand.” Boston takes his feet off the table and leans his elbows on his knees, head tilted up. “My trip to New Orleans, we’re talking prime investment. The area needs more jobs. We’d be stupid not to set up a building down there.”

“Who’s going to be down there? It’ll have to be one of us. Parker’s out, so is Ezra. That leaves you and me. And I’m not thrilled about the thought of sweating my balls off. That leaves you, Boston,” Theo says. He’s got his chin propped up by his hand, in his thinking pose, refined, the one in the group who doesn’t deal with any childhood trauma.

“Which is why I’m suggesting myself.” My ears perk up. Boston is born and raised here in New England, a son of a wealthy politician. This is going to go over like stink on a pig.

“Get all the paperwork together and bring us the building plans, how you think we’ll expand, and we’ll go from there. No use in talking it to death until we’ve got it in front of us,” I tell Boston. This is a plan I can stand behind without any red tape. It’ll help him, too, if dear old daddy and mommy dearest know that it’s my name behind it instead of Boston’s. Let them think it’s the dirty kid from the wrong side of the tracks, who doesn’t come from family of old money, and everybody knows no politician has clean hands. Blood money is what it boils down to. It’ll have them rolling their eyes and coming after me instead of Boston.

“Fuck, I know that look. Love you for it, brother, but this is my battle, not yours, man,” Boston tells me.

“Then you’ll let me do this for you. Take your time if you need to go down there for a longer stint. The business runs itself. We did the hard work. Now it’s about expanding, letting things go so we can enjoy life.”

“Holy shit, I think we need to send Vanessa Taylor a gift, a big gift, maybe diamonds,” Ezra says. A low grumble leaves my throat. The thought of anyone except myself wrapping her body in gold and diamonds is not sitting well, even if my brother is trying to rile me up.

“That won’t be necessary. You want to give her a gift? Fine. The gift should be, don’t show up unexpected. I’m not a fool. You have more than one copy of the key to my place. I find out you use it without giving me the heads-up, Millie will find out what it’s like to suck your dick without your balls attached.”

“Fine, I’ll send a fruit basket. You damn Neanderthal.” At that, I know he’s giving me shit. Ezra has the same qualities I do. Had that been Millie I was talking about, he’d be losing his shit just as much.

“Okay, anyone else have anything useful to bring to the table, or can we call this meeting over?” Theo diffuses the situation like normal.

“One last thing. I’m going to be taking a lot of my work home from now on, unless there’s a reason to come in. Nessa’s schedule is proving to be difficult already, and I’m not willing to add stress to her plate.”

“I see no problem with that,” Theo replies.

“Yep, all is good here,” Boston states.

“Finally. Glad you’re letting someone in, someone who’s worthwhile. Have you told Vanessa about Katie yet?” All of the guys were there for me, Ezra the most. The bond we share is thicker than what I have with the others.

“Nope, but it’s coming. Emilio’s was an experience, to say the least. Also, you tell our mother about this before I get a chance, I’m going to be pissed.” I stand up, ready to take my leave. Nessa should be back at her place by now.

“Later, guys.” I grab the jacket off the back of my chair, put it back on, straighten it, and walk out the door, not waiting for their response. They won’t shut up if I don’t make my escape now. I take my phone from the pocket of my jacket, checking if Vanessa has texted me like I asked.

Nessa: I’m home and in bed. Three more nights.

Parker: See you soon, baby.

She has no idea just how soon. I’ll be leaving the building after I make a stop at my office, grab my laptop, go over a few things with my assistant, and call it a fucking day. Then I’ll be heading to my woman, sliding into bed beside her and getting some damn sleep, since I didn’t get a wink without Nessa in bed with me.

TWENTY-THREE

Parker

I KNEW SHE WOULDN'T PUT THE SECOND LOCK IN PLACE LIKE I've asked her several damn times. Reminding her before we got off the phone last night still didn't help. It's why I'm able to get inside her apartment easily after ending the meeting with the guys, taking what I needed from my office, and talking with my assistant about how I'll be working from home unless there are in-house meetings, asking her to book them all in one day, even if that meant booking them back-to-back without taking a break in between. A solid game plan if that meant I could work when Nessa was at work, switching my own sleeping habits around in order to have time with my woman.

“What are you doing here?” I'm inside her apartment, the door shut and locked, placing my laptop bag on her kitchen counter, ready to take off my suit jacket and tie, when she greets me. She is standing in front of me with a towel around her body, one wrapped up in her hair to soak up the water from her washing it.

“You're here. It's where I'm going to be. Besides, sleeping without you is fucking awful.” I move closer to her, needing a taste of the softest lips I've ever felt. “Shouldn't you be in bed?”

“My shift ran over, then I was talking to Millie. By the time I got home, I was too keyed up to fall asleep even after I took a shower. So, I've decided to organize my closet until my eyelids finally slam shut.” Her smooth skin is void of makeup,

how she prefers it, but knowing that she's naked beneath the towel has me ready to rip it off her body and have my way with her.

"If you're up for talking and not ready to conk out on me, I've got something I'd like to tell you." Might as well get this conversation over with before it's out in the press' hands.

"I'm wide awake. I think it might take me a bit to get adjusted, and I have something to ask as well." My head dips down. I kiss her lips lightly, noticing my marks on her collarbone have disappeared. We get this talk done, and she's still wide awake, I'll fuck her until she falls asleep.

"Good. Come sit with me?" I pull away after I drop another kiss to my favorite place on her body, watching her flesh pebble as I do.

"Okay." My hand takes hers, and I guide us to her couch to sit down on one side. Nessa doesn't even attempt to sit anywhere but my lap, hands going around my neck, playing with my hair like she usually does anytime she gets a chance.

"You want to go first, or me?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. My subject may be a bit touchy, though." There's hesitation in her tone.

"Look at me, Nessa, really look at me." I hold her chin with my fingers, moving it up until her eyes meet mine. "We're going to have conversations that make both of us uncomfortable; it's what happens in a relationship. That doesn't mean I'm going to tuck my tail and run." She nods.

"Then I'll go first. Who broke your heart? There's a reason we were watched at Emilio's the whole time, from walking in, to eating, and then leaving. I didn't do a whole lot of digging, because I wanted to hear it from you first, so I will tell you, I only looked at what the media had to say when I was tagged in their post about us being together." Ezra was right. This subject should have been handled days ago. It's not that I have anything to hide. Between us being sick and the time we spent in bed, there was no way I was going to bring up another

woman. Then our weekend came to an end, and here we are now.

“She didn’t make me a recluse; I was taught a valuable lesson. A woman I thought wanted the same thing as me. A life together, marriage, kids, the whole deal. It turns out I was wrong; she was looking for a free ride. We’d just hit our stride; the company was making more than we’d ever thought imaginable. Looking back, the writing was on the wall. Ezra, Theo, and Boston saw it, heard it actually. Katie had this grand plan. It didn’t go far; the safeguards we had in place made sure of that. Our finance manager and she started skimming money off the top. Ezra is always joking, but it’s only one side of him. The man has a knack for money; he’s obsessed with it. So, when he noticed the discrepancies, he followed the trail. Katie and Eric were idiots, though, didn’t cover their trail. The moron he is used his work email to converse back and forth. Needless to say, they were having an affair. It caused a media frenzy.” The whole time I’m talking, she never looked away from my eyes. Her cheeks got red, and she took a few deep breaths. Anger is warring in every nuance of her body.

“It’s a good thing she’s not around anymore. She’s not, right?” There’s fire in her voice.

“No, sweetheart. She and Eric are both gone. They did jail time; Theo’s dad made sure of that. Then they ran out of town once they were released. It’s good to have people who know people.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. Theo’s dad may have helped, but he didn’t do it all. The four of you pulled it together. It sucks that those two made a mess out of what should have been an amazing first year.” She takes a deep breath, and I’m hoping what I have to tell her next doesn’t fuck things up.

“Thank you. It’s in the past. I don’t mind my recluse lifestyle. I’m also realizing it’s not always a bad thing to socialize with the right woman beside me.” I don’t tell her the underlying reason of us going out was to make sure everyone was aware that Vanessa Taylor is taken, and she was taken by me.

“No need to thank me. I mean, I am kind of lucky she did what she did, or, you know, we might not be here.” She shrugs her shoulders before continuing, “And I’m pretty sure it was my idea to stay in. Though, it’s always hard to say no to Emilio’s food. I’d say it’d be a tie between Emilio’s and Eatzy’s. I’d never be able to choose which is better. They’re both so different yet amazing.” Clearly, Nessa is hungry, and after this next piece of information I offer up, I’ll be ordering food either before or after her nap.

“True too. If that’s cleared up, I’ve got one more confession to make. It’s about work, and your father is involved. There’s nothing wrong, I promise.” She looked scared the moment I put work, her dad, and confession in the mix.

“Okay.” She’s still hesitant.

“I’m sure you’re aware, or maybe you’re not, there’ve been rumors, rumors Ezra found some truth to only on Friday. It seems your father is looking to merge and possibly semi-retire. I wasn’t made aware of it until today. I’ve told Ezra I’m not part of the deal. My name, my eyes, my signature won’t even be on it.”

“Wow, he’s really going to give Mom what she wants, which is more time with him. I guess my days as working as a full-time nurse will be slowing down, too. If Dad steps away, then so will she. This is a lot to digest.” She wiggles in my hold. The need to keep her glued to my lap is real, and I’d usually keep her, except the energy she’s giving off is pure nervousness. The moment she is off of my lap, the pacing begins. Then off comes the towel that was intricately wrapped around her head. Loose wavy locks fall down, dark and rich against her skin. The contrast makes her look all the more beautiful.

“That’s the word on the street,” I mutter. She’s off in her own world, mumbling incoherent sentences.

“Well, I mean, this is a good thing. Dad’s been balls to the walls working well since forever. He’s not getting any younger. Mom isn’t either, but damn, a warning from them would have been nice.”

“Well, it’s not out to the public yet. That could be the reason. Plus, we’ve barely come up for air until today.” I arch my eyebrows at her when she finally looks in my direction.

“That’s true. I’m going to have to call Mom, nudge her without saying it outright. The stubborn lady.” She lets out a long and loud yawn. I take that as my cue to move us towards the bedroom. Everything is cleared up as much as it’s going to be for the time being. The one thing Vanessa needs is sleep, and I’m going to be adamant that she gets what she needs.

TWENTY-FOUR

Nessa

I WAKE UP TO THE FEELING OF BEING PROTECTED. PARKER IS AT my back, one arm under my neck, the other lying on top of my stomach, his hand guarding my lower abdomen like there's baby inside he needs to shelter. There isn't, by the way; my birth control patch makes sure of that. I didn't get it to prevent children since I was practically the Virgin Mary before meeting Parker. It was to control my crazy-ass periods and how long they lasted. Pills were hard for me to remember, an implant device was a commitment, and the others weren't what I really wanted. The patch seems to work, and it's discreet.

That's why we did away with condoms almost immediately. He had a recent copy of his test results from his yearly physical. I stay up-to-date on testing with my job, not that I work in a busy emergency room and could get pricked by a needle. We do it for the safety of our patients. Peace of mind goes a long way with my job. A job that I know I'll be slowly stepping back from, maybe even doing what they call PRN work, picking up shifts when needed. There's no way Mom is going to let Dad step away from his company only for her to be glued to the charity full-time. Plus, it's been something Mom and I have talked about for as long as I can remember.

"Why are you awake?" Parker whispers into the nape of my neck. He gave me two orgasms, one with me on my hands and knees, just how he likes me, his mouth on my pussy, licking me from clit to ass, my body arching into the sensations he wrings out of my body. The minute my orgasm washed over

me, he was flipping me over until I was on my back, and sliding deep inside me. Our eyes were on each other's, saying more with our bodies than we did with our words before he sent me into my second orgasm.

“Food.” He nips my shoulder as my stomach grumbles, the reason why I'm wide awake. It was then Parker made sure the reason they were at the charity event wasn't for him to bid on me. Ezra had a woman in mind, that woman being my best friend, and now that she's made it a point to tell me about the pillow talk they shared, it all made perfectly logical sense for Four Brothers to be at the Cures for Children gala dinner and charity event.

“Fuck. Should have thought about that before I fell asleep. You still want an Italian grinder, extra pickles, and chips?” He knows the way to my heart, through my stomach.

“God, yes. Does Eatzy's deliver on Mondays?” I ask. “I don't want to get up yet.” I push my body back. We are naked beneath the sheets. All I'd have to do is roll over, face Parker, and he'd give me what my body is aching for. The insatiable thirst of having him surrounding me, the feeling is indescribable, still unquenchable, to say the least.

“Even if they don't, I'll have Giles pick it up.” I roll over, wanting to see him, that first thing in the morning look, hopeful his stubble is back for the time being, seeing the sleep in his eyes, and his soft kissable lips.

“You, Parker Hudson, are utterly perfect.” His hand slides from my stomach to my back as he pulls me closer to his body. My pebbled nipples rasp against the soft hair on his chest, and my hand slides up his outer arm, muscles rippling beneath my palm.

“That's you, babe, all you. Also, I'm changing my schedule around. The guys and I talked. Looks like Boston is heading down south, Ezra's taking the lead on the offer, Theo is content with where he's at, and I'm going to be working from home while you work nights. This way, it won't matter what shifts you have. I'll get the time I need with you.” He doesn't let me respond. His head dips down, and he brushes his lips

against mine. Contentment settles deep in my body and soul,
and it's because of the man who's made my home him.

TWENTY-FIVE

Parker

“CONGRATULATIONS, MR. TAYLOR.” I SHAKE NESSA’S DADS’ hand. He pulls me in for a hug. It’s been a busy couple of months. I made it a point to Vanessa it was time I met her parents before they know Four Brothers was going to bring an offer to the table. In other areas with other businesses, I’d never have done that, but with the Taylor’s, it’s different. Tonight, I’m going to be asking Mr. Taylor a very important question.

“It’s Ed, you know that, but thank you.” A lot of things have changed. Working from home has made it easier to see Nessa on the rare shifts she takes at the hospital. Her mom is still overseeing everything she can while Nessa learns the ropes. Even still, it will only take a day or two out of her busy week. As of right now, she’s part-time at the hospital. She knows going down to once or twice a week will happen. It’ll be a damn good thing, too, since once my ring is on her finger, I plan on getting her pregnant, even if that means throwing away that damn birth control patch she changes once a week.

“You’re welcome. Do you have a moment? I know it’s your party, but this will only take a moment.” With the close relationship Nessa has with her mother, Maria, and now my own mother, there’s no telling either of the women. They’d have a hard time keeping a secret.

“Of course. I already know what you’re going to ask. You have my blessing, Parker. My girl is happy, happier than ever. You’re a good man; don’t ever doubt that.” There’s been some

heaviness, shit from my past I'm worried will transfer to mine and Nessa's future. I could have talked to my mom or Ezra about it, but I found that those two are biased as fuck when it comes to the people they love. So, on a whim and a few too many drinks at the Taylors' house, I talked to Ed, about the shit growing up, about Katie, and how I closed myself off, not only to protect myself but also Four Brothers.

"I hope so. Vanessa wants five children. I may never retire with that many." Five children to clothe and feed, possibly send them to college or get them started on the right path if they want to start their own business.

"That doesn't surprise me. After losing Abigail, though, we couldn't do it anymore. I was too deeply entranced in my grief, so I worked night and day. Maria threw herself into making a difference in childhood cancer, hence the charity. Damn that woman, stronger than she should ever have to be, still holding it all together for our family. And Vanessa, well, she's just like my Maria." Leukemia is a bitch. There's nothing worse than watching someone you love slowly slipping away, watching your toddler, knowing you were powerless. I'm not sure I'd still be standing if that happened to a child of mine and Vanessa's. Fuck, it makes my heart ache to even think about.

"I'll give her whatever she wants, and don't doubt yourself either. Your family knows how much you love them. Don't tell Nessa, but when you send her those memes, a goofy smile crosses her face, followed by a deep hit-you-in-your-soul laugh.

"I know you will. If you'll excuse me. I need to mingle, or Maria will tell me I'm being rude. This is the part of work I'll never miss."

"Yeah, I'll be doing the same." We part ways. My eyes scan the rented ballroom. Maria went all out. A merger for Taylor and Four Brothers is a big deal in our world. I can't imagine what she'll do when he announces his retirement in a few short months. That party will undoubtedly be over the top.

My eyes lock on Vanessa as she walks towards me, confidence in how she carries herself. She's wearing another dress that's molded to her perfectly shaped body, and I know it's one of those nights when there is not a stitch of clothing beneath it, easy access for the both of us. Especially when we need a breather. It won't take much convincing from me to have her sneak away for a few minutes or an hour.

"Have you been hiding again, Mr. Hudson?" My hand reaches for hers, pulling her body flush against mine. Fuck, whatever they say about proprietary when you're in public, that ship has sailed. Kissing, hugging, holding her hand, it all fucking happens. The shit storm media frenzy came and went. The more we were out and about, the less they talked about us.

"Your father and I both were. How about we take a spin on the dance floor?" I mutter across her lips. I'm not much of a dancer, but suggesting this will keep her from questioning what Ed and I were talking about. I'm not quite ready to propose. When I ask her, I'll be deep inside her tight pussy, whispering that I'm not going to take any other answer except yes while leaving my marks on both collarbones.

"Okay, who are you, and where is Parker Hudson?" I guide her through the small groupings of people, nodding to them but not stopping to talk to them, or I'd never get time with Vanessa alone.

"He's right here. I either dance with you, kidnap you, or we leave this party, and we'll both hear about it later on," I tell her once I've got us on the dance floor, moving us until I've got her hand in mine, the other on her lower back.

"Well, I do appreciate a man who can read a room, whisking me away from all those stuffy people." She wrinkles her nose. We both know she'll have to get used to it as things change, but for now, it's my turn to take her away.

"I still like my idea of sneaking off to the coat closet." She doesn't look like she'd mind that too much, especially judging by how dilated her eyes are.

"It looks like Millie and Ezra are leaving. Surely, we can, too?" Nessa whispers over the music playing softly.

“Oh, now it’s okay to leave, when Millie leaves, not when I suggest it?” I arch an eyebrow. She takes action, pulling away from my body, hand still in mine, and we’re walking off the dance floor we only entered moments ago. I’m okay with this because wherever Nessa goes, I’ll be right there beside her.

Epilogue

Six Months Later

“THANK GOD, WE’RE FINALLY ALONE,” NESSA SAYS THE instant we’re in our room. There’s not what feels like a million people. While the wedding was everything Vanessa, her mom, and my mom wanted, all I cared about at the end of the day was her last name attached to mine. Between the ceremony and reception, people surrounded us, an annoyance that had me ready to toss my wife over my shoulder, fuck everything else, and whisk her away. I knew without a doubt if I carried out that plan, our family would never let us live it down. After our final goodbyes, we hopped on a Four Brothers private company jet, where we got a slight reprieve from the never-ending conversations. We headed to the back bedroom, where I stripped her out of her wedding dress while her hands were fumbling to get me out of my suit, and took consummating our vows to a whole new level in the sky, tiring us both out until a light knock on our door from the crew let us know we were landing in thirty minutes.

“Nothing but the two of us. No phones, no work, no clothing for two weeks straight,” I tell her. I booked us an exotic vacation on the beaches of Bali. The only time we’ll be interrupted is when we call for room service, not that I foresee us taking advantage of that. Nessa enjoys cooking, another reason to have them stock the kitchen with plenty of foods,

and I'm not above watching her in the kitchen in nothing but a barely-there bathing suit or nothing at all.

"I guess we better go change into them. No one is on the beach, right?" There's a twinkle in her eyes. My woman is damn insatiable, and I'm reaping all the rewards for it.

"Babe, I wouldn't have booked a place any other way. Why the hell would we have this damn money and not enjoy taking advantage, like I'm going to take advantage of you soon?" I guide her to the attached bedroom, where the suitcases were stowed away after the concierge escorted us to our bungalow.

"Then I'll just strip right here." She kicks off her shoes, lifts her shirt over her head, and pushes down her shorts, leaving her in a white lace bra, the sheer fabric showing the pebbling of her nipples. My mouth salivates at the thought of wrapping my lips around them, sucking on them until she's aching between her legs.

"Keep going." I lick my lower lip, enjoying the striptease my wife is giving me. I'm already thinking about the first place of many I'm going to have my way with here. I slowly walk towards her. She takes a step back, not that there's a scared bone in Vanessa's body.

"Are you going to have your wicked way with me, Mr. Hudson?" Her back is against the front door. I'm two steps away from her, lifting my shirt over my head. My shoes came off the second we walked through our home away from home.

"I am, Mrs. Hudson. Drop your arms." The clasp at the back was popped open as we walked. To her two steps backwards, I take one forward. Vanessa does as I command. My hands work the button of my jeans, and I step out of them, watching as she takes in the length of my hard cock, the tip weeping with precum.

"Parker." My name comes out in a coo. I'm ready to rip the matching white lace panties from her body. Vanessa knows it, too, which is why the now see-through fabric that is glistening with her wetness is being pushed down with the tips of her fingers.

“Fuck, yeah. Look at you, ready and waiting for me. It’s like I didn’t wring two orgasms out of your body on the plane.” I take my last couple of steps until we’re flesh to flesh.

“It’s never enough, ever.” My hands go to her waist, and I pick her up. Her legs wrap around my hips, and soft deft fingers find the ends of my hair. My mouth touches hers, hard and fast, tongues meshing together, bodies arching. The wetness on the slit of her pussy glides along the underside of my cock.

“And it never will be.” I pull her up the tiniest bit before slamming her down on my cock completely. I’ve claimed her in every way possible. The next best thing is my child planted inside my wife, which will be happening soon.

Epilogue

One Year Later

“SURPRISE!” I DROP THE TEST ON PARKER’S DESK WITH THE lid on, securing where you have to pee because, yeah, that wouldn’t be good to share with your husband, even if he’ll see a shit ton of body fluids in the coming months. I leverage myself up until my ass is planted, my nightgown sliding up my thighs. Parker has his reading glasses on, his eyes molten while he looks from me to the test.

Earlier this week, I woke up with my breasts sore. One day became two, then I went to look at my period tracker, and I was late. Never in a million years would I have thought this would happen so soon. I talked to Parker last month. We were finally settled. Taylor and Four Brothers merged, Dad retired, Mom stepped down from her role as president, and I took some of the reins. Though there was no way I could do it all. Newlyweds, trying for a baby, it’s why I didn’t take the position as president. This way, I can do some of each, still working as a nurse at the hospital two days a week, along with two days at the charity as well.

“You’re sure?” Parker closes out what he was working on and takes his glasses off.

“That’s one of ten. I’ve drunk enough water for an elephant, and I’ve been peeing on a stick or in a cup for close to two hours now.” I worked a weird shift, getting off at nearly

midnight. Parker was waiting for me in the garage, standing next to his vehicle. Then, we came back home, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him, including me going to the pharmacy in the hospital. When I woke up this morning, he was already out of bed, giving me time to take care of the tests, and now here we are.

“Ten? You took ten tests? Do you need me to buy stock in them next?” Parker moves his chair back, pushing the tests and papers out of the way. His hands reach for my hips after that's out of his way. It takes little effort for him to move me until I'm sitting right in front of him.

“No, I don't think we need stock in pregnancy tests, even if we have more than one kid, which we will.” I arch my eyebrow, already pregnant and planning to have several more.

“Fuck, Nessa.” There's a reverence in his tone as he hitches up my nightgown, the robe slipping off my shoulders as I lift one leg, then the other. Parker groans in annoyance when he sees that I put on a pair of panties. The difference between my apartment and Parker's, well, now, our place, is that it's cold, especially in the mornings. This morning, I'm still exhausted, but my bladder had other ideas about sleeping in. We've yet to move out of the city. Call me crazy, but I love it here, how convenient it is to get to places on foot. The hospital isn't that far away, our home isn't far from Four Brothers either, and while my schedule has calmed down, Parker's has not. He's been at work more than he's been home, meetings after meetings, coming home so irritable, the only way I know how to calm him down is through sex. On the rare occasion, it's with us lying down on the couch, me running my fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp as he decompresses, but for the most part, the second Parker is inside the house, he's after me, and usually, my poor clothes take the brunt of him.

“Happy?” I ask him. One minute I'm sitting on Parker's desk, the next thing I know, I'm straddling his lap.

“The best anniversary present a man could ever ask for, my wife on my lap, a baby nestled inside her. I'm damn ecstatic.”

“Happy anniversary, daddy-to-be. I love you.” I drop my arms, allowing my robe to fall from my body.

“Happy anniversary, Nessa. I love you. Goddamn, you make me so damn happy,” Parker says, hands lifting my nightgown off my body.

“Don’t do it, Parker Hudson. I swear to all that is holy, if you ruin another pair of my panties, that’s what you will be buying stock in. I swear you ruin at least one set a day.”

“Then quit wearing the senseless things. You have no problem leaving them off if you’re in a dress.” He isn’t going after my panties this time, thankfully. I watch as he places both palms on my stomach, almost as if I already have a bump. He’s in awe of me right now.

“Panty lines are not cute.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Vanessa?” he questions.

“Yes, dear?”

“Shut up and kiss me.” The conversation comes to an end as Parker’s lips land on mine. Emotion bubbles through, and I feel him surrounding me, knowing this man is my greatest lover and protector. His past doesn’t define him, and Parker will be the best father ever, past be damned. Our future is only looking brighter.

Coming Next

Playing with Fire, Ezra and Millie’s story is coming Feb 26th and here’s a sneak peak!

Playing Dirty

[Amazon](#)

Chapter One

Millie

“Two black coffees, please, and a date with you tonight,” Ezra walks in for the third day in a row this week. I have one AirPods in my ear, my best friend, Nessa talking about her plans with Parker this weekend and if I’m working or can take a day off of work.

“Let me call you back, some tall, handsome man in a suit is asking for coffee and a date,” I wink at Ezra, he’s in one of his expensive three-piece suits, hair slicked back in a way that’s tells me, Four Brothers has him in meeting after meeting today. The two day beard growth still shows off his jaw line, darker than his hair color of ash brown, streaks of blonde here and there. Ezra’s grey eyes though, one of the three percent in population that has the beautiful color, I know because after him, the first thing I did when there was a lull in customers I looked it up and they suck me into his vortex each and every time.

“We were together last night, are you missing me already?” I ask after I hear the clicking in my ear telling me that Nessa hung up, imagine our luck. Parker and Ezra are best friends and Nessa and myself are best friends, nothing could have prepared me for that fact when I got the call from my girl saying when she took my place at her charity auction who the winning bidder was, getting sick never had such great results before because Nessa and Parker are conjoined at the hip, completely in love.

“Is there a rule saying I can’t have you in my bed every night of the week?” Ezra grumbles when I have to be up and at Books and Brews earlier than the sun rises. I always suggest going home or him staying in bed on the rare occurrences we make it back to my place. Ezra is a creature of habit, I get it, completely. The coffee shop that I’ve been working at since high school is that way for me, my small studio apartment is not me at all, it’s still a blank slate, like I barely live there. Which I don’t, I’m at Books and Brews starting at seven o’clock in the morning and not closing until three in the afternoon. Our schedules really do work well together minus the mornings.

“I didn’t say that, let me grab your coffees,” the coffee shop is currently quiet for the time being, I already know I’ve got about twenty more minutes, then we’ll be balls to the walls, chaos ensued, and damn it if my barista no-call, no-show’s today I am going to be pissed. The owners of Books and Brews are now living on a white sandy beach in Florida, they’re son comes in once or twice a month to collect the books, make sure the shop isn’t burnt to the ground, and that’s it. He doesn’t want this place, I do though, which makes it imperative that I keep this place clean as a whistle, rolling in the black while keeping things running smoothly. So, it’s not me that runs to Bonnie, Chad, or even their son, Scott, I do what needs to be done on my own.

“What time were you thinking?” Ezra likes a pour over so it takes a bit longer than pulling the level in the pre-brewed coffee, this way it makes is smoother yet stronger. I slide the two cups of coffee after putting the lids on the to-go cups. If he were staying, I’d have given him the thrifted mugs we use. They’re a dime a dozen, a reason for us to recycle, and when one breaks we’re not having to worry about the cost to replace it. I just find another mug when I’m venturing out on Sunday, the only day were officially closed.

“My last meeting is at six, I can pick you up around seven,” what I thought was a slight wince, clearly isn’t. The last thing I want to do is close up the shop, clean, do inventory, drop off a deposit at the bank, finally head home, to get dolled up. It’s a Thursday evening too, which means every place is going to have some kind of a wait even if it’s not for reservations.

“Can we rain check on going out and stay in, instead?” Ezra takes a sip of his coffee, the other one I’m sure is for Parker. Boston and Theo have yet to make their presence known here and the only reason Parker has come in is because of Nessa.

“Yeah, my place or yours?” Ezra asks, a crooked smile, knowing what that does to me.

“Yours, it’s closer to the coffee shop, at least this way I won’t have to get out of bed an hour earlier to get here on time,” I tell him.

“I like the way you think,” I watch as Ezra leaves his drinks on the counter, there’s only one usual and she’s off in the other part of the shop where we sell second hand books.

“Ezra,” warning him not to do what he’s about to do, unable to head him off with his tall, muscular body, watching as he makes his way around the corner until all that’s left for me to do is turn towards him and prepare for the inevitable.

“Millie,” yep, nothing is going to stop him, his head dips down, lips going against mine, and if I knew it was going to be a light peck I’d have no issue. That’s not what Ezra is after and he won’t stop until he has his way, hands going to my hips, pulling me in close as his tongue sweeps across my lower lip, coaxing me to open for him, and there’s no way I can refuse him. Not when my tongue meets his, allowing Ezra to take over the kiss, my body plastered to him, and we have a full blown make out session behind the counter of my place of work.

“Have a good day,” our kiss ends, and like usual he’s leaving me wanting more. Ezra can work my body like nobody’s business, I’m talking multiple orgasms that big dick energy of his is top notch and even though he’s currently heading out the door, he’s also left me breathless, wet, and needy all while I’m still in a stupor from only a kiss.

[Amazon](#)



About the Author

Tory Baker is a mom and dog mom, living on the coast of sunny Florida where she enjoys the sun, sand, and water anytime she can. Most of the time you can find her outside with her laptop, soaking up the rays while writing about Alpha men, sassy heroines, and always with a guaranteed happily ever after.

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Acknowledgments

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Amie: Seriously, we don't see each other near enough. Miss you tons!

Jordan: Oh my lanta, the hand holding, the me calling you hysterically crying or laughing, day or night, good or bad. I love you bigger than outer space. If it weren't for you pushing me to write, to see the potential in me, I wouldn't be here.

Mayra: My sprinting partner extraordinaire. Girlfriend, we made it through 2022 ahead of schedule. One day I will fly my butt to California to hug you!

Julia: How do you deal with me and my extra sprinkling of commas? The real MVP, the one who deals with my scatterbrained self, missing deadlines, rescheduling like crazy, and the person I live vicariously through social media.

All this to say, I am and will always be forever grateful, love you all!

Also by Tory Baker

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