



A
BILLIONAIRE
BAD BOY
ROMANCE

*She's
Mine Now*

WESTON PARKER

SHE'S MINE NOW



WESTON PARKER

BRIXBAXTER PUBLISHING

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DESCRIPTION



He's known as Doctor Sexy. Great. Just what I need.

As a single mom, I'm concerned about my little girl and rebuilding my life.

My ex is a piece of work, and I ain't talking about art.

I've sworn off men for forever, even while facing the wedding fever that's spilling over from my best friend's wedding.

But there's something about the doc. He's way more than he appears to be.

And he cares about his patients and his staff.

Eye roll Nope. Seriously. He's a billionaire from some invention, but he's not interested in sipping drinks on a beach.

He's fully dedicated to saving lives and helping people.

At least that's the story on the street.

I'm just working hard not to fall for his good looks or wicked smile.

Surprisingly, the sparks between us could light up a New Year's skyline.

Against my better judgment, I find myself loving his attention.

My ex, however, does not.

When blows come to blows, my hot doc isn't backing down.

He's got one message for my past mistake—she's mine now.

Yes. Yes, I am.

Introduction

Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...



[Get it HERE](#)

DEDICATION

To all of my lovely readers that enjoyed Say You Do. This is for YOU! We heard you loud and clear, and Ali and I jumped on working up this spinoff for April. I love her story and I hope you do too. To all of the hard-working single mom's out there, this one is for you. You're doing the best you can and it's noticed. Keep after it. You got this.

Weston

CHAPTER 1



CHRIS

Working in a public hospital in New York City was a bit like playing Russian roulette. We never knew what we were going to get.

Some days, we hit the ground running and didn't stop until an hour or two after shift. Since our hospital was chronically and severely short-staffed, those were the days we had the most of.

Every once in a while, like today, we caught a break. Time dragged by with little action happening to make it pass faster.

But like fight club or no-hitters, no one talked about it when we had a quiet day. Not unless that person wanted to inadvertently cause a massive accident, natural disaster, or some other catastrophic event.

Even the emergency department had only paged me once this shift for a quick resuscitation and I'd been told they could handle it from there.

As I waited for the ancient coffeemaker in our break room to spurt the sludge that passed for caffeine around here into my cup, I glanced down at my wrist to check the time. *How has it only been three hours?*

Another couple of minutes inched by until my mug was full, but then the process started over when I swapped it out for Hunter's. My best friend and assistant had taken over some exercises with a physical therapy patient of mine when I'd been called away by the ER.

The least I could do was fuel his borderline addiction to this sludge. Then again, coffee was the lifeblood of our hospital. Even the bad stuff would do as long as it was potent enough, which the sludge was.

Which is probably why it's so sludgy.

I carried both steaming mugs up to the PT center and paused in the doorway to see how my seven-year-old patient was getting along. Hunter was a giant of a man who'd once made a living performing in strong-man competitions. He'd since let himself go to the extent that even his shaggy red hair and ginger beard looked unkept most days.

Kids were almost always afraid of him at first until they realized he was a big teddy bear. Philip, the patient he was busy with, had been with us for a few months now. He'd come to adore Hunter, as most did, and was currently playing catch with him.

"Look at how far your gross motor function has come," he cheered when Philip managed to catch the ball in his mitt. "Two weeks ago, you were struggling to move your hand with that thing on. Now you're almost ready to go pro."

Philip's little chest puffed out, and he beamed when he saw me standing there. "Did you hear that, Doctor M? I'm almost ready to go pro."

"Yeah." I smiled and walked into the room, holding up Hunter's coffee. "You're doing great, Phil. I can see you've been working hard at your homework. I'm really proud of you, bud."

Hunter pulled his mitt off and stuck it under his arm, grinning as he walked up to our patient. "Let's see how much strength you've built now that we know how hard you've been working."

He tapped his arm. "Give me a love tap."

"A love tap?" Philip asked, his brow tugging into a frown.

"He wants you to punch him," I said, going over to stand next to him and faking a stern look. "But don't punch him so

hard that you hurt him, okay? I still need him for the rest of the day.”

He giggled. “You got it. I’ll try my very best not to hurt him.”

Hunter let out a playful huff, shaking his head. “Take your best shot, big guy.”

“Here goes nothing,” Philip said, lifting his scrawny arm to do what he had been told to. As his fist connected with Hunter’s massive bicep, the big man made a show of falling over and gripping his arm.

I patted Philip’s shoulder. “I’d say that arm is holding up pretty well, but you need to make sure you keep doing your exercises, okay? We’ll see you next week.”

He nodded dutifully, smiling up at me. “I will, Doctor Matthews. I promise. See you next week.”

Once he had bounced out the door to meet his mother in our waiting room, I extended a hand to help Hunter up. “One of these days, you’re going to make that offer to a kid and they’re going to end up breaking your arm.”

He slapped his palm into mine and jumped to his feet with far more agility than one might expect from a man his size. He snorted as he reached for his coffee. “I’m not that old.”

“Yet,” I said, one corner of my lips tugging into a smirk. “How long do we have before our next victim comes in?”

Hunter’s blue eyes darted toward the plain round clock mounted above the door. “About ten minutes, I’d say. It’s Lizzie’s last session, so we have to go over her maintenance plan before she leaves.”

“I have it ready. I just need to print it out before she gets here.” I sighed, giving my head a shake. “She’s not ready to finish hands-on treatment yet. We’re going to have to find a way to bring her back despite what policy says.”

“We can always go into private practice,” he suggested, not for the first time. “I heard OB/GYN lost another one. The

doctor gave notice this morning, and he's taking two of the nurses with him."

"Fuck." Scratching my jaw as I took a sip of coffee, I closed my eyes and wondered if I would be asked to catch babies from now on, too. "Maybe it's not a bad idea to consider moving out of here. We always said we wanted to go private later on, and as a bonus, we'd get to treat patients for a lifetime."

He shrugged. "I'm not so worried about that. I just don't want to be left behind in this miserable place without you. I'd end up looking like her."

A nurse walked past the physical therapy ward, stomping as she blew her silver hair out of her eyes. "She's been here twenty years and I think it's been almost as long since she's been in a good mood."

"Why would you get left behind here without me?" I asked as I spun toward the small office we shared with the ward next to ours.

Hunter trailed after me. "Uh, how about because you made a bajillion dollars with that machine of yours? You could retire any minute of any day and live off that money for three lifetimes without having to worry about working again."

I rolled my eyes as I bent over, leaning with my one palm on the desk and the other on the mouse to click into my folder on the shared computer. I typed in my password as I replied and hit print on Lizzie's homecare plan.

"If I've told you once, I must've told you a thousand times by now. I didn't develop that machine to make money or to retire early. I thought I had an idea that could help people, so I made it come to life."

"You revolutionized physical therapy for entire groups of patients, dude. You must've known you'd make money."

I lifted my shoulders and grabbed the sheaf of papers, stapling them together in the corner. "I knew I might make some money *if* it worked, which it did, but only after I put

every last cent I had into the prototype. Not that it matters. I'm not about to retire at thirty-two anyway."

"But you could," he pointed out again. "Better yet, *we* could. You could buy us an island and—"

The door to the office banged open and a frazzled-looking nurse I didn't know rushed in. Her gaze bounced off Hunter and landed on me. "Are you Doctor Matthews?"

"Yes. Why?" I straightened up, instantly alert. "What's happened?"

"The paramedics just called. They're on their way to the ER with a nine-year-old girl who had an accident on a motorcycle. She wasn't wearing a helmet."

A chill raced down my spine. I crossed the office in only one stride, handed the treatment plan over to her as I passed, and shouted instructions over my shoulder just before I took off running.

"There's a girl coming in. Her name is Lizzie. Give her that and tell her I'll be in touch about discussing it."

She nodded dumbly, but I didn't have time to make sure she understood the message. Hunter was right behind me, sprinting toward the ambulance bay as fast as our legs could carry us. Treating injured kids was never fun, and motorcycle accidents were never pretty.

Combine the two, subtract the tiny layer of protection provided by a helmet, and we probably weren't in for a good afternoon. I'd just pulled on my protective gear when the ambulance screeched to a halt.

The tires hadn't quite stopped moving yet when the doors at the back burst open. "We need help here. She's having difficulty breathing, and she's complaining about a headache. Damage to the right arm."

"We got her," I barked at the medic, running to get the side of the gurney.

Hunter materialized at the other side, shouting the information we'd just received to the nurse in charge. She

directed us to a trauma room, but I trusted Hunter to navigate us there while I paid attention to trying to stabilize the girl.

As I flashed a light across her eyes and scrutinized her face, my heart sank. I knew this girl.

Well, I knew who she was anyway. I recognized her from the pictures at the front desk. Unless I was very much mistaken, the girl's name was Adi and her mother was our receptionist, April.

While I hadn't said much more than hello to the fiery-haired receptionist, I knew she was proud of her daughter. I'd overheard her talking about the kid on more than one occasion when I'd walked past her desk.

A lump formed in my stomach. April was one of our own, which meant her daughter was, too.

Fuck.

For the next harrowing seven and a half minutes, I focused every ounce of my attention on the tiny human lying helplessly on the gurney.

"My head hurts," she moaned, squinting her eyes against the harsh light hanging above us.

I squeezed her forearm and gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "I know, sweetheart. We're going to take good care of you, okay?"

She nodded but then winced and closed her eyes. Her breathing was coming in shallow pants and her skin was ghastly pale. Gently placing my stethoscope on her chest, I tried to locate the cause of her struggle.

"Everything sounds clear," I said, looking up at Hunter. "It has to be a panic attack."

"Not surprising. I'll get the meds." He spun around and headed to the cart while I murmured soothing phrases to our patient.

While coaxing her into trying to breathe deeply, I completed the rest of my examination. A dark bruise was

forming on her forehead and disappeared beneath her hairline, which explained the headache.

“We’re going to need painkillers as well,” I said before gingerly lifting her arm. It wasn’t mangled, and it definitely wasn’t as bad as it could have been, but it wasn’t exactly good, either. There were a few scrapes and bruises, but that wasn’t what worried me.

The girl’s arm was lying in an unnatural position that didn’t look comfortable at all, but she hadn’t moved it so much as an inch. “She might need surgery. Did you see April out there?”

“April?” Hunter frowned as he handed over the syringe with the medicine we needed. “Who’s that?”

“The receptionist,” I said as I injected the girl as quickly but painlessly as possible. “I’m pretty sure this is her daughter. Now that we’ve stabilized her, we need consent if she has to go to surgery.”

He snapped his fingers. “Ah, her. I haven’t seen her, no. You’d better go look for her. I’ll stay with the little princess until you’re ready for her.”

“Thanks.” I peeled the gloves off and leaned over Adi, brushing a hand over her soft red hair. She was already breathing easier. Seeing it made my own chest expand without it feeling like I had a rhinoceros sitting on it. “I’ll be right back, okay, sweetheart? I need to speak to your mom.”

“She’s not here,” she groaned. “I was with my dad.”

Rage filled my vision with red spots for a moment. *That makes more sense.*

I’d had trouble understanding what Adi had been doing on a motorcycle since I realized who she was, but I’d figured I would get to the bottom of it eventually. Stabilizing her had to come first, but now that she was doing better, my hands were itching to punch something.

My fingers curled into my palms so hard that my short nails bit into my skin, but I kept my expression serene. “I’ll get someone to call your mother then. Don’t worry, honey.

She'll be here soon and Hunter will stay with you until she gets here."

Her glassy brown eyes slid to his side of the bed. "Hi, Hunter."

"Hey, little darlin'." He managed a grin, but I could see it hadn't come easily to him, either. "I'm right here. You just tell me if you need anything, okay?"

She nodded, but her lids were getting heavy. The sedative and painkillers were doing their job, but this girl shouldn't have been in here needing them in the first place.

Everyone with ears in the hospital had heard the whispers about April's ex and what he had done to her. I didn't know the whole story since I wasn't her friend or one of those people who spread gossip around like a foul smell on the wind, but even I knew the guy was an asshole.

When I walked out into the corridor, a guy wearing a black leather jacket and scuffed motorcycle boots was leaning against the wall. The bored expression on his bearded face confirmed what I'd heard about him.

If this was the father, he really was an asshole. I was half beside myself over what had happened to this girl, and I didn't even know her. April's ex, on the other hand, just seemed bored.

"You Adi's father?" I asked as I strode toward him.

The man's head jerked in a nod, but he didn't even straighten up. "She done yet?"

"No." I clenched my hands together behind my back so I wouldn't do something I'd regret later. "What was she doing on a motorcycle without a helmet?"

The boredom melted from his features and was replaced by a deep scowl. He stepped away from the wall, and his dark eyes narrowed. "What the fuck do you want to know for?"

"Don't get an attitude with me. I'm treating your daughter and I need to know what happened. She might need surgery and it's possible she has a concussion. So I repeat, why wasn't

she wearing a helmet, and what was she doing on a motorcycle?"

The guy folded his thick arms, lowering his chin in a way I was sure was supposed to have been threatening. "Do whatever you need to do to her. Then I'll take her home."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. Where's her mother?"

"It's none of your business where she is." He took a step forward, but I still didn't feel the least bit intimidated. If anything, he was putting himself in danger by getting so much closer to me. "It's not her weekend with Adi. This has nothing to do with her."

Aggression and the urge to unleash it rolled around in my stomach. My jaw clenched so hard I was pretty sure I heard my teeth crack.

But this wasn't the time or the place to get worked up. Knocking him out wouldn't help his daughter, and she had to be my priority. Lord knew she clearly wasn't his.

Dragging in a deep breath, I turned my back on him without saying another word and stalked back into the room. The door slammed shut behind me and Hunter's head snapped up.

"Find April's number and call her to come in," I said, going back to my place at Adi's side. "I'll stay with her, but that guy is on strike two with me already. If I have to keep dealing with him, he won't be the only one facing the possibility of arrest today."

CHAPTER 2



APRIL

Adjusting the takeout cup of coffee in my hand, I jabbed the buzzer to my sister's apartment. I also tried to keep the coffee in my other hand upright while I fished around in my purse for my phone.

The ringtone told me it was my best friend calling, and considering she was on her honeymoon and I hadn't heard from her for weeks, I really wanted to take the call before it rang out.

It really was too bad humans had only been given two hands. As far as I was concerned, it was a serious design flaw.

Adi wasn't even with me today, and two still weren't enough. At the very least, parents should have been gifted with at least one extra pair as soon as they placed that little bundle of joy in our arms.

"Hello?" Katie's voice crackled through the intercom.

"It's me," I yelled. "I've got coffee. Open up."

My fingers finally closed around my phone and I shoved my shoulder against the security gate when my sister buzzed me in. Holding the coffee at a precarious angle, I swiped my thumb across the screen and pressed it to my ear.

"Please tell me you're calling because Cyrus has finally freed you from his den of depravity," I joked instead of greeting Luna.

"My den of depravity?" Her husband's voice echoed over the line with more than a hint of incredulity in it. "We've been

traveling across Europe. How is an entire continent my den of depravity?"

"I should've guessed I'd be on speakerphone. You two are ridiculous." I rolled my eyes. "It's not the continent, Cy. It's just you. You can't tell me you haven't seen more of the inside of hotel rooms than you have your destinations."

He chuckled and I could practically hear him shrugging, but then Luna jumped in to admonish me. "April! We haven't only been in hotel rooms."

"Nah, we've also been in—" Cyrus was cut off with a dull thump. I was ninety-percent sure his darling wife had just smacked his shoulder, but it couldn't have been too hard since he only laughed. "Never mind."

Even though they gave me a toothache from half a world away just by listening to them, I couldn't hold back a smile of my own. "I'm assuming you two are having fun, then. When are you coming home?"

"Soon," Luna said with a soft sigh. "I miss the shop, and Cyrus needs to get back to work, so unfortunately, we'll have to start heading home soon."

"Woe be you," I joked, clutching my purse under my arm as I made my way up the narrow staircase to Katie's apartment."

"Did you tell her we're having a baby?" Cyrus asked.

I slammed to a stop with a squeal. "You're pregnant?"

"No." Luna giggled. "But we've talked about it and we think we might want to—"

"I'm knocking her up any day now," he announced before bursting into another fit of laughter. Luna's sweet voice murmured something to him and he groaned.

"Guys, you do remember I'm still here, right?" Their antics nauseated me sometimes, but I couldn't deny that listening to them made even my blackened heart warm up.

It was difficult to believe, listening to him now, that just a couple of years ago Cyrus had been as down on marriage and

relationships as I was. Meeting Luna had changed his mind faster than I had been able to say “whipped,” and then he’d switched to Team Lovestruck.

My team, the realistic one who realized true love didn’t exist, had lost a good player that day. But those two were so unbelievably happy together that they made me happy, too. If there was anyone in this world who deserved for the fairytale to be true, it was Luna.

She cleared her throat. “We know you’re there. Don’t worry. Nothing gross or untoward is happening. I just wanted to call to check in on you guys. How’s my Adi angel doing?”

I smiled softly and started back up the stairs. “She’s good. She’s spending some time with the sperm donor today.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised. “How did that happen?”

“I’ll tell you all about it when you get back.” I reached my sister’s floor, seeing her waiting for me in her doorway. “I just got to Katie’s, so I have to go, but I’m pretty sure Cyrus wants to do something gross and untoward to you anyway. I’ll let you get back to honeymooning. Let me know when your flight is getting in?”

“I’ll do that. Send my love to Katie.”

She hung up after I promised her I would check in on her flower shop later today, and I smiled again as I shook my head and stashed my phone in my purse.

Katie frowned. “What are you so smiley about?”

“Nothing, Mom.” I winked at her and held out the second coffee. “Peace offering?”

She took the caffeine, but her frown deepened. “Why are you giving me a peace offering for smiling? Did you do something stupid?”

“No,” I said, walking around her and into the apartment. “I was just on the phone with Luna. Apparently, Cyrus is on a mission to impregnate her as soon as possible.”

Katie groaned as she shut her door and followed me to her living room. “Are those two still so crazy in love then?”

“You betcha.” I sank onto her pale gray sofa and tucked my feet in underneath me.

My sister walked past, tapping my toes with her hand before heading to her favorite armchair. “Get those feet off my couch.”

I did as she asked, but a shit-eating grin spread on my lips. “You do realize you’re only two years older than I am, right? You don’t have to mommy me.”

“Someone has to.” She sipped her coffee and arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow at me. “Are our favorite honeymooners finally back in the city yet?”

“No. Don’t get me wrong. I miss the hell out of Luna, but they can stay in Love-ville by themselves a bit longer before they come back. Just listening to them made me feel a little like I’d eaten too many sweets.”

“Amen to that.” She raised her coffee in acknowledgment before bringing it back to her lips. “I’m so happy for her, but I’m glad it’s not either of us.”

“You still think you’ll be single for the rest of your life?” I teased, snapping my fingers. “Darn. I guess that means I’m done with being a bridesmaid.”

“I want too much out of a man to get married.” She smiled, smoothing her hand over the subtle purple throw draped over her chair. “Besides, look how well it turned out for you. I’d rather save myself all that hassle.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.” I sighed and tried not to pay too much attention to the tight spot that had formed in my chest when I’d dropped Adi off earlier. “Speaking of my greatest mistake, Craig is spending the day with Adi.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that when you called earlier.” Her green eyes clouded over with worry. “I won’t pretend to understand why you agreed to let him have her.”

“He’s still her father.” I brushed my hair out of my face. “It’s only for a couple of hours. He’s been reaching out more and more to spend a little time with her. I can’t keep refusing him. She wants to get to know him.”

“Why?” She sniffed. “He’s never been interested before. After all the shit he put you through, I can’t even believe he’d reach out. The audacity to think he can walk back into your lives and everything will be fine is just another example of what a bastard he is. A dangerous one, too.”

I nodded but raised my shoulders. “I told him he could only have her if they stay at his mother’s house. That way, there’s someone else supervising too.”

“Good idea,” she said, but her teeth sank into her lip. “Has he told you why he suddenly wants more time with her?”

“Nope.” I sat back against the plush sofa. “I asked, but he just smirked and told me it wasn’t any of my business.”

The worry in her expression intensified, her brows pulling together as her eyes became even darker. “Maybe it’s time to get the courts involved. Just for safety’s sake, it might be better to have a court order stating the terms of their visits.”

“I don’t think we need to do that. I’ve thought about it, but he doesn’t want too much time with her, and I’m pretty sure it’s just a phase. Sooner or later, he’ll get bored with having to spend a few of his precious hours with a child, and then he’ll disappear on us again.”

The thought made me livid, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. Craig wanted to get to know Adi, and more importantly, she wanted the same thing. If she hadn’t begged me to say yes, I would have turned him down.

Unfortunately, he’d waited for us outside of her school one day and told me, in front of her, that he wanted to spend some time with her. It had placed me between the proverbial rock and a hard place since I would be the bad guy if I said no, even if it would only have been to protect her.

Adi was everything to me. I would go to the ends of the earth to keep her from getting hurt, but Craig had always been a master manipulator. He’d known to approach me while Adi was there and he’d played into the whole “I miss my baby” thing so well, even I would have believed him if I didn’t know him better.

But even so, I only wanted what was best for my daughter. If Craig had somehow turned over a new leaf where she was concerned, I wouldn't be the alienating witch who kept them apart. As long as I knew Adi was safe while she was with him, which was why I'd insisted on them visiting at his mother's for the time being, it was fine.

Katie made a humming noise of disagreement at the back of her throat, but before she could say anything else, my phone rang again. When I pulled it out and saw it was the hospital calling, I silenced it and tossed it down beside me.

"They're probably short-staffed again," I said. "I'll call back when we're done. Maybe I'll pop in for an hour or so later before I collect Adi."

The phone started ringing again immediately. It was the hospital again, which made me frown at my phone. They never called twice unless it was a real emergency.

"Hello?" I said when I answered. "It's my day off. How badly do you need me to come in?"

A throat cleared before a voice I didn't recognize came over the line. "April? This is Hunter Holmes calling. I'm afraid I have some bad news. We're in the process of admitting your daughter. Doctor Matthews is with her now. There's been an accident."

My heart crumbled in my chest, and my teeth started chattering. It felt like I'd been hit by an eighteen-wheeler in the middle of a snowstorm.

Katie took one look at my face and grabbed both our purses, then pried the phone out of my hand and took over. Despite the shock, I moved faster than I ever had in my life. My brain was incapable of regular function, but my body worked at double speed.

We rushed out the door and raced to the hospital in Katie's hybrid, parking in the ambulance bay before running inside. I thought I heard someone yelling at us, but then I heard Katie barking out some kind of reply before she was back at my side.

I didn't stop moving until I saw the big, hulking guy I thought was Hunter Holmes pacing up and down outside a room in the emergency department. He started moving toward me as soon as he saw me, confirming my suspicion that I was right about who he was.

"April," he said, pointing at a door down the hall. "She's right in there. She's okay, but she's a bit sleepy because of the meds Chris gave her."

I nodded but pushed past him like I didn't even see him. It would have been impossible to miss a guy that size, even if he hadn't spoken, but I just couldn't slow down right now. I would thank him later.

Craig was nowhere to be seen at first, but then he turned the corner with his arms laden with snacks. The fragile hold I'd had on my self-control snapped as soon as I saw the motorcycle club wannabe.

"You asshole," I yelled, black spots dancing across my vision. "What the fuck have you done?"

He smirked at me like he didn't have a care in the world. "I didn't do a thing. Adi fell off the bike all by herself."

"Bullshit." I narrowed my eyes at him, stalking right up and poking my finger into his chest. "This is your fault. I'm going to check on my daughter now. You better stay the fuck away from her, Craig. I mean it."

"Yeah?" He snorted and opened his mouth to continue, but then I felt a massive presence behind me.

Hunter's hands came down gently on my shoulders. "I've called security. They're going to remove him in a second. Go on in. I'll wait here."

Craig's expression turned murderous as he turned on Hunter, but the other man didn't look either impressed or intimidated. He simply crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows as if challenging my backboneless ex to argue with him.

Trusting Hunter to keep him the hell out of the room, I didn't waste time in getting to Adi. Tears swam in my vision

when I saw her lying on a hospital bed in the center of the sterile room.

A doctor was with her, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from her for long enough to look at him. "Adi, baby? Are you okay?"

She didn't answer, but when I got closer to her, I saw her eyes were closed. Just then, a deep, calm voice spoke from somewhere in the room.

It was like my head was a void, though. I had to put in some real thought before I realized it had to be the doctor talking.

"It's okay, April. She's asleep because of the medicine we gave her, but she's okay. I spoke to her myself until she drifted off and I haven't left her side."

I nodded, going to the bed and taking her small hand in mine. Still without moving my eyes off her, I leaned over to rest my forehead against hers and snapped at him.

"What the hell happened to her?" I asked, my voice coming out harsh. I knew I was channeling my anger at the wrong person, but I couldn't help it.

My brain was stuck at the moment I got that call, and my emotions were totally and completely out of my control. In the very back of my mind, though, in a place that was still rational and thinking logically, I thanked my lucky stars that she'd ended up at *my* hospital.

Someone here had recognized her and thought to call me because Craig surely wouldn't have.

Whoever that person was, I owed them. Big time.

CHAPTER 3



CHRIS

I'd never subscribed to the idea that someone's looks could dictate their personality, but the redhead in front of me sure was fiery. I understood that she was emotional and in shock, but she was aiming those things at the wrong fucking guy.

"At first glance, I thought she might need surgery," I said. "Now that I've had more time to assess her, there may be a chance we can rehab her without having to go that route."

Her green eyes were watery when they lifted to mine, but even the tears couldn't hide the fierceness in her gaze. "That's right. I recognize you now. You're the physical therapy doctor. Why are you down here with my daughter? She needs a real doctor."

A real doctor? Wow.

I had about ten retorts right at the tip of my tongue, but antagonizing a young patient's mother was just wrong. Besides, I'd have chosen the wrong profession if I took offense to everything people said when they were stressed and emotional.

Over the years, I'd learned to brush it off. Retorts always jumped to mind, but I never let them get any further than that. *Well, almost never.*

"I *am* a real doctor," I said, my voice as measured and even as always. "I'm trained in multiple disciplines. Emergency trauma medicine and surgery being among those. Physical therapy is simply my passion."

Annoyance flicked across her gaze. “That’s great for you, buddy, but you still haven’t told me what you’re doing here with her.”

“I fill in for the emergency department when they’re short-staffed. I’ve taken some X-rays of her arm. Would you like to see those, or would you prefer my credentials first?”

Her brows rose, but then she licked her lips and sighed. “The X-rays.”

“Great.” I gathered the ones I wanted to show her and put them up against the lightbox. “These look good, which is what led me to believe the swelling might have made her arm look worse than it is. We’ll only know for sure once she wakes up and we can determine her range of movement, but we may be able to avoid surgery.”

“Maybe?” A deep V formed between her brows when she looked at me. “Why maybe? If you’re so qualified, why can’t you read these? You also still haven’t told me what happened.”

I filled my lungs with air and counted to five. “I can read them, but they only show us so much. Adi has no fractured or broken bones, but that being said, she may still need surgery if there’s other damage on the inside that we can’t see here. There are a lot of maybes right now because we’ve only just stabilized her. We’ll learn more as we run more tests, but there was only so much we could do before you got here.”

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” she muttered. “He did this, right? It was Craig’s fault?”

“It seems so,” I said. “You’ll have to speak to your husband about what exactly happened. I can only tell you what the paramedics told us.”

She glared at me, fury raging in the depths of her eyes. “He’s not my husband. He’s my ex.”

“Sure. I didn’t know if you’d gotten the divorce yet or not.” I took the X-rays down and slid them back into the envelope, glancing at her. “He’s kind of a dick.”

“That’s why I said he’s my ex,” she replied, shaking her head before turning back to her daughter. “There’s also no *kind*

of about it. He's a total and complete dick who just so happens to have a small one."

I snorted, trying to bite back my laughter. *She's a feisty one, all right.*

Even though it was obvious she was having a tough time with all of this, it was also clear she was not one to be babied and coddled. She wasn't about to faint, puke, or bawl her eyes out.

But I still felt the need to reassure her. It was so instinctual that I couldn't help it, and besides that, no mother should have to go through something like this. Especially not when the father who caused it couldn't give a fuck.

"It's going to be okay," I said quietly. "She's going to be fine. We're all here for you."

"I don't need your doctorly bedside manner," she snapped, sending yet another glare my way. "This should never have happened. She shouldn't have gotten hurt. What did he tell you anyway? Did he even bother telling you what happened?"

I shook my head, trying to tread carefully while being honest at the same time. "Adi appears to have fallen off the back of his motorcycle. She wasn't wearing a helmet, but it seems like her arm took the brunt of her fall instead of her head. We'll monitor her for a possible concussion, though. The motorcycle couldn't have been going very fast, but she's still got a nasty bruise to show for the lack of a helmet."

April's hands trembled, and her shoulders fell, another tear tracking its way down her cheek. Her voice was shaky but filled with fury when she spoke again. "Despite everything he did to me, I never thought he'd be so careless with her. How could he?"

My heart thudded against my ribs like it wanted to reach out to hers. I hated situations like this one with a passion. Men like Craig weren't men at all, if anyone asked me. Not that they had.

If I hadn't heard the altercation outside and Hunter telling her that security had been called, I'd have been dragging him

out of there myself. He might have left the premises with a few bruises of his own if I had, though—which wouldn't have been good for anyone concerned.

Adi let out a soft moan, drawing our attention to her. April's gaze found mine, confusion dimming the usually bright orbs. "I thought you said you gave her something to sleep?"

"We did, but it was very light. With the possibility of a concussion, I didn't want to risk giving her any of the heavy-duty stuff. We'd also never give any of that to a child without first obtaining consent, and even then, only if they really needed it. Adi just needed a little nap to calm down, nothing more."

"Why?" April whispered furiously. "Wasn't she calm?"

I shook my head but didn't offer any further explanation once I saw Adi's eyes blinking open. I smiled down at her, running my hand over the top of her head again and reaching for my flashlight with the other.

"Hey, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?"

"You're still here?" she croaked, then spotted her mother standing next to her bed. "Mommy! You came."

"Of course, I did, baby." April swiped the tears from her eyes while Adi seemed to be holding back a flood of her own. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. What happened?" She blinked slowly, a tiny crease appearing when she pulled her brows together. "I don't remember falling asleep."

"We gave you something to make you feel a little better. Do you mind if I take another look at you now that you're awake?"

She shook her head, and April nodded her assent when I glanced at her. I smiled at my new patient, raising the light to her eyes. "Okay, would you mind looking at me for a sec?"

Once we were done with the basics and there was no real cause for immediate concern, I moved on to what I knew

would be a problem area. “Can you try moving your arm for me, honey?”

I touched her injured arm lightly when she didn’t move it, tapping each of her fingers in turn. “Do you feel that?”

“Sort of.” Terror flashed in her soft brown eyes, but she still didn’t cry. “Why can’t I move it?”

“You’re probably just a little stiff and woozy from the medicine.” I flashed her a smile. “Can you sit up for me? I want to have a quick look at your neck.”

April helped the little girl shuffle to a sitting position while I moved in behind her. “Thanks, Adi. You’re being a really tough girl, do you know that? You’re very brave.”

“I am tough,” she agreed, “but I’m also thirsty.”

I chuckled, scrutinizing her neck while trying to examine it as gently as possible. “I’ll go get you something to drink in just a minute. I’m sure you’d like to have your mom to yourself for a little while.”

Dropping my hands to my sides when I was done, I forced a relaxed grin to my lips and walked around her bed. “Is water okay? Or do you have a favorite soda I can get you instead?”

“Pepsi,” she whispered, her attention fixed on her mother. I figured it was as good a time as any to give them some time alone, not doubting that April was holding back a thousand questions she didn’t want to ask while I was around.

Since I needed to speak to Hunter and check on things outside anyway, I’d kill two birds with one stone. “Sure. I’ll be back in a few.”

April started talking as I was shutting the door, but I didn’t stick around to eavesdrop. The smile dropped from my face when I spotted Hunter speaking to a security guard down the hall.

“Is he gone?” I asked as I went to join them. “Craig, I mean.”

“Yeah.” Hunter grinned and clapped the guard on the shoulder. “Jessie is on duty all day and he’ll make sure the

asshole doesn't come back in."

"Thank you, Jessie," I said, giving him a nod before walking away and motioning for Hunter to follow me. The two finished the conversation they'd been having about some football team, and then he came to join me at the nurses' station.

I set Adi's chart down, propping my elbow up on the cool linoleum counter. "I think there's something wrong with a nerve in her neck. She's having trouble moving the arm."

"Should I book an operating room?" he asked, expression pinched until I shook my head.

"No, I'm not cutting her open if it's not absolutely necessary. Let's wait for the swelling to go down and give it time to settle. Then we can re-evaluate."

"It's not dangerous to leave it?" he asked, not second-guessing but genuinely interested. That was one of the things that made Hunter so good at his job. If he didn't understand something, he asked, and then he remembered.

Someday very soon, he would know everything I did and then some. "No, not under the circumstances. I think there's definitely been some damage, but the swelling is hiding it and making it seem worse at the same time. I'm prescribing something that should help with the swelling and the pain. We'll take another look tomorrow."

"We're keeping her?" He frowned, sighing.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm afraid we have to."

"Okay, but you're going to have to be the one who tells April. After what I saw, I'd only give her good news from a distance. I don't want to be anywhere near her when you tell her all this."

"Yeah, neither do I," I agreed. "But someone's got to do it. If you're too afraid of the womenfolk, I guess that's up to me."

He shook his head but didn't take the bait, calling out after me as I walked away. "I'll buy you a beer later to make up for it. Sorry, dude."

I smirked. “Don’t even worry about it. Some of us still have our balls attached to our bodies.”

“For now,” Hunter barked out with a shout of laughter. Then he flipped me off and went in the opposite direction.

I inhaled and exhaled a few times once I’d grabbed Adi’s soda. Pausing outside the door of her room, I pasted a smile back on my face and forced it to stay there. *All righty then. Let’s go get these balls severed from my body.*

Fuck, this wasn’t going to be a pleasant experience at all.

CHAPTER 4



APRIL

The last twenty-four hours had been some of the worst of my life, and that was saying something. While I didn't like to complain too much about it, except for bitching about Craig from time to time, I hadn't exactly had things easy.

But having my daughter in the hospital? It sucked giant-ass donkey balls.

I hadn't left her side, but if that doctor decided to keep her for another night, I would have to. Katie had brought me a change of clothes, but I had to work tomorrow, which meant I'd need more. I'd also need a decent shower and then actually to go to work in the morning.

Sure, I'd still be in the same building, but I really didn't want to have to leave Adi alone in this room. Too many scary things happened all the time, and I didn't want her to have to face them without me.

The meds Chris had prescribed for Adi made her drowsy, so she'd been asleep more often than not, but that didn't matter. I still wanted to be there for her.

At least some nurses on this floor were my friends. It helped calm my nerves to know the people looking after us. I knew they wouldn't bullshit me, even if I wished they'd swoon a little less over the doctor and focus a little more on his patient.

I couldn't really blame them for wanting to hang around every time Chris was supposed to make an appearance,

though. The man looked like sex on a stick, and though I didn't really know him, I'd heard a lot about him.

He was a definite favorite among the staff, female or not. I hadn't realized who he was when I'd first gotten here, but as things had calmed down, it had all started coming back to me.

Doctor Chris Matthews with his shorter, dirty blonde hair and light green eyes the color of springtime grass with a layer of dew over it was a legend in these halls. He was built like a swimmer, tall and toned, but that wasn't even what people couldn't shut up about. It also wasn't that he was revered by his peers and was thought to be one of the most intelligent doctors around.

It was the fact that, while working full time at the hospital and apparently volunteering some of his time to help out veterans, he had also developed some kind of machine that had turned him into a billionaire.

Being hot, smart, and rich meant he was a perfect trifecta for all those who liked to gossip, and there were a lot of those people in this hospital. I couldn't deny that I was one of those myself, but it was more because I couldn't avoid it.

The front desk was a point of convergence for everyone from the different departments, which meant that people shared a plethora of information while they handed files or patients off, walked them in, or came along to discharge them.

When I'd first started working there, I'd tried to tune it all out, but in time, it had become like a soap opera I just couldn't stop watching. Tuning all gossip out had slowly become listening with half an ear, then a whole ear, then eventually became listening unashamedly. And now, I was a full-blown part of it.

I was glad for it now, though. At least I had the lowdown on the doctor who was treating my daughter. I had to admit that so far, he was living up to the hype.

The guy was kind but direct, honest, patient, and, strangely enough, great with kids. It didn't hurt that he was so easy on the eyes, either. Not that it mattered medically, but I wasn't

blind. Now that the initial shock had worn off, I would've had to be *not* to notice the whole sex on a stick thing.

“Mommy?” Adi whispered, and my spine shot straight up in my chair.

I squeezed her hand and smiled down at her, shutting all thoughts of anything and everyone else out of my mind now that she was awake again. “I’m here, baby.”

“Did I fall asleep again?” she asked before yawning and stretching out her legs.

I nodded. “You dozed off after we got back from the CAT scan.”

“Oh yeah.” She blinked the sleep out of her eyes. “Why is it called a CAT scan?”

“I’m not sure, baby. We can ask the doctor when he gets back with the results.” When Chris had mentioned earlier that he needed to send Adi for the scan, my heart had sunk all the way to China.

I’d been holding on to hope that maybe she wouldn’t have to be operated on, but it seemed like it might just have to happen. When he’d spoken about it in that calm, deep, whiskey-wrapped-in-smoke voice of his, it had all sounded like it would be okay.

It was only once he’d left that it dawned on me that my little girl might just really need surgery. I’d spent the next hour silently cursing Craig. Honestly, I wished I could rip his tiny dick off with my bare hands for this, but that would probably end with me in prison.

I wasn’t afraid of much, but even I didn’t particularly want to end up in the big house. Plus, that would mean that Adi would have to stay with Katie for a while, and I’d never hear the end of it.

No, it was better Craig kept his tiny, talentless dick. As long as he kept his butt away from us while he was at it.

Adi’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Mommy, if a CAT scan is for cats, why did I have to go in it?”

I grinned at her. “We’ll have to ask the doctor that one, too.”

It would be interesting to see what he came up with on the fly. Fuck only knew my head was too flat after events of the last day to come up with any quirky answers for her.

“Okay,” she agreed. “I’ll ask him. Where is he anyway?”

I stroked her fingers with my thumb, looking up at the door. “He’ll be here soon. I think he’s just waiting on your results.”

Knowing this hospital, he was probably also so overloaded with patients that it could be hours before we saw him again. But something in my gut told me he’d be by as soon as he could.

Your hormones aren’t in your gut, the snarkier version of me spoke from a corner of my mind. Your libido wants him to be back as soon as he can, but that doesn’t mean anything.

I let out a soft sigh. Snarky, bitchy me was right, though. I had no reason to trust this doctor and his being attractive didn’t change that.

Well, okay, maybe it wasn’t entirely true that I had no reason to trust him. Hunter had told me Chris had been the one to recognize Adi as my daughter. He’d also instructed Hunter to call security if Craig became threatening in any way and he’d supposedly gone toe to toe with him until he’d decided Craig wasn’t worth his time.

Maybe I can trust him.

The man I couldn’t trust was my ex. It came as no surprise, but I still never really would’ve believed he’d let things go this far. If I had, he definitely wouldn’t even have seen Adi without my supervision.

Fuck his mother’s supervision, too. Apparently, not even she could be trusted.

“Baby,” I said to Adi, giving her hand another gentle squeeze. “How did this happen? Why did you get on that motorcycle?”

I kept any trace of accusation out of my tone. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel guilty about this.

“Daddy wanted me to go on it with him.” She looked away from me and focused on the branches of the tree swaying gently in the breeze outside her window. “I didn’t want to, but he told me it would be fun.”

I bet he did. Rage bubbled in my tummy, the feeling so intense that it sent a shiver racing up my spine and begged for the explosive urges to be set free, but I wrestled it all down. *I cannot rip his dick off. I cannot rip his dick off.*

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” I said as soothingly as I could manage. “What happened next?”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I got scared and accidentally let go. That’s all I remember. Please don’t be angry.”

“I’m not, promise.” Not at her anyway. “It’s not your fault, sweetie. It was just an accident.”

An accident Craig should’ve seen coming. What the hell was he doing letting a nine-year-old who’d only ever seen a motorcycle from afar ride one?

Adi was quiet for a beat before her eyes opened and slid back to mine. “I don’t want to go with him again, Mommy.”

My heart shattered at the pain in her voice. Scooting forward on my chair, I leaned over to press a kiss against her temple and brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“You don’t have to. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you again.”

There was a swift, firm knock on the door before it opened to reveal Doctor Sexy himself.

Instead of focusing on the high chiseled cheekbones and the straight perfectly curved lines of his jaw, all I saw was the apprehension shining in his eyes. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

He flashed us all of his straight white teeth when he smiled. But I was willing to bet the farm it was a fake one. “Do you have the results?”

Nerves crashed into me like someone had dumped a bucket of them over my head. He nodded and lifted the clipboard in his hands but didn't look down at it. "Adi has a pinched nerve in her neck. I was hoping once the swelling went down that we might be able to fix it without surgery, but that's no longer an option."

Blood rushed from my head, making me dizzy. Chris must have moved to me because suddenly his hand was on my shoulder and his eyes were hovering in front of mine.

"April?" He said my name like I meant something to him. "Are you okay?"

I dragged in a breath and nodded, forcing my body to calm the hell down. "I'm fine. I just... she's only nine."

"I know, but the doctors won't let anything happen to her. I've spoken to a very good friend of mine who's an orthopedic surgeon here and he's agreed to do Adi's operation. He's the guy I'd pick to do surgery on me."

"Wait, why don't you do it?" I asked, and Adi nodded along with me.

Chris's lips twisted as he shook his head. "I wish I could, but I only ever perform surgery here when there's really no one else available. I'm rusty and I hate to say it but not the best man for the job."

"Well, I suppose there are modest surgeons out there after all," I muttered but then felt a flush spreading across my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I should really just keep my mouth shut."

He flashed me a lopsided smile. "Feel free to speak your mind with me, April. I know this is a big shock and it's a lot to process, but I promise you I wouldn't be recommending it if there was any other way."

"Will you be there?" Adi asked softly.

He turned to her. "If you want me to be, then I will be. I'll also be there after to help you recover. You, me, and Hunter are going to spend so much time together, you'll be begging us to leave you alone rather than being here."

Her lips curled into a hesitant smile. “Really?”

“Really.” He moved to the side of her bed and held his fist up for her to bump with her good one. When she did, he let out a cheer. “There we go! Team Adi for the win.”

Chris turned back to me, questions in the soft green of his eyes. “What do you say? Can we go ahead and schedule the surgery?”

Fear wracked every fiber of my being, but I didn’t let it show. If Adi suspected I was afraid, then she would be too.

I glanced down at her, begging whoever the gods of tears were to keep mine at bay for now. “Sure, let’s do it. Team Adi for the win, right?”

“Yeah,” Chris said, coming closer to me to bump his shoulder into mine and lowering his voice. “Try not to worry, okay? We’ll take good care of her.”

That was easy for him to say. “Asking me not to worry is like asking the summer sun not to shine, but I know you’ll take care of her. You have to Chris. Please. She’s everything to me.”

To my utter surprise, he enveloped me in a big hug and crushed me against his strong chest. “We will, April. Trust me, okay?”

I nodded, but that didn’t mean I would stop worrying. I would never stop worrying, not until the whole ordeal was over. And even then? I hadn’t stopped worrying since they placed her in my arms, and I doubted I ever would.

Wasn’t that just part of being a mother?

CHAPTER 5



CHRIS

Another day, another shift.

I walked into the hospital with a burrito in hand, tearing off a bite with my teeth as I pushed my way through the revolving doors at the front. The administration was finally starting to bring in more staff members, but the going was slow, and the turnaround, as always, was too great for them to keep up with.

Sometimes, it felt like this place was a sausage machine. Whatever they put in just came out the other end and kept right on going. Announcements crackled over the intercom. People rushed by me without a second glance, and the waiting room was overflowing.

Just another day in paradise.

Personally, I had a love-hate relationship with this place. Whenever I thought the time had come to leave it, it would show me exactly why I had to stay. The day would come when I'd make my way out of those doors for good, but it wasn't today.

I still got too high on the adrenaline of being there, still loved the thrill of the next minute too much. At the same time, the physical therapy room was something of a sanctuary for me.

No matter how many patients we had with us or waiting outside, our sessions were like tiny bursts of peace. It was only when the ER came calling that I really received that dose of

excitement, and since there were more doctors down there now, it had been a couple of weeks since I'd been called in.

As I had every day for the last two weeks, I snuck a peek at the front desk as I headed for the stairwell. Instead of April's bright red hair, I was met with the same curly blonde hair of the woman who had been acting as the temporary receptionist since Adi's accident.

As far as I knew, April hadn't been back since. I didn't know why I'd been keeping tabs, but I'd even put out feelers to try to find out if she'd switched to a different shift. I'd been told she hadn't. She'd apparently just put in for personal leave and no one knew when or if she'd be back.

Jogging up the stairs, I again wondered why I'd even gone through the effort of asking. I'd had hundreds of kids of single parents as my patients over the years, but none of them had held my interest like April and Adi had.

Hunter had suggested that it might be because April was such a knockout, but that didn't make sense either. We'd been working in the same hospital for years, and while she'd definitely caught my eye in that time, I'd never even thought about speaking to her or asking her out.

In fact, the first real conversation we'd had was after Adi's accident and April hadn't exactly been at her best. Which begged the question, was I a sucker for punishment or just plain stupid?

I hadn't been able to answer yet, and I doubted I'd be able to anytime soon. The fact of the matter was that I just didn't know why I couldn't get those two out of my head.

April popped into my brain at the most inopportune times, like late at night when I finally crawled into bed or early in the morning when I was in the shower. It was always to wonder whether that smart mouth of hers extended to every part of her life or to picture her long hair wrapped around my fist.

There were rumors around the hospital that I got plenty of action. For that matter, those same rumors seemed to circulate through the entire city. It seemed one couldn't make a bit of

money without garnering the attention of the public eye. If you made more than a bit in one go, people tended to like talking about you.

And yet, for all the speculated action I was getting, it'd been months since I'd actually gotten any. Not that I was complaining. I didn't have time for complicated, and as soon as my name or money got involved, complicated became the name of the game.

It was one possible option for why I couldn't get April out of my head. I just needed to get laid.

Adi occupied my mind while I was at work. I couldn't stop wondering how she was doing after her surgery and why they hadn't made an appointment with us yet.

I shoved through the doors of the physical training room, still deep in thought until I saw Hunter lying beneath one of the machines. Frowning as I tried to figure out what he was doing, I kicked his foot when I reached him.

"Is that broken?" I asked, confused as I gave the thing a quick scan. "It seems to be fine. There's not much that can go wrong with it."

Hunter's arms flexed as he pulled himself out and smirked up at me. "Oh, there's nothing wrong with it. I was just trying to reverse engineer your billion-dollar machine."

"That's not even mine, but if you wanted to reverse engineer it, you could just ask for the patent. I'd hand it over in a heartbeat."

He waved a hand at me before jumping up. "It's pointless. I'm never going to make anything like this."

"Don't say that." I pointed at his chest, the burrito in my other hand now ice cold and long forgotten. "You can do anything you—"

He laughed, smacking my hand away. "It's not because I don't think I'm smart enough, idiot. I'm just too busy with other stuff."

“Right.” I tossed the half-eaten burrito in the trash and folded my arms. “Like what? Lying in wait so you can set me up like this?”

“Among other things.” He shrugged. “I’ve also been putting money against myself on when you’re going to man up and admit you’ve been thinking about the receptionist and her daughter.”

“What?” I scoffed, my shoulders coming up. “That’s crazy.”

“So you haven’t been making me take a detour to the cafeteria just so you can walk past the front desk?” He gave me a pointed look. “I call bullshit.”

I raked a hand through my hair and turned my back on him, heading to the small office to change. “Fine, I just want to check on them, okay? She’s one of us. I’m worried about a patient. That’s it.”

“Why are you so concerned about this one patient?” he asked, following me and leaning against the door as I swapped shirts.

No one would be able to see me past his hulking frame, and since we hit the gym together regularly, it wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before. “I’m not only concerned about her. I just want to make sure her daughter is okay.”

Hunter, of course, saw right through me. “You’re a doctor, bro. It’s okay to check on patients or their moms.”

He made a silly face as he said it, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have a good point.

“Fine. I’ll call them, but my interest is strictly professional.”

“Sure.” He gave me an exaggerated wink before tapping on the frame with his knuckles. “I’m going to go back to my machine if you’d like to make a call.”

He turned and left without another word. I went to close the door, then finished changing while mulling over what he’d said. I *was* a doctor and she *was* my patient’s mother. Plus, she

was a co-worker. Being worried about her and checking up on her wouldn't be crossing any sort of line.

I sank down into the threadbare office chair behind the desk and logged into the hospital system. I didn't have her number, but our employer would.

After I'd made the promise to Adi that I'd be there for her, calling when I hadn't heard from them for so long was only proper. The surgery had gone well. I'd kept my word and had been there while it happened.

There was no medical reason I knew of that April shouldn't have been back at work and Adi should've started physical therapy by now. Calling them wasn't only proper. It was the right thing to do.

Keep telling yourself that, Matthews. Maybe if I started believing that was the true reason for my call, it would somehow become true. It was a long shot, though, considering I already knew it wasn't.

I was calling her because I was curious and because I wanted to speak to her, not because it was the right thing to do. But she never had to know that. Nor did she have to know about the dirty fucking places my mind went to these days whenever I heard her name.

No, it was best that part stayed my secret. I wanted to know whether her smart mouth was still smart when she was between the sheets. I definitely didn't need to find out what that mouth was capable of if she turned her sharp words against me.

I'd really rather she just used it on me. Not that I planned on ever letting her find out that little tidbit of information either.

CHAPTER 6



APRIL

Adi sighed and set a jar of mayonnaise down on the counter with a bit more of a thump than was necessary. She was moving around better, but she was still in a neck brace, and her arm wasn't quite cooperating yet.

I felt her frustration with the jar echoing as a ripple in my own chest. Walking around the small kitchen table to give her a hug around the shoulders, I bent down to drop a kiss on top of her head.

"Let me help you with that, sweetheart." I cracked the mayonnaise jar open and handed it over. "How are you feeling this morning?"

She shrugged, but the desperation in her eyes gave her away. "I'm okay, but my arm still doesn't want to work, Mommy."

Her voice cracked on the last part of her sentence and she sucked in a deep, long breath to get it back under control. Adi had been born an adult, but seeing her trying to act like everything was okay even now was like a flaming lance being twisted in my heart.

"You don't have to act all tough with me, baby," I said softly, pulling the plate with the sandwich she had been making closer. "It's okay to feel what you're feeling. You're angry, sad, scared, and you're in pain. You don't have to hide any of that from me."

Tears suddenly glistened in her eyes as she wrapped her good arm around me. "Will I ever get better?"

“Yes,” I said confidently. “You and I are going to do everything in our power to make sure you’re back to one-hundred percent in no time. It’s only been two weeks. I know it feels like a long time, but if you think about it, it’s not such a long time when your body has to heal.”

“I know, but...” She trailed off, drawing in a shuddering breath that told me she was still trying to hold back tears.

I held on to her tighter. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, angel. If I could take all the pain away from you and take it myself instead, I’d have done it in a heartbeat. But I’m right here for you, every step of the way.”

Craig, the asshole responsible for all this, was nowhere to be found, of course. We hadn’t heard a peep from him since he got removed from the hospital. He hadn’t contacted me about contributing to Adi’s medical expenses, to find out how she was doing, or even just to fucking apologize.

So once again, he was the wrecking ball that caused the damage and I was the one trying to hold it all together. But that was just Craig. He hadn’t changed and never would. I just had to remember that from now on.

Adi sniffed as she stepped away from me, glancing up into my eyes before nodding. “I know you’re here, Mommy. I just wish I hadn’t gotten onto the stupid motorcycle.”

“I know.” I gently encircled her wrist and crouched down in front of her, keeping my gaze on hers. “But listen to me, baby. Sometimes, bad things happen in life. We can’t go back to change them, so we have to get through them and learn from them. The key is never to make the same mistake twice.”

A lesson I had learned the hard way, especially now. I didn’t know how I would handle any future requests from Craig to see Adi, but it certainly wouldn’t be with blind fucking faith that he wouldn’t hurt his own daughter.

My phone ringing from the counter distracted me, but Adi was already turning back to her sandwich anyway. A hospital number flashed on my screen and I froze on the spot. I’d taken

some time off, but I'd been surprised that they hadn't called me in yet regardless.

I wasn't ready to leave Adi, though. Two weeks just wasn't enough after everything she'd been through and was still going through.

But if I didn't answer, I risked losing my job. Since I definitely couldn't afford for that to happen, I brushed my apprehension aside and took the damn call.

"Hi, this is April."

"April?" a deep masculine voice that sent shivers rolling down my spine said. "Hi. I, uh, I wasn't sure you were going to answer." Even when Chris stumbled over his words as if he hadn't been expecting me to answer, he still managed to sound sexy. "This is Chris Matthews. From the hospital. I treated your daughter a couple of weeks ago."

"Yeah, I know who you are." I smiled, shaking my head. "It's not like I would've forgotten the doctor who helped my baby this fast, even if I hadn't known you before."

A low, rumbling kind of chuckle came from his end of the line, and my knees nearly buckled at the sound. "I suppose that's true. Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you by implying you forgot me."

"You haven't offended me." I didn't take offense easily, but I also didn't usually go weak in the knees because of the sound of a man's amusement either. "What's up?"

He cleared his throat, and I got the feeling that he was actually nervous about this call, which was extremely fucking weird. "I wanted to check in on you and Adi, find out how you're doing."

Right, because even Doctor Sexy cares more about Adi than her own damn father.

I released a slow breath through my nostrils. "She's doing better, but she's still having some problems with her arm. We've done everything the doctor told us to do when she was discharged, but the going has been slow."

Chris didn't skip a beat. "Bring her in next week. I can do some light exercises with her, gauge how far she's come, and we can work out a treatment plan for her from there?"

My eyebrows shot up, but I was already shaking my head. "Thanks for the offer, but I don't think I can afford a doctor like you. You're kind of a big shot, you know?"

He chuckled again, and it had the same effect on my knees as before. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"I don't need money, April," he said, his tone firm and confident. If he'd been anyone else, I probably would've felt like they were bragging but not with him. He'd simply stated a fact, nothing patronizing or condescending about it. "Bring her in next week, please? I'd love to take a look at her and see what we can do to help her regain her full mobility. I just want to make sure she's okay."

Even if he didn't need money and wasn't being a prick about it, it still didn't sit well with me to be regarded as a charity case. Not by him or anyone else.

But since he'd offered to do the physical therapy with Adi before, I'd gone to check up on what it would cost us to go see him. His sessions were *way* out of our price range, which was why I hadn't made an appointment with him.

I'd figured the surgeon had given us rehabilitation exercises and that those were good enough. He hadn't mentioned anything about physical therapy being a requirement, so I thought we'd be okay by ourselves.

I didn't even need to look at Adi to know we hadn't been as okay as I'd thought. Her recovery was on track, but I was pretty sure working with Chris would not only make it faster but also easier on her.

All of which meant, knock to my pride or despising being seen as a charity case or not, I had to take him up on his offer. "Yeah, sure. Okay. When?"

I heard papers shuffling and briefly wondered when the last time had been that he'd made his own appointments. "I can't find the tablet. I'll have to give you a call to schedule

something, but it'll be early next week. Does that work for you?"

"That's actually sooner than I thought, so it's perfect."

"Great," he said, sounding strangely relieved. "We'll see you then. Give my best to Adi."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

After I hung up the phone, Adi frowned at me and cocked her head. "You have a funny smile on your face."

"Do I?" I hadn't even realized it, but she was right. Try as I might, I couldn't wipe it off. *So weird. Is all this really because one doctor offered to help us?*

I wasn't used to being offered help, nor was I used to accepting it on the rare occasion the offer was made. As soon as Luna and Cyrus had heard about the accident, they'd immediately insisted on covering any medical expenses in full.

I'd declined, but I had a sneaky suspicion Cyrus had stepped in with the bills without my knowledge anyway. The final bill that had been presented to me had seemed way too low.

I'd vowed to take it up with Luna when I saw her. In fact, she was due here any minute.

A knock sounded at our door, and I knew it was going to be her. Her timing had always been scarily accurate.

They'd only gotten home recently, but she was spending more time here with us than she was at her flower shop. She'd been beside herself with worry for Adi and now seemed determined to check in on us every day. Unfortunately, I was somehow still wearing the funny smile when I went to answer the door.

Luna's eyes narrowed in suspicion as soon as she saw me. "Is that a smile? What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing." I rolled my eyes, motioning her in. "Don't pretend like I never smile. I'm a smiler."

“Not like that you aren’t,” she said, dropping her gaze to give me a long onceover as if she would find the answer in a new pair of shoes or something. “That’s a *me* smile, not a *you* smile.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked. “It doesn’t sound like a real thing to me.”

“It’s real all right.” She followed me into the kitchen, making a beeline for Adi and giving her the biggest hug she could without hurting her. “How are you feeling today, honey?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” she grumbled.

Luna flashed her a radiant smile, batting those long lashes that got her whatever she wanted from her former alpha-hole husband. “We keep asking because we love you, of course. Cyrus sends his love, too. He’ll be popping in with me later in the week.”

“Oh, joy.” Maybe I’d just take the whole hospital bill situation up with him personally then.

My best friend cut me a glance before arching a brow at me. “Whatever it is you think he’s done, he hasn’t.”

“How do you know?” I planted a hand on my hip. “He doesn’t tell you everything, does he?”

Her ocean-blue eyes rolled as she shook her head. “If it has to do with you, he would have told me. Anyway, let’s get back to that smile. What was that all about?”

“It was a funny smile, right?” Adi asked.

“It was not a funny smile,” I argued, even though I knew it was a big fat lie. “It also wasn’t about anything juicy like you two seem to think. I just got a phone call with some good news.”

“Did you get a promotion at work?” Luna asked.

Adi answered her on my behalf. “No, I think she was on the phone to Doctor Chris, not to her boss.”

“Who’s Chris?” she asked with her eyes wide. “Why haven’t I heard about him before?”

“There’s nothing to tell about him. That’s why. Or at least, there wasn’t before. He treated Adi and he’s offered to help us out with her physical therapy at no extra charge.”

“It sounds like he’s a good guy if he’s willing to do it *pro bono*,” she said, her gaze filled with curiosity when it met mine. “Is it a hospital-employee benefit or a personal favor?”

“Personal favor. I think he likes Adi.” I shrugged. “Who knows why anyone does anything really?”

Luna crossed her arms, giving me a pointed look that said she didn’t believe me in the slightest. “Tell me about this doctor, Adi. Is he old and bald?”

Adi giggled, her eyes wide as she shook her head. “No, he’s a heartthrob.”

“What?” My voice came out an octave or two too high.

My daughter, little traitor that she apparently was, giggled again. “I heard nurse Agatha say it in the hospital.”

“A heartthrob, huh?” Luna grinned, her expression so filled with mischief and expectation that I waited for her to start rubbing her plotting palms together. “That’s so interesting.”

“It’s not interesting.” I lifted my gaze to the ceiling with a shake of my head. “I suppose one could say he’s a heartthrob, but he’s also a very good doctor. That’s the only part I’m interested in.”

Lies, all lies. There were several other parts of him I was interested in, mostly those beneath his clothes, but they didn’t need to know that.

It’d been years since I’d gotten laid by anything other than the crappy old vibrator in my drawer. Obviously, I could appreciate a little eye-candy to fantasize about for my bi-monthly alone time as much as the next girl.

Luna looked at me with such a knowing gleam in her eyes that I was halfway convinced she’d heard my thoughts. She

didn't push the issue in front of Adi, though. "Okay, I have to go. I'm meeting Cyrus at the shop. He says he's found us a new supplier. If I'm not there when he meets with the guy, he's going to buy a bunch of stuff I might not end up being able to use."

"Ah, your husband the overachiever," I teased.

She gave her shoulders a what-can-you-do shrug, smiling as she gave Adi a hug goodbye. "Give me a call if you need anything, okay? I can be back here in ten minutes."

"Sure thing," I replied with absolutely no intention of calling her. Cyrus was an overachiever, but so was Luna.

As much as I appreciated their support, if I called them for anything, we'd be moved into their massive house and under their care in a heartbeat. So no.

We were fine for now. It was me and Adi against the world, and that was how it would always be.

With just a little bit of help from dearest Doctor Chris, of course.

CHAPTER 7



CHRIS

A knock on my office door made me look up from the computer. I'd spent the morning doing reports on my patients and formulating treatment plans, but I still had a mountain of paperwork to get through.

Hunter knew I had blocked out this time for admin, so I doubted he was the one interrupting me. I was about to snap at whoever thought this was a free-for-all when the door opened and April's head popped in.

The fighting words died on my tongue and a surprised smile tugged at my lips. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"You never called to schedule our appointment, so we thought we'd drop by." She opened the door a little wider to reveal Adi standing next to her. "Are we interrupting anything?"

I clicked save on the file I'd been working on and shook my head. "No, not really. Just some paperwork."

She made a sympathetic noise at the back of her throat. "In that case, I'm glad we could come to alleviate your boredom for a while."

"I'm sorry I haven't called yet. I've actually been trying to move some things around to fit Adi in at times when the sessions wouldn't interfere with her schooling."

"I haven't gone back to school yet," the little girl piped up helpfully, giving me a shy wave from her spot slightly behind her mother. "Hi, Doctor Chris. How are you?"

“Better now that you’re here.” I got up from my chair and left my coat hanging on the back of it. “How are you feeling?”

She raised her shoulders, but her lips pressed into a thin line. “I can’t get my arm to move right.”

“You’ve come to the right place then.” I grinned and swept an arm in the direction of the therapy room floor. “Let’s have a look at it for you, shall we?”

April didn’t move from the door, even though I was waiting for her to precede me out of the office. “That’s actually what I came to talk to you about. Adi, will you be okay hanging out here for a minute?”

Hunter must’ve been hanging around because he appeared at Adi’s side seemingly out of thin air. “She’ll be just fine. I’ll show her around a bit.”

Like all kids, Adi looked a little apprehensive about Hunter but then recognition dawned in her eyes and her face lit up with a smile. “It’s you. Sure, I’ll hang out with you.”

“Great.” He put a beefy hand on her shoulder, shooting her a playful grin. “Stick with me, kid. I’ll make you famous.”

“Famous?” She frowned. “I don’t want to be famous.”

April took two steps forward to clear the door, then closed it behind her, cutting off what was sure to be a smart-ass reply from my friend. She cleared her throat before bringing her green eyes to mine.

“Let’s not beat around the bush,” she said with that same mama-lion-protecting-her-cub fierceness in her tone I’d heard before. “Do you really think you can help Adi?”

“I really do.” I met her gaze unwaveringly, keeping mine there. “If you tell me what concerns you have, I’m sure I can address them right here, right now.”

I respected her for putting her daughter above all else. As someone who’d dealt with my fair share of patients whose parents ranged from viewing us as a babysitting service to those who just didn’t care about therapy because it would eat

into their own time too much, a mother who actually cared was always a welcome sight.

She leveled me with a stare, but her eyes were filled with doubt. “I’m just not sure what she can get out of this. I don’t want to get her hopes up that this therapy of yours could work when that’s not a realistic outcome.”

I nodded. “I completely understand that, and I understand why you would feel that way, but I’ve seen injuries like this one hundreds of times before. Recovery time differs from person to person, and I’m not saying it’s not going to be hard work, but Adi can absolutely come out of this with her use of her arm fully restored.”

“Guaranteed?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

I blew every rule the department had with just one word. “Yes.”

April searched my eyes as if she was looking for a lie. When she didn’t find one, she visibly relaxed. “Were you serious about doing this for free? Because I meant it when I said we couldn’t afford it.”

My feet were on the move to close the distance between us before I even realized my brain had given the command. I didn’t know what it was about this woman that drew me to her, but it was like I couldn’t stop myself.

Placing my hands lightly on her shoulders, I bent my knees to be at her eye level. “I would never have offered if I wasn’t serious. I promise you, April, I can help your daughter and I will. Will you let me?”

She held my gaze for another beat before letting out the softest sigh and finally nodding. “We’d love to take you up on your offer. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful or anything. I’ve just learned that most of the time when something sounds too good to be true, that’s because it is.”

I regarded her for a moment, wondering what the hell had happened to her to make her think my offer was either untrue or some kind of a trap. Having met her jewel of an ex, I

suspected he was behind her apparently severe distrust of people.

It made me wish, once again, that I'd put my fucking fist through his face. "You didn't sound ungrateful. You just sounded like a mother who didn't want her kid to get hurt again. I admire that about you."

Her brows swept up before they pulled together. "Did you just say you admire something about me?"

"I did." I grinned. "Why does that surprise you?"

She hesitated for a long minute, looking at me like I was a thousand-piece puzzle she needed to put together. "You're not at all what I was expecting, Doctor Sexy."

"Doctor Sexy?" I repeated, blinking in disbelief. "Did you just—"

"Don't take it personally," she said, her voice even but a rosy blush spreading across the tops of her cheeks. "It's what the nurses call you behind your back."

I almost snorted out loud in my attempt to hold back my laughter. "I know. I just didn't expect to hear it from you."

"Why?" she asked, a smirk on her lips. "Does that surprise you?"

With her repeating my own words back to me, the laughter finally broke free. I slung my arm around her shoulders and guided her to the door. "Come on. Let me give you the grand tour. You and Adi will be spending quite a bit of time here for the next few months. You might as well make yourselves at home."

She was tense against my side, but she didn't step away from me. When she glanced up at me, confusion, curiosity, and amusement warred for control over her expression. "Are you a real person?"

"I'm not a toy if that's what you're asking." I winked down at her. "Why?"

"I don't know," she said, confusion winning out for a moment. "You're just different."

“As are you.” I dropped my arm and put a more respectful distance between us when we walked toward Adi and Hunter.

“All the best people are if you ask me.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She didn’t sound convinced at all, but her attention shifted to her daughter. “So, what’s first on the agenda?”

“Your tour, and then we’ll take a look at that arm,” I said, drawing to a stop when we reached them.

Adi’s eyes were lit up with excitement as she looked around. “Will I really be coming here a few times a week from now on?”

“Yep.” A thought occurred to me as I watched her taking the place in like it was Santa’s workshop on Christmas Eve. “Is this the first time you’ve been out since the surgery?”

She nodded enthusiastically, then winced when she must’ve pulled at a sensitive spot around her wound. “Mom said it was better to stay at home to avoid getting an infection in my scar.”

So she is a bit overprotective. Good to know my instincts are still accurate.

“You don’t have to worry about infections here. We run a pretty tight ship.” I smiled down at her. “Can I show you around?”

“Sure.” She glanced at Hunter. “Can he come too? He’s my new friend. Did you know he’s not really scary?”

“Yeah, I did actually. Hunter is nothing to worry about. Once you hear how he giggles like the Pillsbury Doughboy when you poke his belly, there’s no way you can be afraid of him.” Without warning him, I stuck my arm out and demonstrated for her.

Hunter was good with kids, though, and used to this drill. He pretended to try fighting me off while squealing like a little girl. Adi broke out in a fit of giggles, and even April cracked a smile.

She seemed more relaxed while I showed them around but stiffened when I pulled her to the side while Hunter kept Adi entertained at one of the machines. I only led her a few paces away from them, lowering my voice so we wouldn't be overheard.

"I'm going to take a look at Adi's arm now. No matter what, I want you to remember that having full motor function is important at her age. I will make sure she's okay, even if her mobility is more impaired than I might know right now."

"You've seen something, haven't you?" she asked, looking right into my eyes.

I didn't want to lie to her, so I nodded. "I kept an eye on her while we were walking. But again, no matter what, I will make sure she's okay. We just have some work ahead of us."

April blew out a soft breath. "Why would you be willing to do all that work for free?"

"Helping people is all I ever wanted to do," I said earnestly. "It's never been about the money. That was just a fortunate side effect that now allows me to help more people."

"Okay," she said, not questioning me for once. "When do you want me to bring her in?"

"Friday morning at nine."

"We'll be here." She pursed her lips to the side, nodding as she cast a worried glance in Adi's direction. "But Chris, please promise you'll be honest with me. If it's bad, don't sugarcoat it."

"I won't," I lied through my teeth because there was no way I was letting either of them down. Even if it was bad, I wouldn't let them know unless I could no longer guarantee a full recovery. Which wouldn't happen.

Come hell or high water, I wasn't going to let that Craig asshole's irresponsible actions dictate the rest of this girl's life. On behalf of my entire fucking gender, I was going to prove to both April and Adi that there were a few good men out there.

I might not always be one of them, but I could be one today—for the sake of this one family who'd crawled underneath my skin somehow and refused to fucking leave.

CHAPTER 8



APRIL

“**C**ould you pass me the parmesan please?” Katie asked Adi, who had been crowned as her executive assistant in the kitchen.

Adi hopped off her seat, putting two fingers to her forehead to salute my sister as she headed for her fridge. She quickly located the cheese and took it to her aunt, who grated it over whatever dish she was cooking for lunch.

Katie and Adi made a magnificent team in the kitchen, and while I always offered to help, it was nice not to be the one doing the cooking every once in a while. All I had to do was sip my tea at the table and keep them company.

“Adi’s starting physical therapy tomorrow,” I said as I watched them work. “The doctor says we’re going to have to work hard but that she’ll be back to her old self in no time.”

“That’s great news.” My sister grinned, glancing at Adi while stirring something into her fancy concoction. “Are you looking forward to it, sweetheart? You must be eager to get started.”

Adi nodded, her eyes lighting up as she spoke about our day on Tuesday. “It’s going to be so cool to get to spend time there. You should see the place. It’s awesome. Hunter and Doctor Chris are pretty cool, too. I like them.”

“Who’s Hunter and Doctor Chris?” she asked before bringing the spatula to her lips and smiling softly once she’d tasted the sauce on it. “I think I’ve finally perfected this recipe.”

“Good for you,” I said, but my sister didn’t miss my sarcasm. Katie and I were opposites in every way except for one. We were both single and planning on keeping it that way.

I’d always been the loud, brash one with the broken filter while she was refined—or uptight, as I liked to call her—and had so many layers of filters over her mouth that she never said a single word wrong.

Katie wore the finest linens she could afford on her salary as the editor of an online fashion magazine. She worked from her medium-sized but well-appointed apartment but still wore her hair up every day and belonged to a book club that didn’t just get together to drink and talk shit.

Like every girl in their group actually read every book and then discussed it at length. It was ridiculous. And really, really boring.

I, on the other hand, liked faded blue jeans and leather jackets from thrift stores. My apartment was smaller than hers and furnished from garage sales and hand-me-downs. I cursed like a man, drank beer like a frat boy, and hadn’t yet met a book I’d managed to finish.

Having Adi had calmed me down and forced me to grow the hell up, but I liked to think motherhood hadn’t changed the core of who I was. It had just forced me to be the more responsible version of that person.

But despite our differences, Katie was my best friend aside from Luna. She glared at me for my comment about her perfect recipe but then brought the subject back to Adi’s therapy. “I’m assuming this Chris is going to be treating you, and this Hunter person works for him?”

“Chris was also the doctor who recognized Adi on the day of the accident,” I said, and she nodded. “Hunter was the one who called me.”

“So you know them then?” She kept stirring and tasting as she went, but I knew she was paying close attention to me. Her back was ramrod straight, which was this weird tell she had when she was listening.

“I don’t know them *per se*. I’ve met them a few times, and I’ve obviously spoken to them since the accident, but I wouldn’t say I know them.”

She cocked her head as she sprinkled some pepper into the pot. “Is the doctor any good?”

“Yeah, he’s the best,” I said. “I’ve heard so much about him and now I know why. His reputation precedes him, but it’s a good one.”

Katie whirled around and pointed her wooden spoon at me. “Are you gushing, April Adams?”

“No.” My eyes widened as I pressed my hand to my chest. “Who are you talking to? I’d never gush over a man. I don’t gush, no matter how attractive, smart, or kind a guy is.”

Her nostrils flared, and her chin dropped. “Might I remind you that these trips to see this doctor are for Adi’s benefit, not yours?”

I laughed her off, waving my hand in front of me. “Your reminder is received but not necessary. Nothing’s going to happen there.”

“You were gushing about him.” She gave me a stern look. “One does not gush about a man if one isn’t attracted to him.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Thanks, professor.”

“I’m being serious, April. You’re going to be seeing him regularly. What are you going to do if he comes onto you?”

“He won’t,” I assured her, taking another sip of my tea. “Trust me. I’m way too poor for this guy. He’s an honest to God billionaire. There won’t be a *Pretty Woman* life for me. You have nothing to worry about.”

Her brows climbed up to her hairline. “Are you serious right now? Your best friend married one of the city’s richest and most unattainable bachelors. If anyone should know these things can happen in real life, it ought to be you.”

“Jeez, would you relax?” I asked. “I’m not Luna and Chris isn’t Cyrus. Chris seems like a genuinely good guy, which, as you might remember, Cyrus was not. He was a first-class dick

before he fell for Luna. Hell, he still is to anyone outside of the inner circle.”

“And as for you not being Luna?” She narrowed her eyes at me. “You can’t tell me it’s impossible that you’ll fall in love with a billionaire of your very own.”

My eyes rolled again. It was a serious problem I had while I was in my sister’s company. “Luna was looking for someone to fall in love with. I’m not.”

“Good.” She raised the spatula again. “Because you should be done with men after everything Craig has done to you.”

“To be fair to him, Chris isn’t Craig, either.” I knew I should’ve let the subject drop, but I felt like I owed it to him to defend him. “He’ll just never fall for a bitter, bitchy, poor girl like me.”

She didn’t talk me up, knowing it wasn’t self-esteem issues speaking. “Just be careful, okay? That kind of money could make it even more tempting to fall for him.”

My jaw nearly unhinged itself. “Do you honestly think I’d fall for him because he’s rich? Trust me. If I fell for him, it would be for his looks or his laugh.”

“I know you won’t go for him for his money, but you can’t deny it’d be a nice bonus.” She glanced at Adi, who shouldn’t have been hearing any of this. Unfortunately, Katie didn’t believe in treating kids—or young ladies, in her words—like mushrooms.

She subscribed to the idea that keeping them in the dark and feeding them shit meant they would become so used to shit that they’d keep eating it up into their adult lives. While I tried to shield Adi from some things, I also tried to be as honest with her as I could about everything else.

I thrust my chin into the air and refused to even acknowledge her last comment. “Speaking of money, I need to get back to work. Adi’s going to be missing some more school because of her therapy. Do you think you’d be able to help us out every now and then?”

“Of course,” she said, lifting her hand to high-five her niece. “It’ll be fun. It’s always better around here when you are, too.”

For all her faults, my sister loved Adi like she was her own. Between her and Luna, I knew I’d never have to worry about Adi. All I had to do was ask for help if I needed one of them to watch her, and I knew I’d have a taker.

I never took advantage of their willingness, though, which made it easier to ask when it was really necessary. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Watching as Katie started to talk Adi through the meal she was cooking, there was a familiar pang in my heart. As much as Katie didn’t want a man, she did want children. And she’d be a great mother.

My experience had jaded her almost as much as it had me, though. Combined with her naturally wary personality and a few scumbag exes, Katie had given up on love right along with me.

Luna’s fairytale relationship and wedding must still have been fucking with my brain because I suddenly wondered if Katie was making a mistake. I’d been burned too badly to ever believe in love for myself again, but she could still have it.

“You know, there may still be a man out there for you,” I said. “If you think money would be a nice bonus, I’d bet we could find you a *Pretty Woman* experience of your own.”

Katie didn’t give me any response other than to flip me off behind her back, making sure Adi’s attention was on the stove.

Yeah, maybe I could’ve phrased that better.

Damn it. One of these days, I really had to look into getting myself a fucking filter. My mouth was bound to get me in trouble sooner or later.

CHAPTER 9



CHRIS

“**A**di’s coming in for her first session today,” I said when Hunter and I walked out of the break room. I sipped my sludge and turned my head to face him. “We have to take good care of them, okay? April is one of our own. They deserve the five-star treatment.”

“So you’ve said. Repeatedly.” He made a face like he’d sucked on a lemon, then laughed at me. “Don’t we give everyone the five-star treatment? I know I do.”

“You know what I mean.” I nodded at two nurses who walked past us. They waved before bending their heads together and giggling about something.

Hunter raised his brows at me. “I don’t actually. Do you really only give a patient your all if they’re hospital staff? Because if so, you really should’ve told me we were doing that.”

“You’re so full of shit.” I lifted my mug and pushed into the therapy room with my shoulder, turning away from the door so I wouldn’t spill the scalding-hot liquid. “Every patient gets my best. I’m just saying that we need to make sure Adi gets exactly that.”

“Does this have anything to do with a certain mother who will likely be coming in with her?” Amusement glinted in his eyes when he shot me a look before going to grab her file.

“Of course not,” I said, but he just rolled his eyes at me. “Why are you giving me a hard time about this? All I said was to take care of our patient. Why is that so strange?”

“Because you don’t say it before every patient.” He smirked. “In fact, you’ve only ever said it about this one. It just makes me wonder why.”

“Nothing to—” I was interrupted by the door opening.

Adi appeared first, her smile wide and excited. April followed her in, seemingly always only one step behind her daughter.

My palms suddenly felt sweaty. April looked way too appealing with her hair pulled up into a messy bun, tendrils of it framing her delicate face. She wore jeans, a black tank top, and a deep red poncho that was knitted so loosely I saw the top she wore beneath it. I also saw the curves the shirt clung to, and my mind momentarily got stuck on them.

Hunter giving Adi a fist bump jerked my mind back to reality. “Hey, kid. You ready to get started?”

“So ready.” She beamed up at him before turning toward me. “Hi, Chris. Mom said we’re going to work hard today.”

“That, we are.” I forced moisture into my dry mouth before addressing April. “I’m glad you guys came in. Are you staying, or do you need to get to work?”

“I’m staying for this session,” she replied, not even trying to mask the worry tightening her brow. “Just to be clear, this therapy of yours isn’t going to hurt, is it?”

Adi came to stand next to her mom, looking up at me with apprehension in her gaze. I dropped into a crouch in front of her without hesitating, focusing my attention fully on my patient.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Some of the exercises might be a little uncomfortable at first, but they shouldn’t cause any pain.”

She sank her teeth into her lower lip but nodded. April put a hand on her shoulder, taking half a step closer to her. “I’ll be right here, baby. If it hurts, just tell me.”

I glanced up at her, wishing there was something more I could do to reassure her other than the smile I offered. “We

won't push her, April. Don't worry. Let's have a chat before we start."

She dipped her chin in acknowledgment, then followed me to the mats where Hunter was already waiting. He got a short stool for Adi to sit on and motioned for April to have a seat on the bench of a leg-press machine.

Once they were settled, both Hunter and I sat down on the stack of yoga mats. He passed me Adi's file, but I didn't need to look inside it. The details of her injury were burned into my mind.

"We like to start by talking our patients through what they can expect from their sessions with us," I said. "It helps ease the mind."

"You're sure it won't hurt?" Adi asked, letting me see past her I'm-a-tough-kid exterior again.

I nodded, motioning to the state-of-the-art machines placed at even intervals around the cavernous room. "All of these were designed to help us help our patients without hurting them. We won't ever risk further injury. Anything that causes you pain as opposed to discomfort would be risking further injury, so your mom is right. If you feel any pain, let us know, okay?"

"Do you have any questions so far?" Hunter asked, slow and measured like we had all the time in the world. Which we did really.

Even if we didn't get around to doing any therapy today and we only gave them the information they needed to feel comfortable before coming back, that was fine too.

Adi shook her head, but April narrowed her eyes as she gazed around the room. "What will you be doing then?"

"For today?" Hunter and I exchanged a look. "It's simple really. Stretches."

"Stretches?" Her narrowed gaze slid to mine and her arms crossed over her chest. "Seriously?"

“Seriously.” Hunter stood up to demonstrate, beckoning with his hand for Adi to join him. “People underestimate the value of stretching. Come on. Come stand up with me.”

She glanced at her mother, who nodded her encouragement before she joined him. I stood too, eager to see how she would handle what I knew was coming.

After Hunter led her through some light stretches, both April and Adi seemed to relax. The little girl didn’t wince or flinch once, which was a good sign.

I smiled. “That was great, Adi. Your recovery is going to go very well.”

“You can tell that after a few stretches?” April asked, but her tone wasn’t fearful or disbelieving any longer. It wasn’t even biting. Now she just sounded curious.

“You’d be surprised how much I can tell from a few stretches. You could join in if you wanted to. These are good for anyone.”

She chuckled, shaking her head as she kicked her long legs out in front of her and crossed them at the ankles. “I’m fine with just watching, but thanks for the offer.”

“Anytime.” I went to stand behind Adi. “Okay, now I’m going to take your arm and extend it to your side. When it’s in position, I’ll let go and then I want you to see how long you can hold it there.”

She nodded and gave me her arm, which I lifted until it was at a ninety-degree angle to her little body. “Remember, when I let go, you hold it there.”

I’d barely moved my hands away when the arm fell back to her side. Adi’s lip trembled and April’s eyes clouded over again. Stepping forward, I looked at both of them in turn. “Hey, now. There’s no getting discouraged in here. We’ll keep working on it, all right? Let’s get down on the floor.”

Hunter tossed three yoga mats off the stack, and each of us took one at Adi’s sides. I showed what I wanted her to try, then nearly got knocked on my ass at the unexpected question she asked.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” She watched me intently while I wobbled on one knee, totally taken aback and caught off guard.

I recovered fast, though. “No, why?”

“Mom was talking about you,” she said as she got on her hands and knees to get into the position I’d shown her. “But she said she was too poor for you and that she’s not a pretty woman.”

My brows shot up along with my gaze, which landed on April’s flaming cheeks. She refused to meet my eyes, choosing to focus on her daughter instead. “Haven’t we had the conversation about keeping girl talk quiet?”

Adi shrugged. “I didn’t know it was girl talk.”

Hunter was shaking with silent laughter, but he’d folded his massive body into the child’s pose in an attempt to hide it. My interest was piqued, though. “How did I become the subject of girl talk and what’s this about you not being a pretty woman?”

I got the movie reference. I just wanted to see how she would react. When her gaze finally flitted over to mine, holding it for just a beat before it dropped to inspect her nails, her green eyes were filled with something between mortification and amusement.

“My sister asked about you,” she said. “It was nothing. This is just my daily reminder of what a child can absorb when you think they’re really not paying attention.”

Hunter rolled out of his pose, grinning at the ceiling and propping his hands underneath his head. “This is such an interesting session. What else did your mom say?”

Adi’s nose wrinkled. “She said—”

“Shut it,” April snapped jokingly, widening her eyes at her daughter. “Do they look like girls to you?”

Adi’s warm brown eyes came to me first, then went to Hunter before she shook her head. “Nope.”

“Then we don’t tell them what was said when we were having girl talk.” She smiled sweetly. “Now, weren’t you in the middle of something?”

“We were,” I said, even though I was burning to know what else had been said about me. I never would’ve thought that she’d discuss me with anyone at all, much less that I would’ve been the subject of classified girl talk.

I’d gotten the general gist of it from Adi’s comments, though. If I was correct, then I needed to set the record straight at some point. Money, or lack thereof, had never been a deciding factor in who I dated and never would be.

As for the movie reference, well, not every guy with money who got involved with a woman without any could be equated to that story. April wasn’t a hooker, for starters. But also, I wasn’t interested in paying anyone for their company. Surely, that set us apart from the movie.

Even so, April avoided my gaze for the rest of the session and I didn’t get a chance to speak with her privately to let her know what I thought.

We kept explaining what they could expect, showed some basic exercises Adi could start with at once, and made sure to answer all their questions.

When our hour was up, April hopped off the bench and finally looked at me again.

“Where do we go from here? Will you call me to schedule the next session, or do we do that now?”

Oh, so now we’re all business again? I sighed internally. I liked getting those glimpses of who she was when her shields were down, but it didn’t seem like she lowered them very often.

While I understood that she was probably embarrassed, I couldn’t see so much as a trace of it anywhere on her features. “I’d like to see Adi three times a week. We can look at our schedules now to find the times, or we’ll give you a call. We’ve got a few minutes before our next session.”

“Okay, let’s do it now.” April fished her phone out of her pocket while Hunter suddenly appeared with the tablet we kept our calendar on. “Is there any possibility we can do it when my shift ends? My sister will be dropping Adi off for me, so she’ll be at the hospital anyway.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Hunter nodded. “Let’s go through your shifts for the next two weeks and see if we can work around them. Then we’ll see how that works before we schedule the next sessions.”

“That’s perfect,” she replied, taking the tablet from him and speaking while she compared our calendar to hers. “I have to do more shifts to work in some of the time I’ve been out, so we might just be able to make this work despite how busy you guys are.”

She whistled between her teeth as her eyes darted from her screen to ours. “Wow. You really are busy, but I think I’ve worked us in.”

When she’d found suitable slots that were available, Hunter added their names and grinned at Adi. “We’ll see you around, kid.”

He glanced at April and lifted his fist for a bump. “Good luck with the extra shifts. Those hours can really suck.”

“You’ll be a welcome face back,” I commented without thinking, and I saw Hunter bringing his palm to his face from the corner of my eye.

Well, this is an awkward end of the day for us.

April nodded after a beat. “Okay, then.”

She took Adi’s hand and led her out of the room. I groaned out loud when the door banged shut behind them.

“You’ll be a welcome face back?” Hunter cracked up, shaking his head at me. “That was smooth, bro. Really.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled, but he completely ignored me.

“You know what would help you come back from that?” he asked, but I could tell it was rhetorical. “If you could find a

shop to buy some game from, you might stand a chance. You've run out. Don't even buy a top off. Buy the entire refill."

He smacked me on the shoulder, still laughing as he went to put the mats back on the stack and get our stuff ready for the next patient. The saddest thing of all was that I couldn't even argue with him.

I knew it'd been a while since I'd tried chatting someone up or flirting, but that had been a disaster. And I hadn't even been trying to flirt or ask her out.

If making simple conversation with her ended like that, Hunter was right. I needed to find somewhere to stock up on game because mine seemed to have run out.

CHAPTER 10



APRIL

Saturday morning came and brought with it my first day back at work. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? I can stay if you aren’t. Aunt Katie will be here soon, but I can cancel my shift if you need me to.”

Adi sat on our couch playing with a foam ball that was part of her therapy and watching me pace around the room. “No, Mom. Don’t cancel. I’ll be fine with Aunt Katie. I’m feeling better. I promise.”

I frowned and stopped moving for a second to really look at her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m fine.” There was a tiny hint of exasperation in her tone that made me dread the imminent teenage years.

It also told me I’d been hovering far too much the last few weeks. “Okay, but you’ll call me if you need me, right?”

“Right.” The doorbell rang, and she jumped up to get it, almost like she couldn’t wait to get a break from me.

I ran my fingers through my hair, breathing deeply through my nostrils as I tried to calm the emotional storm raging around my insides. Normally, I wasn’t one to let my emotions rule me. In fact, I was quite good at shutting them down and not showing them at all, but since Adi’s accident, I had been all over the place.

Although it had meant going into the red with my leave at work, I hadn’t been able to convince myself to go back earlier. Every time I thought about it, I got slammed with the guilt over what had happened the last time I’d left her alone.

The protective mother bear in my chest roared every time someone so much as looked at my daughter. I knew I was being an erratic helicopter parent, and yet I didn't know how to regain my rhythm.

Going to work was probably a good place to start, even though the prospect of leaving Adi with Katie for that long was terrifying to me. Not because I didn't trust Katie but because there was that stupid voice inside my head saying no one could care for my daughter the way I could.

But as I heard my sister joking with her and asking how her therapy went, I knew I had to get my shit under control and get the hell back to work. I forced a smile to my lips when Katie walked into the living room.

"Hi. Thanks for coming."

She frowned at me, pulling her head back. "Thanks for coming? What's with you?"

"Mom's being weird today," Adi supplied helpfully.

Katie arched her finely plucked brows. "I can see that. Is everything okay? Did something go wrong with physical therapy? Adi just told me everything was fine."

"It was fine," I replied. "Chris is still confident about her chances of making a full recovery, but I'm pretty sure he's now also confident that I'm secretly obsessed with him."

"What?" She frowned. "Why?"

I flicked my hand like it hadn't been one of the most humiliating experiences in my life. "Adi told him about how I thought I was too poor for him."

Her eyes flew wide open, and she brought her hand to her mouth to hide her smile. "She did?"

"Yeah. She did. I didn't have an answer that wouldn't make it sound like I was secretly obsessed with him, so I just shut it down."

"How'd you do that?" Katie rounded the couch and set her purse down on it. "Because whatever you did, I'm quite sure you just made it sound more like you're obsessed."

“She said we’re not allowed to repeat girl talk to boys,” Adi chimed in.

My sister stared at me, blinking rapidly with her jaw slightly unhinged. “That’s what you said? Yeah, he *definitely* thinks you’re obsessed.”

“I just really hope he isn’t there today,” I said. “If I don’t see him for a few days, maybe that’ll make things less awkward.”

“I doubt it.” She smirked and pointed at the door. “Well, let’s go, stalker chick.”

Narrowing my eyes in my best screw-you glare, I held her gaze to make sure she got the message and then went to gather my things. My heart raced when I left the apartment, a hollow feeling settling in the pit of my stomach.

Once I was back at my desk and had updated all my colleagues who asked about Adi’s condition, I took a few breaths and tried to concentrate on work. All morning, I pretended that I wasn’t looking for Chris, but whenever I looked up, I found my eyes roaming the lobby for him.

Why I was looking for him, I didn’t know. I really wanted it to be so I could duck in time to avoid him, but there was a gnawing truth at the back of my mind. I wanted to see him simply because I wanted to see him.

Those light green eyes had been popping into my thoughts too often to deny it. I’d also wondered on more than one occasion what it would be like to drag my fingers through his silky hair or to run my hands down the muscular planes of his back.

When he still hadn’t shown up by lunchtime, I realized he was probably either busy upstairs or not on shift. It shouldn’t have mattered where he was anyway. Unless I wanted to seem even more obsessed with him, I needed to get a damn grip.

Determined not to be the stalker chick my own sister now thought I was, I marched down to the cafeteria and resolved to do better after my break. *I will not look for Doctor Sexy—*

My thoughts were interrupted by a familiar deep voice coming from behind me. “Mind if I join you?”

I whirled around on my seat, briefly wondering if I’d somehow summoned him with my borderline obsessive thinking about him. “Yeah. No. Sure.”

Oh, God. Since when do I stammer around guys? Kicking out a chair across from me, I focused on giving him a smile instead of trying to figure out the confusion swimming around my head.

Chris looked as good as ever, his blonde hair just messed up enough to know he’d been working and hadn’t bothered to check it. His green eyes seemed to sparkle in the midday sun shining into the courtyard where I’d taken a seat, and his lips formed an easygoing smile.

“How’s Adi doing?” he asked, sitting down opposite me.

I shrugged, acting like I wasn’t suddenly a bundle of nerves for some odd reason. “She’s good. She’s been practicing those stretches, and the ball is basically glued to her hand.”

He chuckled, and the rich sound of it made my stomach feel all warm. Maybe I was coming down with something.

“That’s good news. Dedicated patients always recover faster than those who only work while they’re with us.”

“You’ve definitely got a dedicated patient in her.”

I cocked my head after giving myself a quick pep talk. I’d been acting so unlike myself recently that I was even annoying my own daughter. I needed to calm down and get back to being me. All this freaking out, hovering, obsessing, and snapping wasn’t me.

Which wasn’t to say I wasn’t a bitch at times. I just wasn’t usually one without reason. Chris hadn’t given me any reason. If anything, he was possibly the nicest person I’d ever met.

“I’m sorry if I’ve come across as a crazy person,” I said. “This has just been a really difficult time.”

“No need to apologize.” His smile grew wider. “I’ve already told you I understand. How are you holding up with everything?”

“Worse than I thought I would,” I said, surprising even myself with my honesty. “One minute, you think you can handle anything life throws at you and rock at it, and the next, you get knocked so far off your game that you don’t even recognize yourself.”

Understanding softened the corners of his eyes. “The universe sure has a way of putting us back in our place if our heads get too big. It’s happened to us all, I think.”

Something told me he really did understand, but prying into his innermost thoughts and experiences didn’t feel right. I sat back instead, spearing a tomato with my fork and deciding it was better to just keep things light.

“You and Hunter seem to work well together. How long has he been your assistant?”

Thankfully, Chris seemed onboard with my plan about ignoring all the heavier topics for now. Since he’d met Craig and had been the doctor at the emergency room when the medics brought Adi in, I was sure he had a million questions.

But he seemed content not to ask them now, which made me like him even more. “We’ve been together since I got started about eight years ago. He’s a giant and a goofball, but I love him. My job would’ve been impossible most days if not for him.”

“He seems really good with kids,” I commented. “Adi can’t stop speaking about you two.”

He grinned. “He is good with kids, but she’s a really good kid. It’s not difficult to warm up to her.”

“About that.” I fidgeted with my fingers in my lap, but I knew this was my opening to address the massive elephant sitting on the table between us. “I’m sorry about what she said in that session. My sister and I weren’t discussing you behind your back or anything like that. She just asked about the doctor treating Adi, and when she heard what nurses called

you, she felt compelled to remind me our visits with you are for Adi's benefit. I only made that comment to get her off my back."

His eyes lit up with amusement. "Don't even think about it. I'll admit to being curious about what you said, but it's not a big deal. I know how these things go. How's your first shift back at work?"

Chris and I spent the rest of our lunch break talking. We stuck to small things, just getting to know each other. He asked about Katie and Adi and told me more about his practice, Hunter, and what their machinery was capable of.

For the first time in weeks, I actually felt like myself. I laughed, teased him, and didn't constantly feel like I had to keep my guard up just in case trouble was waiting around the next corner. It was a nice change of pace.

"It was good to see you, April," he said once our burgers were done and our water bottles drained. "Maybe we could have more lunches together."

It wasn't a question, but it wasn't a demand either. He had this way about him that just made things easy.

I nodded so automatically it was almost like my head was attached to a string someone else was in charge of. "Sure, that would be nice. Same time tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is my day off, but I'll see you on Monday?" He flashed me another smile that absolutely should not have made my heart go all aflutter.

"See you on Monday," I said. "Enjoy your day off."

As he walked away from me, I couldn't help but steal a glance at his firm butt. The guy had a nice ass. And nice eyes. And a nice smile.

And also, none of those things were only nice. Despite the fact that I knew better, for one fleeting moment, I wondered if having my own *Pretty Woman* story would really be all that bad.

CHAPTER 11



CHRIS

“**M**an, it stinks out here. I love it.” Hunter took a deep breath and grinned at me, pulling his faded ballcap lower over his forehead. “There’s nothing like a Sunday morning next to the water.”

I nodded and set my tackle box down between our feet. “I’ve heard the stripers have been biting this season. We should have made some time to do this months ago.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged before crouching down to bait his hook. “Shifts have been crazy recently, though. It’s not like we’ve had much free time.”

“True.”

He unpacked what we needed, and we both lapsed into silence as we got our rods rigged up. Once we were done, he walked a safe distance down the pier and cast his line. He was still close enough that we’d be able to speak while we fished, but far enough away that I, hopefully, wouldn’t get a fishing hook through my lip.

“If we went into private practice, we wouldn’t have to deal with such crazy shifts,” he said. “It’d still be hard work, but we’d make our own hours and we could have a ‘Gone Fishing’ sign made for when we just need to get out.”

“I don’t think it works that way.” Making sure there was no one around me, I let my own line fly and widened my stance. “If we set our own hours and actually do well, we might end up working even more.”

“But the hospital won’t let us have a ‘Gone Fishing’ sign,” he argued with amusement in his eyes when he glanced at me. “If it’s our own place, we can just hang it on the door whenever we want.”

“Again, I don’t think that’s how it works.” Swells tugged at my line and gulls cawed and darted overhead. They might not be well loved by beachgoers, but there was something about them in this environment that made it feel right.

It relaxed me more than I had been in a while. Tension melted out of my muscles as a gentle breeze cooled my skin. *Hunter has a point. We really should do this more often.*

“Maybe we could designate a certain time slot on a specific day that we use to get out of the office,” I said. “We might not always be able to fit fishing into that break, but we could try for a couple of times a week.”

“That’s the spirit.” Hunter grinned, crab-walking over to give me a high-five before going back to his spot. “Are you really thinking about it then?”

“I don’t know.” I narrowed my eyes as I considered his question. “I’d like to go private, but is now the right time? There’s a lot more to it than just making a decision and going for it.”

“Why?” He frowned and jabbed a thumb at his chest. “I could take care of the business side of things. I took some classes in college.”

“I didn’t know you took business classes,” I said. “You’ve never mentioned it before, but it would come in useful if we decided to do this.”

“Maybe I should’ve said I was *enrolled* in business classes. I might or might not have taken the actual classes.”

I rolled my eyes at my friend. He liked to joke around, often pretending to be dumb when the truth was that the guy was extremely smart.

“Even so, I’m sure you’ll do just fine running the business. But that’s not the only thing we’d have to think about. We’d need the space, the equipment, and marketing for a start. We’ll

probably also have to hire someone to handle the admin and scheduling. Plus, we'd have to leave the hospital. Are you really ready to leave all our patients?"

He sighed and lifted his cap to run his hand through his hair before shaking his head. "No. I don't think I'd be able to leave them."

"There you have it then. Until we're ready to leave them all, we can't go anywhere." That was the long and short of it and the reason I still hadn't left the hospital.

"We could offer to keep treating them," he said after pausing for a minute. "Some of them might look us up and come with us when we leave."

"I'm sure some will but not all of them would be able to afford private rates." An image of April and Adi at our first session flashed in my mind.

As if Hunter had seen right into my brain, his eyebrows arched and he shot me a questioning look. "You've always said you weren't in this for the money. Maybe it's time to put that money where your mouth is. But speaking of the Adams family, have you heard from April again?"

"I meant it then, and I mean it now, but other people don't know that. Potential clients aren't going to walk into a private practice expecting to be treated for free or at discounted rates. They're still going to go to the hospital for that."

"Are you purposely avoiding answering the part about April?" he asked, suspicion heightening his voice.

"No, I was just answering the important questions in the context of our discussion about private practice. Are we done with that?"

"We're just putting it on the backburner for now." He grinned. "So April? You heard from her?"

I sighed. "Yes, actually, I have. We had lunch together yesterday."

"You did?" He spun around to face me, fishing rod dangling from the limp fingers of his right hand. If he got a

bite now, the entire rod would disappear into the water, but he didn't even seem to notice.

"Where did you take her?"

"I ran into her at the cafeteria. We had lunch there."

Hunter's eyes widened before a dry chuckle slipped out of him. "You're a motherfucking billionaire and you couldn't think of a better place to take her than the hospital? I love their burger special—don't get me wrong—but I don't think it's the ideal location for a first date when you can literally afford to fly the girl to Paris."

"The flight to Paris is just a little longer than the forty minutes we had. Then there's the return flight, actually getting to a restaurant there, ordering, eating. All in all, there just wasn't time."

"But a first date in the cafeteria?" He shook his head. "You could've given her so much better than that."

"Did I mention I just ran into her and asked if I could join her? It wasn't a date." Not that I would've minded if it had been one. I simply would have done what Hunter suggested and taken her someplace nicer.

I might have run out of game but that didn't mean I was completely clueless. I still had a brain. I just hadn't had to exercise that part of it for a while.

He tilted his head back and laughed, his giant belly shaking. When his laughter subsided and he'd swiped his fingers below his eyes, he looked like he totally disagreed with my conclusion that I still had a brain.

"I sure hope you have something up your sleeve for when you do take her on a date," he said as he adjusted his grip and turned back to the water. "If you're serious about wooing this girl, the cafeteria isn't going to hit the spot."

"Wooing?" My eyebrows rose. "Does anyone still use that word?"

"Obviously, I do." He grinned. "So, do you?"

"Do I what?" I frowned. "Do I use the word wooing?"

He snorted and rolled his eyes toward the clear blue sky like he was praying for patience or help from above. “No, do you have something up your sleeve for when you take her on an actual date?”

“Oh, that.” I sucked my lips into my mouth, letting my head tilt back. “No, I don’t have anything up my sleeve. I’m not even convinced I’ll ask her out on a date.”

“Why not?” His shoulders squared as his line grew taut, but then it slackened again. When he reeled the line in, his hook was empty. “Little bastards. I hate it when that happens.”

Lowering to his haunches to add more bait, he looked up at me with expectation in his eyes. “Don’t think this incident will get you out of having to answer my question. You like this woman, so why not ask her out?”

For a moment, I stared off into the distance instead of replying, watching the blue-gray water shimmer beneath the sun. Eventually, I shrugged one shoulder and gave my head a slight shake.

“I don’t know if I like her. I don’t even really know her.”

“But there’s something there,” he argued. “That much is crystal clear whenever you two are in the same room.”

“I won’t deny that I’m attracted to her,” I admitted because there was no point in even trying to deny it. “That doesn’t mean I should pursue her. We’ve both got a lot on our plates and it’s not like I can’t keep my head on straight just because I think she’s hot.”

“If having a lot on your plate was a reason for people not to date, there would be no one in a relationship anywhere on the face of the planet.”

“It’s a lot more complicated than that.” I reeled my line in slowly while I spoke. “She has a child and her ex is a dickhead. The child was injured because of the ex. Understandably, all her guards would be up at the moment.”

“So what you’re really saying is that you’re scared?” he asked, disbelief ringing in his tone.

“I’m not scared.” I scoffed, glancing over to give him a pointed look. “This might just not be the right time for either of us.”

“You keep saying that.” He stood up and prepared to cast his line again. “First about going into private practice and now about this.”

“You just agreed with me about not being ready to leave our patients. Until we can figure that out, neither of us are willing to leave the hospital. So it’s not the right time. As for April, her daughter is recovering from an injury that could greatly impact her mobility if it’s not treated. Do you really think she wants to think about dating right now?”

“I doubt she’s ever going to be ready to think about it if no one asks her out, but you might also be right. She has a kid and her ex is crazy. It might just not be worth the hassle.”

“I never said they wouldn’t be worth the hassle.” It really wasn’t the hassle holding me back. “I just don’t see the point in trying to start something if one of us is not in the right place to see it through.”

“You’d honestly take on the responsibility of a child that isn’t yours?” His brown eyes grew wide. “That’s saying something, man. I thought you just wanted to get into her pants.”

“It’s only a little about wanting to get into her pants.” I arched a brow at him. “Also, you know that by saying that, you just jinxed yourself into marrying a woman with a child one day?”

“I don’t have time for that.” He smirked. “Super busy guy here, you know? I have some business books to read. No girls for me. Not for getting into their pants or any other reason.”

“Sure, I believe you,” I joked. “When you meet the woman, let me know. It’s going to be fun saying *I told you so.*”

Hunter’s eyes went back to the sky, but he didn’t argue. He simply took a breath before focusing his attention on the water and going back to the subject of private practice.

Throughout the day, we talked about what we might need and spitballed ideas about how we'd be able to keep helping our patients. Although our discussion never ventured to April and Adi again, they were still on my mind.

I'd been looking forward to fishing on my day off all week, but right then, I was more looking forward to the next day, my session with Adi, and having lunch with April again. What did that say about my earlier objections to asking her out?

CHAPTER 12



APRIL

My blood boiled as I sat in therapy with Adi and watched her having trouble grasping things in her hand. Chris and Hunter were sweet and supportive of her but it was obvious she was getting frustrated regardless.

It was all because Craig wanted her to ride on the back of his fucking deathtrap and now he couldn't even be bothered to send a damn text to check up on her. I was so pissed off at him that I had brief fantasies of dismembering him slice by slice.

I wanted to wring his neck or magically replace every spoon of sugar he would ever shovel into his coffee with salt instead. So many revenge strategies whirled through my mind that I started to wonder if I'd missed my true calling.

Perhaps I should've become a scriptwriter for a suspenseful television show or a politician instead of a receptionist. It seemed my vindictive streak was far wider than I'd ever thought.

Seeing my daughter in pain brought out a bad side of me that made me want to really hurt Craig in return. Then again, short of severing his favorite appendage—which I'd already vowed not to do—there wasn't much that would actually hurt him.

No amount of name-calling, arguing, or fighting with him would make him feel a damn thing more than he already did about any of this—which was nothing. I was pretty much limited to plotting revenge, which might've been satisfying but it was also useless.

“I can’t do it,” Adi cried, dropping the toy meant to assist in motor function on the floor. Her face was flushed and droplets of sweat had popped up on her brow. “It’s too hard.”

Chris put a hand on her shoulder and bent his knees to be on her eye level. “I know it’s hard, but you’re doing so well. How about we take a break for a few minutes? There’s nothing wrong with needing a rest.”

Her eyes dropped to her shoes, but she nodded. Hunter bumped into her side, intent on cheering her up. “Have I showed you our hall of fame? Chris and I ask our patients to write down funny things that happen to them or that we do in their sessions. We have a whole wall filled with cards.”

“Can I, Mommy?” She glanced at me, and the despair in her eyes nearly killed me.

“Of course.” I waved them off, got up from the stool I’d been sitting on, and headed in the opposite direction.

I needed a minute to regain control of my emotions and I didn’t want Adi to see me while I did. I heard their footsteps echoing down a corridor on the side of the training room but it took me a second to realize I wasn’t alone.

Spinning around, I schooled my expression to a more neutral one from the glower my features had set in automatically. Chris stood behind me, a concerned frown pulling his brows together and worry in his eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You seemed pretty out of it toward the end there.”

I let my chin drop and hid behind the curtain formed by my hair for a moment, drawing in a deep breath before I looked up and pasted a smile on my lips. “I’m fine.”

He lifted his eyebrows, a slight smile on his lips as he shook his head. “No, you’re not. What’s going on?”

“Okay, I’m not fine.” I screwed my eyes shut and just let go. Chris had proven we could trust him and he was really trying to help. Keeping things bottled up didn’t seem necessary with him, especially considering that he’d come after me to ask if I was okay.

“I’m just so pissed off whenever I see her struggling. I should’ve been there when Craig was trying to force her onto that motorcycle. I let this happen to her when I told him he could spend some time with her. I knew he was bad news. I knew he didn’t have a flying fuck to give about another person, even when that person is his daughter, and I still agreed when he said he wanted to see her.”

Chris slid his hands into the pockets of his scrubs and tilted his head. “Wait, you feel guilty about what happened?”

“Yes.” I threw my hands out to my sides. “How could I not? I’m the one who told him he could spend time with her. I’m the one who should’ve been there to protect her from that asshole, and I didn’t do it. He might’ve been the one to pressure her to get onto the motorcycle but it’s still my fault.”

Without hesitating, he closed the distance between us in two long strides, coming to a stop so close to me that I could smell the spicy clean scent of his aftershave. It was a really nice smell but not even that could distract me right then.

“Adi’s injury was not your fault,” he said firmly, his eyes locked on mine and his jaw set. “There’s no way you could’ve known what was going to happen when you agreed to let him see her. Even if you could, do you really think he would’ve just accepted it if you had said no? He’s her father, April. He might not be a good one, but it wasn’t wrong of you to say yes to him seeing Adi for a few hours.”

“If he hadn’t accepted no for an answer, I should’ve fought him. I shouldn’t have just agreed. Sure, I didn’t know what was going to happen, but I should’ve known it wouldn’t be anything good. I know better than to trust him. Now she’s hurt and it’s all because, once again, I was an idiot when it comes to Craig.”

“You were *not* an idiot.” He reached out and placed his hand gently on the small of my back before leading me into his office. Once the door was closed, he guided me to the chair behind his desk and motioned for me to take a seat.

I didn’t know where he was going with this, but he hadn’t steered me wrong yet. My ass hit the chair and Chris dropped

down to his haunches, letting his hands dangle between his knees as he looked up at me.

“I don’t have any children,” he said, and I frowned. He held up a finger when he noticed, his eyes shining with earnestness as they held on to mine. “Just wait. I promise you I have a point. I don’t have any children, so I know people don’t believe me when I say that I understand how difficult it is to watch your child struggle. I might not know how it feels to watch my child going through something so difficult, but I know how tough it is to see a loved one go through stuff you can’t fix for them.”

His voice was softer than usual, as was his gaze. “It might not look like it, but Adi is doing really well. She’s progressing much faster because she’s a child. Adults would’ve taken two weeks to achieve what she has in two sessions. You told me that I had a dedicated patient in her, right?”

I nodded but didn’t speak. There was a lump forming in my throat that I didn’t want him to know about. Having my voice coming out thick would definitely clue him in.

Chris’s eyes stayed steadfast on mine. “Well, I can see how dedicated she’s been. It shows in every exercise we do. It’s in all the little things you wouldn’t even notice, unless that’s what you’re looking for, and it’s exactly what I’m looking for. Her injury won’t be permanent. She will regain the full use of her hand. I swear it.”

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat, but I doubted Chris would’ve missed the crack in my voice in just those two words. “Are you this nice to everybody? Because that seems like that would be exhausting.”

“I’m not.” He laughed, and the sound was as rich and smooth as I remembered.

The man was an enigma. He looked like a cover model but had the heart of a saint. He carried himself with an air of confidence but didn’t come across as cocky, and yet, from what I’d heard about his altercation with Craig, he had that definitive protective alpha-male streak I usually didn’t have time for.

The juxtaposition between the flashes of alpha I'd seen from him myself or heard about and the gentle, supportive, easygoing guy with the great laugh was interesting to say the least. It drew me in because I'd often heard people talking about how different someone was, but I'd never actually met a person I really thought was that different.

Chris, however, definitely seemed to be.

"Hey," he said, drawing me out of my thoughts. "Can I take you to dinner tonight? I know we had lunch planned, but I'm sure you'd rather spend the time with Adi after the session."

Surprise rendered me incapable of doing much more than blinking in surprise. "You want to take me to dinner? Why? Is this just another thing you do to be nice when you feel sorry for your patients?"

I knew the guy had a lot of money, but taking every patient he felt sorry for out to dinner seemed to be a waste. Especially when they weren't even paying him to begin with.

"No." He laughed again, nudging my knee with his shoulder before standing up. "I've actually never taken a patient or their parent out."

"So it's just me then?" My heart skipped a beat, but I wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

Chris shrugged, then nodded. "Yep. Just you. So what do you say?"

"I don't think it's a good idea." As I said the words, a wave of regret rolled over me.

Disappointment hit me right in the gut, but Chris didn't seem too fazed. "Why not?"

"It's not that I don't want to. I just have a lot of baggage. And we work together. I'm trying to save you." It sucked that I had to say no to him, but it simply wouldn't have been fair to say yes.

"I appreciate it, but you don't need to save me," he said without skipping a beat. "I'll pick you up at seven. If you

don't have someone to watch Adi, I'll take you both out.”

Before I could come up with a way to turn him down again, he glanced down at his watch and smiled. “Would you look at that? It's time for us to get back to it.”

He held out a hand to help me up, turned, and strode out of his office without another word about dinner. The office door remained open behind him, and when I heard him joking with Hunter and Adi outside, I sank back into his chair and smiled at his confidence as I covered my face with my hands.

My palms were clammy, and my heart was racing. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought I was actually excited.

CHAPTER 13



CHRIS

“I was wondering whether you were going to text me for my address,” April said when she opened their front door.

My breath was knocked right out of my lungs when I got a good look at her. With the soft light from inside lighting her up from behind, her hair formed a fiery halo around her head. She hadn't dressed up much, but she definitely looked good.

The black shirt she had on clung to her curves a bit more than anything else I'd seen her in, and its neckline was low enough to dip between her breasts. A handful of thin golden chains hung around her delicate neck, each with a different length. The longest one had a heart-shaped pendant that hung about halfway between her collarbone and breastbone.

Dark skinny jeans and a pair of low-slung heels completed her outfit. Her eyes had dark liner around them and maybe a touch of mascara, but other than that, her face seemed bare.

The dirty part of my mind conjured up images of running my tongue along the exposed parts of her skin between the chains before heading all the way down. Another part of me was struck fucking dumb by how much I preferred this look to the skimpy designer dresses girls usually wore when I picked them up.

I had nothing against skimpy designer dresses. In fact, I used to love them. Sundress season used to be my favorite time of year in the city. But apparently, that had changed.

Adi's face popped up behind April, and she gave me an excited wave. "Hi, Chris. We're ready. I just need to put on my shoes."

She disappeared again, but seeing her had reminded me that standing there staring would just be awkward if I let it carry on. "I found your address in your file. It seemed silly to text you for it when you gave it to us just last week."

"I gave it to you to have on file for medical reasons, though. Not dates. But I forgive you." Her teeth sank into her lower lip and she seemed to be struggling as much to keep her eyes on mine as I was having with not letting my own gaze stray again.

"So," I said, trying to remind myself that there was a nine-year-old in the vicinity. "Was it too short notice to get someone to watch Adi?"

"No." She lifted her chin into the air and her expression grew serious. "I don't like to play games. If you really want something out of this, she's part of the package. If you'd rather not take us to dinner now that you know, that's fine. I would've told you earlier, but you didn't exactly give me the chance."

"I didn't give you the chance because you would've turned me down again out of some misplaced determination to protect me from you and your baggage." I didn't have to give the Adi part of her statement a second thought. "It's perfect if she comes with us. I was kind of hoping she would."

It wasn't even a lie. After speaking to Hunter, I'd given some serious thought to what he'd said, as well as my arguments against asking April out.

Maybe April's guard was up, and maybe we were both busy, but there was something here, and I wanted to explore it. Sometimes, waiting for the right time meant missing that gap, and I didn't want to take that chance with her.

I'd also known that if I went for it, it wouldn't be a one-night fling. I didn't know where this would lead, but she didn't strike me as the type who messed around. Because of that, I'd

considered the fact that she was a mother and that Adi wasn't going anywhere.

Despite it all, I'd decided to go for it. A few years ago, her coming right out and saying she didn't like to play games might've scared me off.

But now, it did the opposite. It even kind of turned me on.

"I'm not here to play games, either," I said, holding her gaze so she would see how serious I was before taking a peek over her shoulder. "Now, where's Adi? I wanted to get her opinion about pineapple on pizza."

"I love it," she yelled from somewhere inside, then came hobbling toward us while still in the process of sliding one foot into her shoe. "Please don't tell me you're one of the haters. Mom is, but I've forgiven her for it."

"There's nothing better than a Hawaiian pizza." I grinned, stepping back and holding out a hand to each of them. As I did, I realized why Adi had been taking so long to get her shoes on.

They were sneakers, and from the mess happening with her laces, I took an educated guess they were giving her some trouble. "Do you mind if I tie those for you? It's really good for dexterity, and I'm always on the lookout for an opportunity to improve mine."

April glanced down at her daughter's feet as I motioned to them, a storm suddenly brewing in her eyes when she looked back at me. I knew she was blaming herself for not noticing immediately, and she was probably nervous about how Adi was going to react, but the little girl only gave a surprised chuckle.

"Oh, sure," she said. "I was going to ask Mom to help. It was taking too long."

April's mouth turned down. Without thinking about it, I took her hand when I moved past her and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"I was facing you two," I murmured under my breath. "It's much easier to notice these things when you're looking at

someone rather than standing next to them.”

The slight narrowing of her eyes told me she’d heard me. I heard a soft sigh coming from her as I released her hand to help Adi.

“If you like pineapple on pizza, I’d like to ask you a very important question,” I said, while tying her laces. “How do you feel about mint chocolate-chip ice cream?”

The girl lit up like a Christmas tree. “It’s my favorite.”

“Mine too.” I grinned and tightened the last knot before straightening up. “Ready to go?”

“Yes!” Adi bounced on her feet and ran past me.

April smiled softly as she watched her, then turned her gaze on me and nodded. “We’re ready. I just hope you are.”

“Kids, baggage, and working together doesn’t scare me,” I said.

She tilted her head and looked up as she fell in step beside me. “What does scare you then? Something has to.”

“Clowns, candy canes, and a few other things I’d rather not talk about on a first date.” We walked to their elevator but Adi was already there, jabbing the call button repeatedly.

She turned toward us with a gigantic smile on her face. “Can I have my own pizza?”

“Of course,” I replied and motioned for them to precede me into the elevator when the doors slid open. “I was thinking we get takeout and go have a picnic in the park. Sound good? We can get the ice cream from this great food truck I know near the park.”

“Two questions,” April said, leaning with her hip against the handrail and her arms folded. “How did you get into our building and do you know of a park that will definitely be safe after sunset?”

“The gate outside was propped open, and yes, I do.”

I hadn’t invented my therapy machine with the aim of making factories full of cash, but having the money was

certainly useful at times.

April let out a string of inventive curses without using an actual bad word and leaned her head back against the paneled wood. “I can’t believe those fluffing, worm-brained dweebs left the gate open again.”

“Fluffing worm-brained dweebs?” My brows rose.

Adi giggled when she glanced up at me. “My aunt Luna doesn’t swear and Mom tries to keep it clean in front of me,” she said helpfully. “Aunt Luna said it sets a bad example. I know which words only adults are allowed to use but Mom’s trying to be good about it.”

“I think your mom and this aunt Luna are both right. You should be at least eighteen before you start hearing bad words.” I winked at April, who rolled her eyes in response. “Twenty-one, maybe?”

“Please.” She lifted her head again. “With the amount of TV and humanity kids are exposed to nowadays, they start hearing bad words before they’re even discharged from the hospital after birth. All I’m doing is trying not to use so many of them that Adi starts thinking they’re the only words in existence.”

“Luna doesn’t swear at all?” I asked when the elevator pinged our arrival in their lobby.

We piled out, but Adi twisted around to answer me, eyes bright as she nodded. “Nope. People tease her about it, but she doesn’t care. She doesn’t like swearing, so she doesn’t.”

“It’s good to have principles you believe in,” I said, darting past them to get the door.

The gate was still open. April kicked the brick holding it out of the way before glancing up and down the street. Her gaze came to a rest on my car. “I’m assuming that’s yours?”

“How’d you know?” I dug the key fob out of my pocket and unlocked the doors.

“No one who lives around here has a car that nice,” she said, taking Adi’s hand before we crossed the street.

I followed the same path her eyes had taken earlier. “It’s not that nice. Hunter keeps trying to convince me to get one of those fancy sports cars, but I don’t need that.”

“You mean you don’t need an extension of your d—” She cut herself off as she glanced down at her daughter, shaking her head at herself. “Never mind. You know what I mean.”

“I do.” I laughed as I opened the back door of my sedan for Adi. “For the record, there are other cars on this street worth a lot more than mine.”

She gave me a lopsided grin and rounded the car, opening the passenger door before I could get to it. “True, but I know all of those. I just wanted to see what you would say to having the nicest car around here.”

“It might have worked if it’d been the truth.” I waited for her to get in, then closed her door before she could reach for it.

Her answering laughter filtered out of the car. Hearing it made me smile as I climbed in behind the steering wheel. “Why did you want to know how I would react?”

She shrugged. “Because I’m still trying to figure you out, Doctor Matthews.”

I gave her a meaningful look before turning over the engine. “Well, maybe tonight will help with that.”

“Here’s hoping.” The response was so soft that I almost didn’t hear it. It was more like she had said it to herself and I just happened to overhear her.

It hit me, not for the first time, that the baggage she had mentioned was weighing her down more than I’d have thought possible. Every time I got a glimmer of insight into who she really was, it became more and more clear.

I gripped the wheel tighter as I backed out of my space. Getting this woman to trust me enough to lower her guard and actually let me in wasn’t going to be easy. *It’s a good thing I like a challenge.*

Determined to make her relax at least a little, I made small talk with her and Adi on the way to the takeout place I had

chosen for our pizzas. She was laughing along with us by the time we got there.

We ordered our food and decided to walk to the park. It was a private space that required a key, but I had a handful of friends in high places, and one of them had been able to hook me up.

He'd also arranged for the twinkling lights in the trees to be lit before we arrived, and I'd come by earlier to set out a blanket with some drinks.

Adi spun in a circle with her good arm out to the side. "This is awesome!"

April bumped her hip into mine, smiling as she looked at me. "Well played, sir."

"Thanks." I grinned and walked over to the blanket, setting our food down before having a seat. "You guys coming?"

"It's like a fairy garden," Adi said as she came to join me. I handed over her pizza and earned myself a wide smile when she opened the box. "It smells great. Thank you."

"You're absolutely welcome."

April sashayed her way closer to us, sitting down with her legs crossed before taking her pepperoni. "This is pretty impressive, but pray tell, do you often flex your bank account's muscles on dates?"

"Nope." I picked up my first slice and bit into the cheesy goodness. The combination of sweet and savory hit my tongue, and I chewed happily while she watched me like I was a puzzle with a few pieces missing.

Once I'd swallowed, I cracked open a bottle of water and took a long sip before arching a brow at her. "What?"

"I'm just confused. You claim you're not this nice to everybody, but you do all this for us. Why?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I like you guys. I wanted to take you out for dinner. How about you stop questioning my motives and tell me about you instead?"

“What do you want to know?” she asked. “You already know the highlights.”

“I don’t know your favorite kind of music.” It was a mundane question, just personal enough to tell me something real about her but not personal enough to set off any of her alarms.

She dipped her head back as she thought. “I think it has to be country. Yours?”

“Rock.”

“Go figure.” She laughed.

“Why’s that? I can’t like rock?”

“It’s just...” She trailed off, the corners of eyes crinkling on a smile. “It’s exactly what I would’ve expected from a guy like you. It’s nice that one thing I expected about you turned out to be right.”

“What about you?” I asked Adi. “What kind of music do you like?”

She looked up in the middle of devouring her pizza. “I like country, too. But I also like some boy bands and other pop.”

“Of course.” I smiled at her as I picked up another slice. “Do you want to know a secret?”

She nodded enthusiastically, but her attempt at an answer was muffled by the food in her mouth. April reminded her not to speak with her mouth full, then turned to me. “What was the secret?”

“I like some boy bands, too. But don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to protect.”

They exchanged a look before they burst out laughing. The rest of our dinner went on in much the same vein. We didn’t talk about anything serious, but I learned a lot about them. I made sure to include Adi in the conversation and realized that they laughed a lot when they were together.

When we eventually left, Adi’s eyelids were drooping, and since it was a Monday, I figured we’d better not push things

too late. I wasn't really ready for the night to be over, but it obviously was.

Adi even fell asleep in the car but did her best to pretend like she hadn't when April woke her up at their apartment. I walked them up, stopping when we reached the door.

"Thank you for dinner," I said, making eye contact with each of them.

Adi glanced up at me. Then her gaze darted to April before coming back to mine. "Are you going to kiss my mother?"

"That choice isn't mine to make, kiddo." God knew I wanted to, but given how hesitant she was about dating, I doubted just going in for the kiss was a great idea.

My suspicion turned out to be right when she pulled Adi inside. The door closed until I could only see a sliver of her face. "Thank you for dinner. I'll see you at work."

"Good night, April," I said. "Good night, Adi."

"Good night, Chris," the little girl called from inside before I heard her footsteps shuffling away.

April gave me another smile. "Good night. Thanks for taking us out."

She closed the door in my face, but I still thought the night could've gone a lot worse.

In fact, I'm ninety percent sure I might have a shot at another date.

CHAPTER 14



APRIL

“Have you brushed your teeth, baby?” I walked into Adi’s room to find her climbing into her bed.

One of these days, she wasn’t going to want the pale pink comforter she’d had since I moved her into her own big-girl bed. But for now, she pulled it up to her chin with a relaxed smile on her face.

She nodded as she rolled onto her side to face me, her hand beneath her cheek. “My teeth are brushed. My hands are washed. I put on clean pajamas and I went to the bathroom.”

“I don’t even know why I ask anymore. You never forget anything.” She was getting too big too fast for my tastes. “What would you like to read tonight?”

Walking to the small bookshelf against her wall, I ran my fingers along the well-loved spines and hoped she chose something with princesses. After the night we’d just had with Chris, I was definitely feeling me some happily-ever-afters.

The me from a few weeks ago would also bitch-slap now me if she knew how warm and fuzzy I was feeling. Adi lifted her head a fraction of an inch and caught my eye.

“We don’t have to read tonight. Can we talk?”

Those three words extinguished the warmth in my stomach and the fuzzies turned to stone so fast, it was like they’d gazed directly into Medusa’s eyes.

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?” I went to sit at the foot of her bed, resting my hand on her blanket-covered ankle.

She sat up and brushed the hair out of her eyes. “Why didn’t you kiss Chris? I think he wanted to kiss you.”

My eyes became as round as they’d ever been. I’d expected Adi would have questions about the dinner. I just hadn’t expected that to be the first one.

Inhaling a deep breath through my nostrils, I rolled my lips into my mouth and did my best to come up with an honest answer. “I didn’t kiss him because I’m not dating him. He’s just my friend. Nothing more.”

Her head dropped to the side as she studied me. The thing about my daughter was that she was a lot smarter than even I gave her credit for most days.

Leaning forward, she took my hand and gave me a look that said today was one of those days. “Why aren’t you dating him? You deserve someone good, Mommy. Chris is good.”

My heart melted into a puddle of goo that cracked and broke as it dried. “It’s not that simple, honey. Adult relationships are more complicated than they look in the movies. Dating someone doesn’t just happen, and it doesn’t always end well.”

She frowned. “But I like him.”

“I like him, too.” I stroked my thumb over her knuckles and gave her a soft smile. “That’s why he’s becoming my friend. Dating someone is a bit different from friendship. The other person has to like you back and in a different way than how we like our friends.”

“I don’t understand.” She sighed, withdrawing her hand and lying back down in bed. “I know you have to like someone in a different way. You have to want to kiss them. Don’t you want to kiss him?”

If only you knew how much. But I couldn’t tell her that. If I did, I’d be getting her hopes up. Regardless of how good a guy Chris was or how badly I’d wanted to kiss him, my track record with dating was abysmal.

Craig had just been the rotten cherry on top of a cake made out of layers of disaster. Getting involved with Chris when I

had the history I did was just plain unfair to him. I had so many issues that my issues had mated and had a whole bunch of little issues of their own.

“It’s not only about wanting to kiss someone. I know you don’t understand, baby. I wish I could explain it better, but let’s just be happy that Chris is our friend for now, okay?”

“Okay.” She released another deep breath and snuggled into her mattress. “Good night, Mommy.”

“Good night, honey.” I stood up and pressed a kiss against her forehead, knowing full well she wasn’t about to just go to sleep.

I would have to face another slew of questions tomorrow, but I was being granted a reprieve for tonight. A cold beer sounded like a nice way to unwind while I tried to figure out how the hell I was going to answer her questions without lying or getting her hopes up.

Leaving her bedroom door open just a crack for the light from the hallway to filter in, I blew her another kiss before going to the kitchen. After grabbing my beer, I got settled on the couch and pulled out my phone to distract me.

The dangerous thought of texting Chris popped into my head, so I scrolled down to Luna’s number instead. It wasn’t that late, and I could really use some insight from my friend right about then.

While I waited for her to answer, I peeled the label off the bottle and looked out of my window at the lights of the building next door with a million thoughts racing through my head.

“Hey, April,” Cyrus said. I pulled the phone away from my ear to make sure I’d dialed Luna and not him, but I hadn’t made a mistake. “What’s up? Luna’s just gone to grab something from our study. Maybe you can help us settle this argument. She says it’s a waste to keep traveling back to places we’ve been. I think it’s better to go back and see all the things we missed the first time.”

“Are you planning another trip already?”

He laughed but I could practically hear the pout in his voice when he spoke again. “I don’t like having to share my wife with work. I’m trying to convince her we should take a sabbatical for a year and practice our baby-making skills instead of working.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t stop the smile that came at the same time. “Who needs work, am I right?”

“Exactly. Thank you. You and Adi should come with us. There’s no way Luna would refuse if you guys come.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. An entire year with you two on a baby-making mission sounds like the stuff nightmares are made of.”

“Your loss.” He chuckled. “I understand where you’re coming from, though. I wouldn’t have wanted to spend a year with the person I am now a few years ago either.”

“I was thinking something very similar earlier,” I said.

“Are you coming over to our side of the fence?” he asked, sounding way too excited. “Who’s the guy?”

“There is no guy,” I lied. “You get to keep your side of the fence all to yourself.”

“Boo. You deserve a good guy, April. He’d have to have balls the size of watermelons to keep up with you, but there has to be at least one guy in New York City who’s not a pussy. Want me to set you up with one of my friends?”

“Stop offering. We all know you don’t have any friends.”

He scoffed. “Whatever. Let me know when you’re ready. Here’s Luna.”

“What’s this about a guy with balls the size of watermelons?” She wasted no time when he handed the phone over to her. “Is it that doctor we were talking about the other day?”

“I have no idea how big his balls are.” Well, not literally. Metaphorically, though, they seemed to be decently sized. “Cyrus was just being Cyrus.”

“He’s not wrong about you deserving a good guy.”

“People keep telling me that today.”

She snorted in a way that only Luna could pull off without sounding disgusting. “Maybe you should see it as a sign from the universe that you really do deserve a guy who’s not a giant tool.”

“Or a sign that she deserves a guy with a giant tool,” Cyrus piped up in the background.

Luna broke out laughing, murmured something to him I didn’t want to hear, and then turned her attention back to me. “Sorry about that. He’s gone. What’s up?”

I tore the label into little pieces that scattered on my lap. “I went on a kind of, maybe, sort of date with Chris tonight.”

“What?” she squealed. “Why didn’t you call me earlier? We could’ve watched Adi for you.”

“He took both of us out actually.” I huffed out a breath. “I tried to warn him away, but he refused to listen. He just told me he’d pick us up at seven.”

“A guy who’s not going to be scared away by your tactics? Interesting. I like the confidence. It reminds me of Cyrus.”

The snort I let out was not at all as cute as hers had been. “Except Chris isn’t the cockiest dick on the planet.”

“Never let Cyrus hear you calling him that. You’ll give him enough ammunition for puns and jokes about his nether region to last for the rest of our natural lives.”

“Aye aye, Captain.” I smiled but it didn’t last very long. “Did Cyrus really leave?”

“Yep. Why?”

My teeth sank into my lower lip. I chewed on it for a beat while I thought. “Adi asked Chris if he was going to kiss me when he dropped us off tonight. He told her it wasn’t his choice, and I freaked out. I just pulled her inside and said good night.”

“Why’d you freak out? Wait. Let me rephrase that. *You* freaked out over a guy wanting to kiss you?”

“He didn’t say he wanted to kiss me, just that it wasn’t his choice to make. But yes, I freaked out over a guy. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I think there’s something wrong with me. It’s like there’s been this fundamental shift in me since the accident.”

She didn’t hesitate for even a second. “Since the accident or since you met this doctor?”

“I met him ages ago. I work at the same hospital, remember?”

“You said you hadn’t really spoken to him before, though, so I’m counting the day he treated Adi as the day you met him. Either way, this fundamental shift happened once you started spending time with him. Why would that mean there’s something wrong with you?”

“Because I don’t get this way about men. I’m not the girl who dreams about the poofy white dress or the romance, but tonight after we got back, I wanted to read Adi a story like that.”

Instead of the excited shriek I expected from her, I got a quiet sigh. “There’s nothing wrong with you, April. You got burned before, and it’s made you cautious, which is completely understandable. But I think you should give this guy a chance. If you’re happy being single, that’s fine, but if you want to explore what other options there might be out there, that’s fine, too.”

“Other options, huh?” I chewed on my lips again.

“Yeah. I mean, why not? Giving him a chance doesn’t mean you have to marry the guy. As long as you’re clear about what you want from each other, you don’t even have to put a label on it. Spend some time together and see what happens.”

“I wouldn’t have minded spending the night alone with him. See how much he really knows about anatomy.”

“That’s not what I meant, but okay.” She giggled. “Look, if that’s what you want, go for it. Just remember that being

friends with benefits sometimes ends with that poofy white dress and all the romance. Cyrus and I are the perfect example of that.”

“You really are.” That was half of the damn problem. I’d literally just watched this movie playing out before my very eyes and I hadn’t been able to believe how a series of such small events could’ve transformed Cyrus from ruthless, renowned bachelor to a pussy-whipped puppy dog.

To be fair to him, he was still ruthless in every other area of his life and I wouldn’t call him a pussy-whipped puppy dog to his face. But when he was with Luna, he was the sweetest, gentlest person imaginable and he didn’t give two fucks about who knew it.

The thought that I might be at the start of my own series of small events was downright terrifying. Cyrus had once told me that it had almost been like he’d had no choice in falling in love with Luna. She swept him right off his feet, and he hadn’t even noticed it until it was too late.

Their story was the stuff romance novels were made of. Real life didn’t work like that. On the other hand, I now knew what to watch out for going in.

Giving Chris a chance didn’t mean it had to end the same way for us as it had for them. I didn’t live in a romance novel like Luna did. Real life had a way of jerking me back to reality as soon as my head hit the clouds.

So I’d be fine. The universe would keep my feet firmly planted on the ground. No sweeping would be happening here.

“You know what?” I said. “I’ll think about it. Thanks for talking me off the ledge.”

“Any time.” I heard the smile in her voice. “Have sweet dreams about all that anatomy he might know.”

“I will.” I snorted as I tried to hold back my laughter. “But you say Cyrus hasn’t corrupted you. Keep telling yourself that, girl. You’re just as dirty as he is now. Tell him I said congratulations.”

CHAPTER 15



CHRIS

“That’s it for us for the day,” Hunter said as the telltale ding of the tablet shutting off sounded. “No more appointments make Hunter a free boy. Mind if I take off early? I have to do some things for our new business.”

I laughed and scooped a basketball off the floor, making a perfect shot into the bucket we stored them in. “Yeah, sure. Go ahead. I’ll just finish tidying up here all by myself.”

He grinned. “Great. Thanks, boss.”

“No problem. It’s my turn anyway.” I grabbed the last ball and made another shot while Hunter walked to the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said and left before I could reply.

Wonder what he’s really getting up to this afternoon. Considering that we’d just recently concluded that we weren’t ready to leave the hospital just yet, I doubted he was really going to do something with opening our private practice.

It didn’t really matter what he was really going to do, though. On the odd occasion when our appointments ended early, we always left once the therapy room was restored to a more respectable state.

Our sessions could get out of hand, especially when we had a lot of kids coming in as patients. At the moment, we had a pretty even split, but there was still equipment everywhere.

As I finished stacking the mats, there was a soft knock at the door. I sighed, hoping to everything that might be holy it

wasn't the ER calling.

"Come in," I yelled, already mentally preparing myself for whatever emergency I would have to attend to. *There go my grand and glamorous plans of catching up on my paperwork this afternoon.*

I turned to find not an ER nurse standing in the doorway, but April.

She smiled and gave me a wave. "Hey. Where is everyone?"

"Home, I assume. We finished our appointments early today. Come on in."

Fuck, why did she have to look so good even in the drab uniform the hospital made her wear? The navy dress with red accents was plain, but the material strained across her breasts and made it look like the button was hanging on by only a few threads while the hem hit her about mid-thigh.

It shouldn't be this sexy. Unfortunately, women weren't the only ones who often had a thing for someone in uniform.

I, for one, had had my fair share of fantasies about women in certain uniforms. This particular uniform had never made the cut before, but I'd also never paid much attention to April in it.

I had a feeling said uniform would be making an appearance in my fantasies someday very soon. Clearing my throat as I tried not to indulge in those fantasies right then, I sat down on the mats to hide the bulge I felt growing in my scrubs.

"I just wanted to come by to thank you for last night," April said, turning to close the door behind her. "We had a lot of fun. I'm pretty sure you made Adi's year."

"I still owe her an ice cream," I said. "I enjoyed it, too. Thanks for agreeing to come out with me. We should do it again sometime. Start with the ice cream maybe."

"Sure." She stopped and ran her hand over her long ponytail, bringing it forward over her shoulder as she glanced

around the room. “Are you really alone here? It’s so weird when there are no other people around.”

“Yeah, it’s not often this quiet in here. Are you done with your shift?”

She nodded. “I wanted to come up earlier, but we were slammed downstairs all day. I’m glad I caught you before you left.”

“You could’ve just texted me,” I suggested. “You didn’t have to come all the way up here.”

Something unfamiliar sparked in the green depths of her irises. Well, it wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. I just hadn’t seen it from her before. If I was right, it was heat radiating from her gaze as she dragged it down the length of my body.

My cock, still excited from the almost-fantasies of getting her out of the uniform, twitched when her eyes lingered on that area. When she brought them back to mine, there was a sassy smile playing on her lips. “What if I didn’t text you because I wanted to see you instead of just messaging you. Would that be a problem?”

“Definitely not.” My voice came out rougher than usual.

April must have noticed because she suddenly started walking slowly toward me with a little bit of a sway in her hips. “You mentioned the other day that some of your exercises are good for anyone. Care to show me some? I’ve been a little stiff lately. Maybe you’ve got something to help me unwind.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, watching her approach with my gaze roaming openly and unashamedly across all the places I hadn’t let it linger on before.

Even if this wasn’t going where I thought it might be, it was only fair. She sure wasn’t making a secret about checking me out.

Scrubs did nothing to hide a hard-on the size of the one I was growing. If she came much closer, she would see exactly what effect she was having on me but I couldn’t say I really cared.

I was attracted as fuck to this woman, and if she'd come up in here with any kind of intention of seducing me, which seemed to be the case, I wasn't about to say no. Placing my palms on either side of my hips, I splayed my fingers on the plastic and dug my nails into it to keep from reaching for her when she came to a standstill inches away from me.

Eyes locked on mine, she shrugged and flicked her hand in a careless wave. "I didn't really have anything in mind, but this seems like an opportunity too good to pass up. It's never this empty around here, with not even Hunter being around."

"Got it." So she hadn't come up here to seduce me. I couldn't deny that I was a little disappointed about it, but I could live with making the most of the opportunities life handed us. "If I remember correctly, the exercises I mentioned before were stretching exercises."

"Yeah, I think so." Her voice, like mine, was definitely husky now. She swiped her tongue across her lips and my cock strained against my pants in response. "Care to show me which ones might help? I know you're off the clock, so it's fine if you'd rather I come back another time."

"Nope." I jumped off the mats and strode toward the door, calling to her over my shoulder. "Turn around. I'm just going to lock the door to make sure no one interrupts our private session. I don't mind helping you out while I'm off the clock, but I'm not available to anyone else right now."

It would kill the mood to sit her down and have a talk about what we both so clearly wanted to do, but I needed her to know that if this happened, I remembered her comments about not playing games and I wasn't planning on sleeping with anyone else while we weren't playing those games.

"I'm off the clock, too," she said, and her voice was laden with enough meaning that I knew she'd caught my drift. "So I'm not available to anyone else either."

"Good to know." The sound of the lock clicking into place echoed in the room, but instead of it spurring me on to shoot into action, it slowed me down.

I didn't have anywhere to be for the rest of the day and she wouldn't have initiated this if she was in a hurry to get somewhere, so I wasn't planning on rushing anything.

April had turned as I'd asked, and I took a second to check out her ass as I moved back to her. "Okay, so what you want to do is to reach up as high as you can with both hands."

"Like this?" she asked as I watched the dress riding up until it was right below that ass.

I curled my fist into a ball and put it in my mouth to keep from making any of the sounds I wanted to. Once I was sure it was safe, I removed it but that didn't mean my voice didn't give me away anyway.

"Perfect," I said with a gravelly undertone. "Now bend over and try to touch your toes."

Again, she didn't question me. Her fingertips brushed against her toes seemingly without any effort at all.

"Does this work?" she asked.

"Like a charm." I walked up behind her until I was close enough that she'd be able to feel my erection if she rocked back even slightly. I wasn't about to grind myself against her until I was one-hundred percent sure it was what she wanted.

Placing my palm on her lower back, I applied gentle pressure. "Extend your arms forward while straightening out your back. Imagine turning your arms and body into an ironing board."

I was making up the biggest load of shit but I was pretty sure she knew. My plan worked, though. As she lengthened her back and extended her arms, she pressed her ass firmly against my erection.

The quietest moan slipped out of her but she didn't move a muscle. Since I didn't want to take any chances of scaring her away, I didn't assume anything. There was still the possibility that she was turned on but didn't want me to do anything about it.

"I'm going to touch you now," I said. "That okay?"

“Yes,” she whispered, but it was more than loud enough for me to hear in the quiet room.

“Relax,” I replied. “Stand up straight but don’t turn around. We don’t want to make your muscles any stiffer than they have been.”

“You seem pretty stiff yourself.”

Her comment cut through the tension in the air and I let out a chuckle. “Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve done any stretching myself.”

“Really?” She sounded surprised but then dropped her head back against my shoulder when I started running my fingers from her hips to her thighs. “Fuck, Chris.”

She was standing flush against me now. I turned my head to trace her earlobe with my tongue, one hand slowly lifting the dress while the other snaked around her waist. I was so hard it hurt but I was still intent on taking this slowly.

“Fuck is right,” I groaned as I rolled my hips against her. A groan got caught in my throat but April didn’t bother trying to hold back her hums of encouragement.

My fingertips danced across the bare skin of her thigh. Her dress bunched around her waist and was being held in place by my forearm. Reaching for her top button with my free hand, I flicked it open and thanked everything when the next one came undone as easily.

I only undid one more before deciding to leave it for now and tease the underside of her breast over her clothes instead. Moving my fingers from the outside around to her inner thigh, I stroked the soft skin I found there and felt her tremble against me.

“Chris,” she whimpered. “Don’t let me fall.”

“Never.” I held her closer to me and tightened the grip of my arms while my hands continued exploring.

As I dragged my fingers across the front triangle of her panties, my own legs suddenly felt weak at the wet heat beneath the soft cotton. She adjusted the angle of her head to

bring her lips to mine, lifting her arm to tangle her fingers into my hair.

Our mouths met softly at first, an almost tentative kiss that changed as soon as my tongue darted past her lips to taste her. Her lips were soft but her tongue was insistent, as dogged in its pursuit as mine.

An inferno built up inside me, making me as desperate as I'd ever been. My hips moved against hers—with hers. I stopped teasing the underside of her breast and slid my hand into the opening I'd created to cup the weight of it, running my thumb across her hardened nipple.

She moaned into my mouth and shivered, pressing her body tighter against mine. Our kiss deepened, our tongues and teeth clashing as I swept her panties aside to find her bare beneath them.

Bare and so soaked that the movement of the cotton made the scent of her arousal drift to my nostrils. A feral-growl-type noise I didn't make very often rumbled in my chest and my fingers slid through her folds.

It took every ounce of determination I had not to bend her over and take her right then and there. My cock throbbed and my muscles were wound so tight they were almost vibrating, but I forced myself to calm down and focus on her.

Using the heel of my hand on her clit, I pushed a finger inside her and nearly came just from feeling her inner muscles fluttering around it. She gasped something that might have either been my name or a curse into my mouth, her body already tensing.

I opened my eyes just in time to see her brow knitting as she came, flooding my hand while her mouth momentarily stilled on mine. My underwear got wet against my skin as I stroked her through her orgasm.

All it would've taken for me to go over the edge with her without even having her touch me was one more brush of my hips against her. I refused to come this way, though. It just wasn't happening.

With effort that I thought deserved a medal, I managed not to shoot my load in my pants and was ready for her weight when she sagged against me. She turned slowly in the circle of my arms, smiling lazily as she brought her gaze up to mine.

“Those were some stretches,” she said, her eyes glazed over as she held on to my shoulders.

I lifted her against my stomach and started walking us over to the mats. My lips brushed against hers when I spoke. “You think so? That’s great but you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

CHAPTER 16



APRIL

Who would've thought it was possible to feel like I was floating on a cloud of bliss just because of an orgasm? Definitely not me. *That's for sure.*

But I'd also never had an orgasm like that one before. Chris had managed to do with his hands what not even a vibrator being operated by the chick in charge of the vagina had been able to. He'd blown my fucking mind.

Even so, as he kissed the stuffing out of me while carrying me God only knew where, I already wanted more. I wound my arms around his neck and pressed my chest against his just as he lowered me down and my ass hit cool plastic.

I didn't need to look to know where we were. He had brought me to the yoga mats without needing to stop devouring my mouth once. Spreading my legs with his hips, he moved forward until I felt his impressively sized erection pressing up right against my core.

It cannot be a coincidence that this stack of mats is the perfect height. Then again, it's not like he'd had time to set this up for this.

When I'd come up here, all hot and bothered from the dreams about him that had plagued my sleep after what Luna had said, the last thing I'd been expecting was for any of those dreams to actually come true. Yet at least a few of them already had.

So far, I'd had his arms around me, kissed him, felt how badly he wanted me, heard the sounds he made, and had gotten

a spectacular orgasm out of the deal. *Time to make some more dreams come true.*

Bringing my hands to the hem of his shirt, I lifted it up to expose a body so ripped that feeling it beneath my fingertips riled me up almost all the way again. The planes and valleys of muscle rippled beneath my touch as he kissed me harder.

I didn't think I'd ever been with a guy who was so unrestrained in his reactions. Chris wanted me and he seemed to want me to know how much. It was an exhilarating realization that made me understand so many things I'd read about in articles over the years but hadn't believed possible.

When even the biggest skeptic becomes a believer after one round with this guy, he's got to be good.

After running my fingers over every inch of his abdomen, I brushed the pads of my fingers over his nipples and was surprised when he shivered. Another low groan came out of him and he pressed into my hands.

"Sensitive?" I asked between fervent kisses.

He nodded and also spoke without breaking off the kiss entirely. "Everything seems to be sensitive with you."

Tingles ran down my spine and across my skin until they exploded like fireworks when they reached my extremities.

"Truth or line?" I asked. If it was a line, it was a fucking good one. *Way to make a girl feel special when she only wants to get her rocks off.*

"Truth." He covered one of my hands in his and moved it down slowly enough that I had plenty of time to draw away if I wanted to.

I didn't.

But I appreciated that he hadn't just used my hand to grab his own package. The fabric of his scrubs and then the elastic of his underwear brushed against my skin as he guided our joined hands farther down.

"If you don't believe that it's true, feel me," he murmured before sealing his mouth over mine again.

He let go of my hand to continue dragging torturous paths up and down my thighs without ever going high enough. I considered teasing him back, but I was too curious about what he'd meant.

I closed my fist around his rock-hard shaft and his entire body jerked as he hissed into my mouth. "Fuck, April."

"Like you said, fuck is right." His skin felt like velvet but I hadn't even known men could get this hard. There was just about zero give as I squeezed my thumb and forefinger together.

"April," he said in a tone that made my name sound like a warning before he nipped my lower lip. "If I say stop, you have to stop, okay?"

"Why?" I swiped my thumb across his tip and gathered so much silky wetness that I didn't really need an answer to my question anymore.

He gave me one anyway. "I'm dangerously close to coming. If you keep doing any of that, it's going to happen and I'm not ready for it to, unless you want to end this."

"I'm definitely not ready for it to end." I eased up on my grip but didn't let go of him. "Aren't you supposed to be able to hold back indefinitely until you eventually decide I've had enough orgasms?"

He chuckled against my mouth. "Do I look like fucking Hercules to you? No one has that amount of self-control when they need someone as much as I need you right now."

Another shiver of unadulterated pleasure ran through me. "I knew it couldn't be true but thanks for confirming for me. You don't have to hold back with me. If you want to—"

He cut me off with a fierce, demanding kiss that he broke off as abruptly as he started it. "You misunderstand me, April. I'm not done with you yet. You're fucking killing me. There's no way I could hold back indefinitely, but I'm okay for now. Just stop when I say so, okay?"

"I'd be insane to refuse that request."

“I’m glad we’re in agreement.” His lips descended on mine again, but his hands didn’t stop this time. He moved my panties to the side once more, resting one hand on my upper thigh and teasing my clit with his long fingers while the fingers of his other hand played with my entrance.

My back arched and my hips bucked as I tried to get them inside of me. Chris obviously knew what I wanted, but instead of giving it to me, he pulled away to sink to his knees between mine.

He smirked, sliding me to the edge of the mat before bringing his hands back to where I wanted them. “This time, I don’t just want to feel it. I want to taste it, too.”

I spared a moment to think about his kneecaps on the hard floor without one of these mats beneath them, but all thoughts about telling him to grab one evaporated when he put his mouth on me.

Between his tongue and his fingers, I was almost delirious in no time. He nipped, licked, sucked, and stroked me into another orgasm with seemingly no effort at all.

This one was even more powerful than the last. If I hadn’t been hanging onto his shoulders for an anchor, I was pretty sure they’d be picking up pieces of me scattered across all four corners of the globe.

By the time my eyes finally blinked open and my brain started semi-functioning again, Chris had already put on a condom and was staring down at me with so much need burning in his eyes that my legs spread farther automatically, almost like they wanted to welcome him home.

He gripped my hands as he lined himself up, his gaze intent on mine. “Still fine?”

“You certainly know how to stretch a girl out.” I smiled and squeezed his fingers. “I’d love to see more.”

“No, April. The words. The actual words. I need to hear them.”

Each sentence came out between labored breaths. His thighs quivered against my legs, and agony flashed in his eyes,

but he kept still with his broad head nestled in my warmth.

“I’m fine,” I whispered, threading my fingers into his soft hair and holding his head in place. “I want you, too, Chris. We’re good. I promise.”

“Good.” He still didn’t just slam into me, though.

Pushing in inch by delicious inch, he filled me up until it felt like I wouldn’t even be able to breathe if he went any deeper.

He stopped just before the point of discomfort, screwing his eyes shut as he dragged in measured breaths. “Fuck. You feel too good.”

“So let go,” I said, rolling my hips when he still didn’t move his. “I told you, you don’t need to hold back with me.”

I squeezed my inner muscles, and he let out a loud moan. His features contorted into something between agony and rage but it was the sexiest expression I’d ever seen a man wearing.

“Think you’ve got one more in you?” he asked, but the last word became another moan when he drew out slowly before sinking back in.

Everything about him at that moment was so beautifully erotic that I nodded. “Keep making those noises and feeling like you do, and I’ll probably even get there before you.”

“Doubt it,” he bit out, opening his eyes to look into mine. “Ready? I’m really fucking close.”

My stomach flipped at his admission and my clit was back to pounding like it’d been years since it’d been touched. “I’m ready.”

Claiming my mouth for a kiss that felt surprisingly intimate, he finally started thrusting. Our bodies were pressed together so tightly that I felt every dip of his muscles, every tremble, and every shaky breath he took.

Although this was our first time together, I could tell when he was reaching his crescendo thanks to all of those little hints. Reaching between us at the exact right moment, I massaged my clit and went flying over the edge at the same time he did.

As the most intense climax yet tore through my body, I collapsed back against the mats and saw bright lights exploding behind my eyelids. His body folded over mine as if it just couldn't let me go, and his chest expanded and fell just as fast as mine when we finally came back to earth.

Chris planted a final kiss on my lips before taking a step back. "I need to go take care of the condom. I'll be right back."

He was so damn gorgeous with his hair all ruffled, his lips swollen, and his eyes soft and satisfied. I couldn't quite believe I was the one responsible for making him look and feel that way.

I also couldn't quite believe I'd just had three orgasms. Multiples had been a myth to me before, but apparently, Chris's knowledge of anatomy was all I'd needed to dispel that it was a myth.

Because holy crap, that was awesome.

As I watched him walk his gorgeous ass away from me, though, reality started catching up with me in more ways than one. I knew there wasn't anything wrong about what had just happened between us, but it suddenly felt like there was.

A bad feeling crept up on me as I sat and redid the buttons on my uniform. Scooting to the edge of the mat, I tested out my weak legs before standing up. *Wobbly, but past the point of face-planting.*

It would have to do. I smoothed out my dress just as he came walking out of his office, heading toward me with that smile still on his face. My heart raced and my cheeks flushed.

"That was..." He trailed off and ran his hand along the back of his head, his gaze zeroed in on mine. "An unexpected but awesome surprise to end the day. You want to go get something to drink downstairs?"

He moved to put his arms around me again, but I took a step back and shook my head. "I have to go get Adi. Thanks for, well, you know. See you tomorrow."

“Okay.” A frown appeared between his brows, but he lifted his hands with his palms out and didn’t come any closer. “Don’t overthink this, April.”

I nodded and got out of there as fast as my wobbly legs could carry me. There was a bathroom at the end of the corridor, and thankfully, it was empty.

Darting into the nearest stall, I flipped the lock and stood with my back against the door, head hanging as I slid down against it. *Wow. We really just did that.*

My mind was in a flat spin, but as I searched every nook and cranny inside, I couldn’t find so much as a glimmer of regret. All that remained to be seen was whether Chris felt the same.

I groaned. *What the hell had I been thinking?*

CHAPTER 17



CHRIS

Hunter grinned at me when he looked up from the tablet. “Adi is our last appointment for the day. How about using some of their time to ask April out again?”

“I’ll think about it.” I wasn’t entirely convinced she’d say yes, though.

After everything I’d done yesterday to make sure she was on board and not doing anything she might regret or scare her off, she’d still bolted like a damn deer who heard a gunshot in hunting season.

I wasn’t giving up on her. Slowing things down after what had happened just seemed like it might be the best course of action. Pushing for a date the very next time I saw her didn’t qualify as slowing things down.

I’d have to see for sure when they got here, though. Before I saw her, I’d have no idea where her head was at about the awesome fucking sex we’d had.

If I’d thought that maybe this attraction I felt toward her would lessen once I’d had her, I’d have been dead wrong.

I felt like an addict who had taken one hit and was now hooked. Just thinking about it, which was incredibly difficult not to do, made me pop a semi. *Welcome back to being fourteen, asshole. No one missed you.*

“While we’re waiting,” Hunter said, “what do you think the name of our private practice should be?”

“It wouldn’t need to have a name,” I replied, giving myself a mental shake to get rid of the porn-worthy memories floating around inside my head. “It’s literally a doctor’s office. Why?”

“We need to start throwing around names before we can plan a marketing strategy and create a brand. My textbook said you have to go into marketing with a clear name and brand, or you might as well kiss your money goodbye.”

“I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t apply to us.”

He rolled his eyes. “What about Topher and Ter’s Body Shop? Like the end of both our first names. Cool, right?”

I didn’t even bother giving him a response. I just made a face at him and left him to draw his own conclusions.

After tossing around a few more equally terrible names, I shook my head at him. “What about The Doctor’s Office? Brilliant, right?”

He flipped me off. “We’ll think of something better.”

“Great.” I glanced down at Adi’s treatment plan and ran over what we had to do today. “In the meantime, do you mind taking the lead in this session? I need a few minutes to speak to April.”

“I literally just suggested you ask her out again. In case you were wondering, that was my way of telling you I was going to take the lead to give you a few minutes to speak to her.”

“Thanks, but it depends on what she says to what I need to speak to her about whether I’ll ask her out or not.”

His massive brow furrowed. “Did something happen between you guys?”

I mimed zipping my lips and flicking away the key. “Nothing you and I need to talk about. Let’s just leave it at I might’ve fucked up.”

“How?” His bearded jaw slackened. “It’s not possible to fuck things up that fast, even for you. Not unless you...” One of his ginger brows arched. “Unless you literally fucked—”

The door banged open, and Adi came running inside. “Hi, guys! How are you?”

“To be continued,” he said to me with a knowing gleam in his eyes before turning to our patient. “The question is, how are you?”

“I’m better,” she replied, holding up her arm to show off a less supportive sling. “We’ve just come from the other doctor and he said I can move over to this one now.”

“That’s great, sweetheart.” I smiled and went over to ruffle her hair. “Where’s your mom?”

I glanced at the door, and, of course, at the exact moment that I stood there staring at it like a lost sailor wishing for a mermaid to appear, it opened again and April walked in. Her gaze connected with mine almost instantly, and she did nothing to mask the worry in hers.

“She’s there.” Adi frowned and pointed at the door, tilting her head as if she wanted to question if I was okay.

Hunter laughed it off, wrapping his arm around her bicep and leading her to the other side of the room. I had an almost overwhelming urge to take April into my arms when she didn’t stop moving until she was in front of me, but the fact that Hunter and Adi were in there with us, plus the expression on her face, made me think she wouldn’t want me to.

“Hey,” I said. “Did you have a good shift?”

“No.” She scrubbed her hands over the side of her face, bringing her weary gaze to mine. “It felt like it was six days long.”

“Why? What’s going on downstairs?” I frowned. “I haven’t heard about anything out of the ordinary happening.”

“That’s because nothing out of the ordinary is happening down there.” She lowered her voice and flicked her hand between our chests. “The out of the ordinary shit all seems to happen up here.”

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure Hunter and Adi were otherwise occupied, I took a step closer to her and rested

my hands lightly on her hips. She tensed and checked for them too but then sighed as she relaxed into my touch.

“There’s nothing out of the ordinary about two unattached, consenting adults who are attracted to each other getting together,” I said. “It’s so *not* out of the ordinary that it’s kind of what the human race depends on for its survival.”

She cracked a smile at my joke, shaking her head as she brought her hand to my stomach and played with the material of my shirt. “Does that mean things aren’t going to be really awkward between us now?”

“No awkwardness here.” Since my back was turned on the room and I was pretty sure I was blocking anyone’s view of us now that we knew exactly where they were, I risked a quick kiss to her forehead. “What we do when we’re alone has nothing to do with anyone else. I don’t know about you, but I enjoyed what we had here. I really don’t think we have anything to feel awkward or guilty about.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to jeopardize Adi’s therapy for anything in the world, least of all for a hookup.”

Ah, so that was what this was about. “Again, what we do when we’re alone has nothing to do with anyone else. Not even Adi. Regardless of how things play out between the two of us, I won’t stop her therapy. I’m not that guy.”

“You mean you’re not spiteful, vindictive, or like to abuse your position?” She lifted her chin defiantly, but there was humor in her eyes. “Good. But you should know if you go back on your word about this, I won’t stop bugging you to keep doing the therapy. No matter what.”

I dipped my head to look into those green eyes and flexed my fingers on her hip. “You mean if I threaten to stop her therapy, you’ll be around all the time?”

She patted my stomach with a coy smile. “Don’t go getting any wild ideas on me, buddy.”

“I think we should stop therapy immediately.” My voice was so low it was almost a whisper. “I’m also not your buddy, April. I’m so much more than that.”

“Are you?” Her gaze darted from one of my eyes to the other. “From where I’m standing, we’ve been on one date with child supervision and we’ve hooked up once. That’s it. That’s what we are to each other.”

Why did she sound so defensive all of a sudden? I had a feeling I’d inadvertently smacked right into one of her barriers. It stood to reason that I’d trip over some of her baggage at times. It still didn’t scare me off.

Dipping my head lower, I positioned my mouth just above her ear, so close that her hair moved against my lips when I spoke. “We’ve hooked up once so far but it’s going to happen again. It was too good not to happen again. And again. And again. There’s so much I still want to do with you and have you do with me. Unless you feel differently? Have you had enough of me?”

Her head shook against mine. “Definitely not.”

“Then we feel the same way.” I took a deep breath to control the baser urges flowing through me with having her so close by. Then I took a step back to put some much-needed distance between us. “But in the meantime, how would you guys like to do something this weekend?”

When I looked at her, a light flush covered her cheeks and her lips were parted. *Fuck, that’s sexy.*

It was good to know I wasn’t the only one so affected but the knowledge made it that much more difficult not to drag her off somewhere for a quickie.

She rolled her lips into her mouth, closed her eyes, and took a breath before nodding. “Adi hasn’t spent much time doing anything fun after the accident. I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

“I figured that might be the case. I’ll make sure we do nothing that involves a motorcycle.”

April rolled her eyes at me. “If you tried to even show me one of those things right now, the owner had better be okay with it getting taken apart piece by piece and having some panel beating done to it.”

“I could bring a hammer and we could hit up a junkyard?” I suggested, sort of joking but also not really. “We could go fuck up some motorcycles if it’d make you feel better?”

“You’d do that for me?” Her head pulled back as she gazed up at me. “Without judging me, of course?”

“I’d be right there with you.” All I had to do was think about that day Adi came in and I was ready to tear every motorcycle I could find apart with my bare hands to ensure something like that—or worse—never happened to another kid. “Without any judgment. Don’t worry.”

A slow smile appeared on her lips. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that sometime. Let’s stay away from anything motorcycle or biker related this weekend, shall we?”

“We shall.” I took her hand and gave it a soft squeeze before jerking my head toward Hunter. “I’d better go step in before he undoes all the good work I’ve done with her.”

She fell into step beside me and bumped her shoulder into my arm. “Really? All the good work you’ve done? He’s helped a lot and you know it.”

I exhaled heavily, rubbing the back of my neck. “Fine, if you insist on diminishing my role here, I think we should stop therapy. That way, you’d be around all the time and you’d see how good I really am.”

“If I have to stalk you in order to see how good you are, you can’t be very good at all,” she teased. “I also don’t know why you’d want me around all the time. If I was, I’d look for every opportunity to distract you.”

“Really?” I smirked and arched a brow at her. “Tell me more about these distractions. What would I have to look forward to?”

“Well.” She twirled a lock of hair around her finger, pushing up on her toes to whisper since we were now too close to the others. “I could tell you about all those things I still want to do to you.”

I groaned. “That’s not fair.”

“How?” She laughed. “It’s fair when you say stuff like that, but not when I do?”

“Not when you say it when we’re about to join your daughter and my best friend for therapy.” I willed my brain to scrub those words clean before my cock could react.

April laughed again and looked like she was about to say something else when Adi spotted us walking over to them.

“Come look, Mom. I did it.”

Her words did the job my willpower hadn’t been able to achieve when I noticed what she was talking about. I got down on my knees beside her and held out my hand. “Let me see something real quick. Give me your arm.”

She did as I asked, and this time when I told her to hold it, it stayed. A wide grin formed on my lips as I held up my palm for a high-five. “This is excellent progress. I wasn’t expecting that for at least another week or so.”

April gave her the most radiant smile I’d seen from her yet. It was so open and unguarded that it made me want to take a picture just so I could see it again.

“Well done, baby. I knew you were going to knock therapy out of the park.” She turned to me. “What’s next?”

“I think it’s time for us to progress to some more challenging exercises.” I climbed to my feet and nodded at Hunter. “Do you agree with my assessment that she’s ready for phase two of the treatment plan?”

Although the final decision rested with me, he’d been with her alone in this session so far and I trusted his judgment. “Yep. I think she can handle it.”

“Great. Let me show you what I want you to start on.”

Hunter and I demonstrated the exercises we’d be working on with her for the next couple of weeks until she was ready for more.

The rest of the session flew by. Adi was, as always, a model patient. She paid attention to what we did and tried her best to mimic us.

When Hunter called time at the end of the day, she was smiling despite the sweat dotting her brow. “Thank you for helping me, Chris. I’m happy that it’s you.”

“So am I.” I fist-bumped with her when she offered and ruffled her hair.

Hunter gave her a mock pout and jerked his thumb at his chest. “I’ve been helping too. Aren’t you happy I’m helping?”

She giggled and rolled her eyes. “Thank you for helping too, teddy bear.”

He winked at her. “You’re welcome.”

April’s gaze met mine, and for once, there was real warmth in it. “Thanks, guys. We’ll see you soon, right?”

“Definitely.” I really wanted to kiss her goodbye, but I didn’t.

Our relationship wasn’t quite there—yet.

One of these days, I was hoping it would be.

CHAPTER 18



APRIL

Late shifts were the worst. Everyone I passed in the parking lot looked more zombie than human by the time we got off.

It had been a busy one, too. There had been a pile-up on the freeway and it had us running around like crazy people trying to accommodate the surge of patients.

I was half dead on my feet but I still needed to pick Adi up from Katie. As I made my way to my beat-up old car, I checked my watch and cursed.

The weather was nice tonight, a warm and balmy evening with barely even a breeze. But it was also late. Despite the good weather, I wasn't sure about picking Adi up if she was already bathed and in her pajamas.

Sticking a hand into my purse, I rummaged around for my phone and keys. Once I located both, I called Katie and stuck the phone between my shoulder and ear as I unlocked the car and got in.

I leaned my head back. *So, so tired.*

I yawned just as Katie picked up. "Hey, are you finally done?"

"Yep. I just got to my car. I'll be there as soon as I can. At least there shouldn't be much traffic."

"Adi's already asleep," she said. "Go home, get some rest, and you can come to pick her up in the morning?"

“Are you sure?” My lids were so heavy that I didn’t have it in me to argue too much. “I don’t mind coming to get her. She’s my responsibility and you’ve already watched her all night.”

“We had fun,” she said simply. “Now go home. I’ll see you for breakfast.”

“Appreciate it.” I covered my mouth for another yawn. “See you tomorrow. Tell Adi I love her.”

“As soon as she wakes up,” my sister promised. “Drive safe.”

“I will.” We hung up, and I started the car, blasting music over the radio to stay alert. I drove slowly anyway, just to be safe, and was more than ready for bed by the time I made it to our apartment.

It was quiet and dark inside. I didn’t even bother turning on any lights. My bed called to me, chanting my name like it was putting me under its spell as soon as I stepped into my bedroom.

Just five minutes. I’ll brush my teeth and change in just five minutes.

I collapsed onto my bed before I could get out of my clothes, and I repeated my promise to myself. Before I could keep said promise, the scene changed.

Some part in the back of my mind knew I had fallen asleep, and I had the nagging feeling I shouldn’t have, but then I realized I was lying on a lounge on a deserted beach, and I stopped caring about why I should wake up.

Perfectly golden sunshine that didn’t seem to burn warmed my skin. Clear blue skies stretched as far as the eye could see, and waves lapped gently at the shore. It was the kind of blissful vacation I’d been longing for almost as far back as I could remember, but I’d never been able to take it.

I blinked, and a frozen cocktail appeared on a small round table beside me. *Wow. This is fucking incredible.*

Plus, it's a dream, so no hangover. I did a little dancing jig and sat up to take a drink.

Which was when I realized I wasn't alone in my little slice of heaven. Chris was in the ocean, his skin bronzed and his smile brilliant as he walked out of the waves.

Droplets of water glistened on his drool-worthy body and his hair was slicked back. He ran a hand through it to mess it up and came toward me.

"You woke up," he commented. "Have a nice nap?"

"I think I'm still napping." My eyes traced a drop that clung to his strong jaw before gravity defeated it and made it track down the column of his throat before it pooled into several others on his chest.

"If you're still napping, then this is your dream. What would you like to do?" His tone was playful, but there was a definite bulge making itself known inside the thin material of his shorts.

More droplets ran in rivulets down the ridges of his torso, making my mouth water as I watched their path. "Come here."

He smirked. "Your wish is my command. Where do you want me?"

I spun around and dropped my legs off the side of the lounge chair, opening my knees and gesturing to the space between them. "Right here."

In the space of a heartbeat, he was there. His long fingers burrowed into my hair while he slid his free hand beneath my chin and coaxed me to look up at him.

"Now what?"

There were so many ideas running through my mind, but one was more prominent than the others. "You've gotten to taste me. I'd like to return the favor."

"This is your dream and you want to go down on me?" he asked, disbelief flashing past the lust in his gaze.

I nodded. "You have no idea how much."

He tightened his grip on my hair and stepped closer. “Go for it then.”

“Impatience won’t get you anywhere,” I joked. It totally would, but what the hell? As he so helpfully pointed out, this was my dream.

A soft chuckle came from him, causing his stomach muscles to ripple. I lifted my hands to those first, running my fingertips across the washboard in front of me.

Every muscle was defined, and the lightest smattering of freckles somehow made him even more perfect. The V between his hips must have been crafted by Aphrodite herself and the dark happy trail that ran down from his belly button made this girl extremely happy. And turned on.

He let out a soft groan when I slid my fingers down and cupped him over his shorts. “How is it that you can get me this hard when you’ve barely touched me?”

“Because it’s my mind giving you that hard-on?” I ran my nails lightly up the outline of his shaft. “Are you complaining?”

“Hell no.” His breath caught when I pulled on the string keeping his pants up, and his gaze was heavy on mine as I ripped the Velcro free, letting the wet material fall to the sand.

It turned out Chris had gone commando. *Thank you, dreamland.* And I was suddenly faced with his long, thick erection standing proudly inches away from my mouth. It curved up to his belly button, and though I hadn’t gotten a good look at it the other day, I was pretty sure the impressive size was spot on.

I licked my dry lips and wrapped my fingers around his shaft, bringing the head down to my mouth. My tongue circled his tip and one hand went to his hip to keep him where I wanted him. Not that he seemed to be going anywhere.

He tasted salty from the water but there was something else there that was all him. Clean musk and spice that seemed to match the way he’d smelled when we’d been together.

He threw his head back and rocked his hips in time with the rhythm I was setting. Minutes or hours might have passed before he pulled back and covered my bikini-clad breasts with his release.

The next second, he was on me, fucking me senseless right there on the beach. I wound my arms and legs around him, bringing his hot skin as close as it could get to mine.

Our mouths clashed in an almost violent kiss that had me out of my mind in no time at all. Everything about him felt perfect. The weight of him on top of me, the hardness inside, and the light scratching of his stubble against my jaw.

When he wedged his hand in between us to stroke my clit, I was done for. My toes curled, and I came screaming his name to anyone who might be out here with us.

I jerked upright in bed, sweaty and panting. It took me a few long seconds to realize I was alone, fully clothed, and in my own bed.

Man, what a dream!

Disappointment stabbed like pinpricks at my gut about it only having been a dream, but I pushed it aside. Chris had promised me that there'd be more hooking up for real in our future and I believed him.

Sure, it would've been way better if he was here right now, but he wasn't. There was nothing I could do about it except to make sure that someday soon, he'd be here when I woke up.

That way, I'd be able to wake him up in a special way and have him take advantage of the state my dreams left me in since I'd met him. Despite my recent orgasm, I was very much unsatisfied.

Being hot and bothered wasn't going to help me get back to sleep, though. Neither would my sudden hyperawareness of the sweat and grime of the day still covering my skin.

I stayed on my firm mattress for a few more seconds, staring at my dark ceiling and doing breathing exercises to calm my racing heart. Once it didn't feel like it was galloping

anymore, I sat up and tried to ignore the slickness between my legs so I wouldn't go back to thinking about my dream.

A glance at the clock on my nightstand told me I'd only been asleep for about three hours. I needed to get at least three more if I wanted to function like a human being tomorrow morning. Plus, my sister made breakfast at seven every day. She'd have my head for dessert if I was late.

Mindful of that fact, I turned the faucet to lukewarm and stripped out of my uniform before climbing into the shower. Not even the cool water and the imminent threat of being murdered by Katie could quite snap me out of my dream completely.

I'd been in a dry spell for so long that I wasn't surprised awesome sex had woken up my previously-thought-to-be-dead libido. Having a wet dream, though? That was a surprise. It had never happened to me before.

My nipples tingled as memories, fantasies, and dreams collided in my mind. I lathered my hands with shampoo and washed my hair, conditioned it, and reached for the soap, going through the motions as my brain tortured me and my body reacted.

Shit, has he turned me into some kind of sex addict? Why couldn't I stop thinking about it?

I suspected I knew the answer, even if I didn't want to pay much attention to it. Luna had mentioned to me when she and Cyrus first got together that the same thing had happened to her.

So I wasn't an addict. I just couldn't stop thinking about it because for the first time ever, I'd met a guy who knew what he was doing and wanted to do it to me. A guy who also happened to be nice, hot, and funny.

Strangely, I didn't freak out about any of this. His reaction to my uncertainty over what we'd done had wiped away any doubts. I couldn't keep freaking out about him, and as I stood under the cool water, I realized I was completely calm.

If anything, I was suddenly even more excited about tomorrow. We were going to have a good day with him, and if it was at all possible, I might even be able to convince him to re-enact my dream with me.

More tingles exploded across my skin and I smiled. *Yeah, tomorrow's going to be a good day, for sure.*

CHAPTER 19



CHRIS

Early on Saturday morning, I was awake and ready to go. April and I hadn't set a time, so I sat on a stool in my kitchen and fired off a text to her.

Me: I've got a full day planned. Can I come to pick you up in about an hour?

Staring at my phone, I waited for her response. Three jumping dots told me when she started typing, and the reply came through a minute later.

April: Ready whenever you are ;-)

I grinned, anticipation for the day I had planned buzzing through me. Since I'd been waiting for an acceptable time to reach out to her, I already had all my shit in my pockets.

The elevator for my penthouse was a private one, and it was already on my floor since I hadn't moved after getting home last night. I jabbed the button, and the doors opened instantly.

April was waiting on the sidewalk when I got to her apartment. Her skin was glowing and there was a relaxed smile on her face as she ambled over to my car.

"You seem to be in a particularly good mood," I said as I climbed out to get the door for her.

She shrugged but her smile turned coy. "I got some really good sleep last night."

"That so?" I glanced toward the apartment building, frowning when I still saw no trace of Adi. "Is it just the two of

us today?”

“Nope, Adi’s at my sister’s. We have to pick her up there if you don’t mind.” She rattled off her sister’s address. “She was already asleep by the time I got off shift, so she stayed over there.”

“Makes sense.” April surprised me by pushing up on her toes to kiss the bottom of my jaw before getting into the car. I closed her door and lifted my eyebrows once I was in the driver’s seat. “What was that for?”

“Like you said, I’m just in a good mood.” Her eyes were bright, shining like emeralds under fluorescent lighting.

“You had a late shift, and you slept that well?” I shifted the car into gear and merged into the traffic but kept an eye on her in my periphery. “I thought yesterday’s late shift was madness. I heard about the accident.”

“Oh, it was madness.” She shot me a half-smile. “But I had some very pleasant dreams once I finally got home.”

“Well, now you’ve piqued my interest. What did you dream about?” I glanced at her to find her looking at me with a faraway but very heated gaze.

“You.”

“Me?” *Fuck. I shouldn’t have asked that.* “What about me?”

“Things that made me realize it was better to meet you outside my building than have you near my bedroom.”

My head fell back against the seat as my cock started straining against the zipper of my jeans. “Don’t tell me more unless you want me to turn the car around and go straight back to your place. Do you think your sister would mind if Adi spends the day with her?”

“She wouldn’t mind, but Adi would. I told her we were spending the day with you, and she was really excited about it.”

“I can’t say I’m disappointed that she was excited to spend time with me. I am pretty disappointed that we can’t turn

around if that's the case.”

“We'll have plenty of time to get into the specifics of the dream some other time. Don't worry about it.”

“Why don't you sound like you're worried I'm going to take off at any minute anymore? Or worse yet, worried I won't take off?”

She shrugged again. “Because I'm not. You need to make a left up here.”

I followed her instructions and decided not to question this change of heart she'd had. It meant we were progressing, and I didn't want to risk said progress by asking her too much about it.

April went up to get Adi by herself, warning me that her sister would spend the entire day interrogating me if I went up there with her. They were back less than five minutes later.

Adi skipped up to the car, and April carried a backpack over her shoulder. I got out to help her with it and to load it into the trunk for her, but then Adi threw her arms around my waist and hugged me.

“Hi, Chris. I'm so excited for today. What are we going to do?”

I was taken aback by the hug, but I returned it and grinned at her. “I thought we could go to the Statue of Liberty? Have you ever been?”

She looked up at me with wide eyes and shook her head. “Never but I've always wanted to go.”

“Then I'm honored to be taking you there for the first time.” I dipped my head at the car. “You ready? The lines can get pretty long, so the earlier we get there, the better.”

“This is going to be so cool,” she exclaimed, practically diving in when I opened the door for her.

We chatted about what Adi had gotten up to with her aunt the night before on our way to the statue.

April eventually turned toward me after we parked and got in line for the ferry. “What made you think of this? It really is a pretty cool idea for a day out. I just don’t think so many locals do it.”

“I like to come here every once in a while.” I looked out at all the boats on the water and the masses of people around us. “My father was an immigrant, and when he arrived here, he came right by this statue. Visiting it reminds me of my roots and the measures he went to so we could have a future here.”

Her eyebrows went up. “I never knew that.”

“I don’t talk about him much,” I said, then pointed at a souvenir stand. “How about we go get something to remember the day by?”

“Yes,” Adi replied without hesitating for a second.

April smiled but nodded. “You two go ahead. I’ll keep our place in line.”

“Let’s go shopping.” I took Adi’s hand to make sure she didn’t get lost in the crowd, then proceeded to deck her out in everything from a shirt, hat, and flag to a snow globe, pen, and miniature model of the statue.

When we got back to April, it was almost our turn for the ferry. She glanced at all of Adi’s choices and narrowed her eyes. “I’m going to pay you back for that.”

“No way. Get your own gifts for her. Those are mine.”

She sighed but eventually just thanked me and let it go. As we found space for ourselves on the upper deck at the very front of the ferry, Adi pressed her chest to the railing with April and me behind her. I slung my arm casually over April’s shoulders and she burrowed into my side.

Undoubtedly, this gave us the appearance of a family, but I didn’t give a fuck. I kind of liked it.

April and I pointed out landmarks to Adi and talked about them. Then we each took one of her hands when we reached the island. We spent the day learning about each other’s histories and running around together.

We ate corn dogs, drank lemonade, and laughed, and when we got back to the city, we decided to act like tourists for a little longer. When we were eventually done, I slid my hands into my pockets as we walked down the sidewalk to my car.

“Next on the agenda is dinner,” I said to April. “You’re going to love the place I chose.”

She glanced down at her jeans. “I’m not exactly dressed for a fancy dinner. Neither is Adi.”

I rolled my eyes at her and grinned. “Oh, ye of little faith. It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing. The only thing that matters is whether you’re still up for dinner after the day we had.”

“I’m starving,” Adi said. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” I whistled the rest of the way to the car, eager to see what they thought about what I’d done.

Pulling out all the stops wasn’t something I did often, but it was something I couldn’t seem to stop doing for them. I’d had to pull some strings again to make my plan work, but I was sure it would be worth it.

Unless it was all a bit too much for April.

Either way, the plan was in motion and I would just have to roll with the punches. The restaurant I’d chosen was only a few miles away, but it took us a while to get there with the traffic.

April started playing a game with Adi while I found myself marveling at how different she was once she defrosted. She was finally lowering all those guards without snapping them back up again a few minutes later.

Now all I had to do was hope I hadn’t taken it a step too far with dinner. I’d always wanted to do this, though. Having Adi with us had just given me an excuse.

“Is this a theater?” April asked when I parked in the designated spot that had been reserved for us right outside the doors. Her eyes were wide as she took in the neon lights and

old-school facade. “Why are our names on the sign?” She pivoted in her seat to face me. “What did you do?”

“I booked the place out for the night.” I grinned. “It is a theater, but it’s also a restaurant. The servers perform pretty much any song you request, but their favorites are classic Broadway and pop. Adi said she liked pop, so I figured she might like belting out a few tunes.”

“I’ve heard of this place,” April breathed, her gaze never leaving mine. “It takes weeks to get a table.”

“I play poker with one of the owners every couple of months.” I shrugged. “He owed me a favor.”

“So you booked out the entire place just for us?” Her brows arched but there was excitement shining in her eyes.

“Yep. You ready to do some singing?”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and smiled as she pulled on her door handle. “You’re going to be so sorry you ever asked me that question. We’re all going home with bleeding ears tonight, but it’s going to be so much fun until then.”

Practically flying out of the car, she laughed and let out a sound that wasn’t at all like her. My brows went up, and I twisted around in my seat to face Adi.

“Do you know what’s going on?”

She nodded, giggling as she looked out the window at her mother. “Your ears really are going to bleed, but she loves stuff like this. So do I. I hope you’re ready.”

Both of them kept hoping I was ready. I kept telling them I was, but now I was getting to the point where I was starting to look forward to knowing what they hoped I was ready for.

CHAPTER 20



APRIL

“I haven’t had this much fun in forever.” I grinned at Chris and collapsed on my seat across from him. “Thank you for this. It’s incredible.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you don’t find it too extravagant that I booked the place out. I just thought if I was going to call in a favor, I might as well go all out.”

“Oh, it’s totally too extravagant, but it’s also amazing. I’m not about to complain when Adi’s smiling like that.” I jerked my head in her direction.

The servers had formed a line on either side of her on stage and were letting her take the lead in performing a song from her favorite musical. “She’s having a blast.”

He turned slightly in his seat to have a better view. “I’ve accomplished my mission then. Are you going to go up there with her again?”

I wiped my brow with the back of my hand and shook my head. “Not right this minute. I need some water and maybe an energy drink.”

His eyes lit up with amusement when he brought them back to mine, and he pushed a bottle of water across the table and arched a brow. “An energy drink, huh? Age catching up to you?”

My eyes widened in surprise. Then I stuck my tongue out at him before I could think better of it. “Pretty sure you’re older than me. Is that why you haven’t been up there at all?”

“I’m more of an after-dinner, headline performer,” he said, totally deadpan in his delivery. Only the slight crinkling of the corners of his eyes afterward let me know he was trying not to laugh.

“In that case, I’ll be awaiting your performance with great anticipation.” I sat back in the plush upholstered chair that was more comfortable than any seat I’d had in a restaurant before, and I snagged a piece of bread from the basket between us. “What song are you going to perform?”

He smirked. “That’s for me to know and for you to wait for with great anticipation.”

“Fine.” I pretended to pout but it only lasted for a second. I was having too much fun to keep from smiling for longer than that. “As long as it’s Broadway or Pop and not Rock, you’ll fit right in.”

“I could sing heavy metal and I’d still fit right in,” he said confidently. “What’s your next choice of song?”

“I’ll see what I’m in the mood for after my break.” I propped my forearms on the table and leaned in, capturing his gaze with my own. “For now, I’d like to get to know you better. We haven’t had much time to speak one on one recently.”

“What would you like to know?” He spread his arms out over the back of the booth with an easy smile. “Ask me anything.”

“You mentioned your father immigrated here. It sounds like an interesting story. I’d love to hear more about him, where he came from, and if he’s happy here now.”

His expression shuttered and he didn’t move a muscle except for a small twitch below his jaw. “Let’s leave that topic for another day. We’re having a good time. I’d rather not get into it now.”

The reply puzzled me, but if anyone understood that certain topics were off-limits when one was having a good time, it was me. “Has Adi told you she’s going back to school soon?”

Chris's eyebrows rose like he was surprised by the sudden change of topic, but then a relieved expression swept across his features and he relaxed once more.

"No, she hasn't." He grinned. "Is she excited?"

"Very much so." I rolled my eyes. "You'd swear being at home with me has been a hardship. Don't kids usually beg to stay home from school?"

He shrugged, glancing at her having a ball up onstage again. "Some kids, maybe. If Adi's dedication to her therapy is any indication of her approach to school, I can understand why she'd be eager to get back."

"She really is." I turned away from him to look at Adi as well. I didn't think I'd ever seen a wider smile on my daughter's face.

In fact, despite her injury, she'd been happier than ever since Chris had come into our lives. It made me a little worried that she might be getting too attached to him.

And it wasn't just her getting attached either.

But I refused to let a little worry get in the way of our evening together. Chris had gone all out for us. If I kept thinking about what the fallout might be if he should suddenly be done with us once Adi's therapy was completed, I was going to ruin the effort he'd gone through.

I also didn't truly believe it would happen that way. Adi needed a good, stable male figure she could depend on to look up to in her life, and Chris looked like he might just be that person.

He and I talked while Adi performed with the servers. Once dinner had been served and I'd eaten more than one person should be able to fit in, Chris finally took the stage.

The song he chose was a classic, and although he didn't have the best voice I'd ever heard, he managed to carry a tune just fine. The fact that he never took his eyes off us while singing about how he was standing before us in the dark, knowing this was his chance to show his heart might have

contributed to my feeling that it was the best performance ever.

Even I got teary, and Adi and I both hugged him when he came back to the booth. We performed another song each before it was time for us to hang up the old microphones.

It wasn't that late by the time we left the restaurant, but Adi was exhausted after all the excitement and so was I. Chris helped her into the backseat before coming around and closing my door.

He winked when he dropped into the driver's seat beside me. "Thanks for letting me do that for once. You always seem to have it sorted before I can get to you."

"You're welcome." I returned his wink, even though I felt a little salacious doing it, and was surprised when the move elicited a chuckle.

After he'd eased us into the light traffic around the restaurant, he met my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Does that mean this was officially a date?"

"You booked out an entire restaurant for us. I'd say that qualifies as a date."

His grin widened. "Excellent. I was hoping you'd say that. I'm supposed to wait a few days before I talk to you again now, right?"

"Traditionally." I turned my back on the city lights beyond the window and studied the handsome profile of my date instead. With his chiseled features and lean muscles, he really made for quite the sight illuminated by the ambient light from outside. "I don't subscribe to the traditional rules of dating, though."

"How so?" He tilted his head but kept his eyes on the road.

"I'd like to spend some time with you. Just the two of us. Interested?" My voice was quiet in an attempt to keep the conversation private but Adi was staring absently out the window anyway. I was pretty sure she was sleeping with her eyes open.

Chris nodded in response to my question, drawing my attention back to him. “Sure. I’d love to. When?”

“If you’ve got tomorrow night open, why don’t you come over to my place? I’ll cook us dinner and we can talk.”

He frowned. “Talk? That doesn’t sound good. Am I in trouble?”

“Not yet,” I joked. “Talking doesn’t always have to mean something bad, you know?”

“It doesn’t have to but it usually does.”

“True.” I reached out and put my hand over his on the shifter. “It’s nothing bad in this case. I promise. I’d just like to spend some time with you and I haven’t cooked for anyone but my sister and Adi in ages.”

Booking out a restaurant didn’t exactly fit in my budget but I had some skills in the kitchen to show off. It wouldn’t be anywhere near as fancy, but Chris flipped his hand over to take mine, then smiled at me before turning his attention back on the road.

“That sounds great,” he said. “What time?”

“Seven?” I suggested, a flurry of butterflies suddenly appearing in my stomach. I had just successfully asked a handsome guy out on a date. *Never thought I’d do that again.*

When he smiled at me, one of the butterflies lodged itself in my throat while another made it all the way to my chest cavity and started causing havoc there.

“What can I bring?” he asked, that same smile still in place.

I shook my head. “Nothing. You’ve done way more than enough. It’s my turn to spoil you now.”

“Okay.” He didn’t argue but brought my hand up to his lips to kiss the back of it before he let it go. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Same.”

This time when Chris dropped us off, Adi didn't make any comments about him kissing me. She hugged him tightly instead and looked up at him like he'd personally hung the moon. "Thank you for tonight."

"You're welcome, sweetheart." He ruffled her hair. "See you soon, okay?"

"Okay. Good night." After giving him a wave, she headed inside and called over her shoulder. "I'll brush my teeth and put on my pajamas, Mommy."

Chris reached for my hand again once she'd disappeared inside, giving me a firm but gentle tug toward him. I could've easily stood my ground, but I didn't. I landed against his hard chest with one hand in his and the other flying to his shoulder.

It was such a romantic moment that Luna would have swooned, while I should've been disgusted by it. I wasn't, though. Not in the least.

As he leaned down and searched my eyes, I pushed up on my toes and kissed him like a real girly heroine might have. The kiss was soft and sweet.

Unfortunately, he let me go seconds later. "Good night, April. I'll see you tomorrow."

Then he spun around and marched to the stairwell, shooting me a last smirk before he, too, disappeared. I stood in the doorway for another minute or so trying to get my racing heart under control and cursing it for racing at all.

Adi was already in bed when I got to her room, her nose buried in a book from her school. She looked up when she heard me coming in.

"That was an awesome night." She grinned but her eyes didn't quite lift the way they should have. "Do you think Chris will take us there again?"

I thought Chris would take her wherever she wanted to go whenever she wanted to go there, but I didn't say so. The whole attachment thing lurked at the back of my mind, and I didn't necessarily want to encourage it.

“We can always ask,” I replied. “Would you like to go there again?”

She nodded, covering her mouth as she stretched out on a yawn. “I’d love to.”

“Then we’ll ask him. Want me to read with you for a while?”

“Nah. I don’t think I’m going to read much longer. I only read while I was waiting for you. I’m too tired.” She shrugged her little shoulders, her tired gaze filled with a sad kind of curiosity as she closed her book. “Mommy?”

“Yes, baby?” My head might still have been in the clouds because of that kiss, but it came crashing back down to earth at the next words out of her mouth.

“Why isn’t Daddy more like Chris?”

She might as well have shot an arrow straight through my heart. I sucked in a breath, my head already shaking even though I had no idea how to answer her.

Eventually, I settled for the truth. “I don’t have an answer for that, baby. People are just different, I guess. I’m sorry. I wish there was something else I could tell you.”

There were so many things I could tell her, but none of them were good. Despite everything, I wouldn’t say those things to her now. She wouldn’t understand, and I was afraid she’d think I regretted having her with Craig if she knew how much I regretted ever trying to make a life with him.

Adi was the best thing that had ever happened to me regardless of the relationship she had been born of. Maybe one day when she was older and she asked the right questions, I could be completely honest with her.

For now? There really was nothing more to say.

CHAPTER 21



CHRIS

When I walked into the therapy center on Monday, I stopped when I realized there was someone in there already. A man stood near the door to the office with his back turned to me. It almost looked like he was trying to peek into it through the window overlooking the floor.

What he hoped to find in there, I had no idea. Patient files were stored away every afternoon and there was nothing of interest or value in there otherwise.

I also had no clue how he'd gotten in, considering that Hunter didn't seem to be around and usually patients stayed in the waiting room until one of us called them in. I cleared my throat to announce my arrival and let the door bang shut behind me.

"Excuse me. Can I help you?"

The man spun around, and his dark eyes narrowed as he zeroed in on me. I recognized the leather cut at the same moment I saw his face.

"I've heard you're treating my daughter here," Craig, April's ex, said. "I came to check you out. Make sure this is a safe place for her."

His tone held a hint of malice that was impossible to miss, but I wasn't worried about it. I'd been itching to punch this guy for weeks now. Maybe he'd give me a second chance to do it.

I strode up to him, leaving only a few feet of space between our chests. "I am treating her. You're welcome to

check out the facility, but I can assure you that the place is safe.”

He snorted and cracked his knuckles in his fist. “Of course you’d say that. What I need is an unbiased referral from a real doctor saying you’re not some hack who’s only hurting her.”

“Some hack who’s only hurting her?” My brows lifted. “I believe there’s only one of those in this room right now, and it’s not me. Why did you really come here, Craig?”

“I’ve already told you I came to check out the place my daughter will be treated in. I’m entitled to that, aren’t I?”

“She won’t *be* treated here. She already *is* receiving treatment here and she has been for more than a month. Why come here now?”

He took a step forward, presumably in another attempt to intimidate me. If only he knew how bored I was by his routine, he wouldn’t have bothered. I’d known guys like him all my life, and I could take care of myself.

Puffing up his chest and banging on it wouldn’t scare me. The gleam in his eye was familiar, too. He meant to strike the fear of God into me.

Sorry, buddy. That ain’t happening.

“I came because I heard you’ve been hanging around with my wife and my kid. Looked into it and found out you’re also the doctor treating her.”

“So?” I exhaled through my nostrils, silently praying that none of our actual patients walked in right then.

I could handle Craig, but this was supposed to be a place of comfort, healing, and positivity. We did our very best to keep all the shit that had happened to most of our patients in other areas of this hospital out of the room.

If they came in to find a crazy macho biker threatening me, we’d have some work to do to get the levels of calm back to where they should be.

Craig stabbed a meaty finger into my chest. “So? So I don’t want you talking to my wife, you pretentious fuck.”

“Ex-wife,” I corrected, and his face turned the color of a ripe eggplant. “You’re no longer married to her and your daughter has been in therapy with me for weeks, as I’ve said before. If you have any questions about her treatment, please direct them to my office and my assistant will be sure to update you in due course.”

“Bullshit. I want answers from you right now, and while you’re at it, stop talking to my wife.” His finger dug into my pec.

I removed it by swatting it away like it was nothing more than an annoying mosquito. “I’ll do whatever I see fit. I can’t provide comprehensive updates about patients during my appointment hours. Email my office and we’ll have the feedback sent to you just as soon as we get around to it.”

Which wouldn’t be soon, but the hospital had a policy surrounding updates where the care of minor children was concerned. I wasn’t allowed to turn the parents down outright unless very specific sets of circumstances were present. And none of them were present in this instance.

As much of an asshole and as shitty a father as Craig was, he had every right to request information from the physician treating his daughter. Even if he was only there to lay down the law regarding my interactions with April.

He sneered at me. “I’m not waiting around for a report while you fuck my wife. You will stay away from her.”

I didn’t bother pointing out their marriage status to him again. The guy was acting like a Jack Russell who’d pissed on a toy. “April will do as she pleases, as will I.”

Heavy footsteps entering the room had both of us turning toward the door. Hunter stood just inside, frowning and seemingly sizing the other man up.

Recognition flashed in his eyes a second later, and he dropped his duffel bag on the floor. “Is there a problem in here?”

“I see it’s time for me to go.” Craig took a step back from me but glared as he pointed at my chest. “It would be a shame

if you lost your license for dating inside the office. Let's not go down that road."

He held my gaze for another beat, triumph in his eyes and the way his brows jumped. When he'd finally marched out the door muttering something about how he could've fucked up the giant if he'd wanted to, Hunter and I exchanged a look.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not sure. I think it was just meant to be a warning."

"About April?" As he came back up after he grabbed his duffel bag off the floor, he faced me and scratched his head. "I thought they've been divorced for years."

"They have, but he mentioned something about having heard we were spending time together. It doesn't seem like he was too happy about knowing she might be seeing someone else."

"What'd you tell him?" He slung the bag over his shoulder and jerked his head toward the office. "I'm going to put my stuff down, so speak up."

"There's not much to say. I told him I'd do whatever I wanted and so would April. I'd have said the same thing even if it wasn't me she'd been on a date with."

"Sounds like you." He paused in the doorway and pitched his bag onto the couch from there. "You didn't tell him it was you, though, did you?"

"No, but I would've if you hadn't come in." I shrugged. "I'm not ashamed of her and we're not doing anything wrong."

"Doesn't make a difference to a guy like that." He scratched the back of his head. "I heard him saying something about his wife. I'm assuming he hasn't gotten remarried."

"Nope. He was talking about April."

Worry crept into his eyes as he crossed the room back to me. "You think he's delusional? Thinks they're still married?"

“It’s not that.” I released a heavy breath. “I think he got used to feeling like he was still in control of her somehow. She wasn’t dating, she was taking care of Adi all by herself, and he could come and go as he pleased.”

He whistled under his breath. “You really think that’s it?”

“I do.” The corners of my mouth pressed in. “Guys like that always seem to have an issue with control. They’re losers who fuck up everything they even look at, but they get off on feeling like they’re masters of their tiny little universes.”

“Look who paid attention during his psych classes,” he joked as he started up the tablet to check our schedule. “What was that he was saying about losing your license for dating in the office?”

“He doesn’t have any idea what he’s talking about. Don’t worry about it.”

He laughed. “Oh, I’m not. I know there are no rules about dating in this place. Hell, half the people who work here are hooking up, dating, or married.”

“I don’t think he knows that.”

“Well, as long as you know there’s nothing to worry about,” he said.

I glanced up toward the ceiling. “Yeah, I know. Thanks. Who’s up first this morning?”

“Lisa. She’s had her second round of surgery. There’s a note from the orthopedic surgeon saying we need to pay special attention to her lower back.”

“Got it. What’s next?”

Hunter took me through the rest of our day while we got the equipment ready for our first patient. She was a cheerful, middle-aged woman who worked hard, laughed a lot, and was a pleasure to have around. And exactly the kind of patient we’d lose if we went into private practice too soon.

I blew out a breath. The more Hunter and I talked about it, which was every damn day by now, the more I wanted it. All I

had to do was figure out how I could make a deal with the hospital so I could keep helping our patients and theirs.

In the meantime, the situation with Craig hovered in the back of my mind. I couldn't get over the feeling that he was planning something. I just didn't know what.

Whatever it was though, it couldn't be anything good. I needed to speak to April and warn her that he'd stopped by.

If he showed up at their next session, which he very well might, things could go south fast. Especially if he started spewing the same kind of shit he had this morning.

We had three more patients after Lisa before we had time for a short break. As soon as we were done with our last session, I headed to the office and called her.

"Hey, you," she said. "You calling to cancel on me for dinner tonight?"

"I wouldn't do that." I grinned despite the uneasiness in my gut. "I'm still looking forward to it."

"Did you call me just to tell me that?"

"No." I ran a hand through my hair, gripping the nape of my neck. "I'm calling about Craig actually. He came by to pay me a visit this morning."

There was a long pause on her end of the line. "What did he want?"

"He tried to threaten me. Did you say anything to him about us?"

"I haven't spoken to him since the hospital." Her voice was considerably cooler than it had been when she'd answered. "I don't plan on speaking to him anytime soon either. What did he say?"

I gave her the highlights, then sighed. "I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Something doesn't feel right with him."

"Nothing has ever felt right with him." She laughed but the sound was bitter. "Don't worry about him, all right? He's all

hot air. He has no idea what he's talking about. All he's doing is reaching."

"Yeah, I know." But it wasn't me I was worried about. "I can handle him, April. I just wanted to make sure I kept you in the loop."

"I'll see you tonight, Chris. Thanks for calling, but everything will be fine, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then. Say hi to Adi for me, okay?"

"Okay. Bye."

After she hung up, I stood there with my phone in my hand for another minute. Something was wrong with Craig, but only time would tell what it was.

Well, time and making sure I'm there when the shit hits the fan.

Hunter had been right. This relationship could become a hell of a lot more complicated than I'd bargained for. But I was strangely okay with that.

CHAPTER 22



APRIL

Keeping my cool while I was on the phone with Chris was a hell of a lot more difficult than I'd made it sound. I was fuming by the time we hung up.

Craig still hadn't called or texted to find out how Adi was doing, yet he somehow thought it was okay to show up at the hospital to threaten Chris? He forced our child onto the back of a motorcycle, injured her, and hadn't bothered to see her or even inquire about her health after. Now this?

It was downright ridiculous. The audacity of the man practically had steam coming out of my ears.

Despite all the stuff that had gone down between us way back then, this was still a new low. Even for him.

After he caused her injury, I'd at least have expected a phone call. God forbid he actually offer to help me pay the medical bills—an expense we wouldn't have had if not for him.

The bills might have been lower than I'd expected, but that didn't change the facts. He hadn't even asked how much it'd been. Besides, surely, he should've at least offered to chip in.

I'd learned my lesson with Craig a long time ago when it came to money, though. I hadn't asked him for help with the medical bills, and I wouldn't do so now.

Knowing that he wouldn't help and that I was the silly one for even thinking about how he should've chipped in didn't make me any less angry about the situation. If he'd come to

me to ask about Adi's therapy, I would've told him how it was going.

I might not have made it easy on him, but I wouldn't have withheld the information either. Well, not a lot of it.

For him to go to Chris when he was doing us a favor by treating her, and then to threaten him? That was beyond what I would've expected even from Craig.

I didn't even want to think about him still referring to me as his wife. It had been almost a damn decade since our divorce. He was so far over me it was like we'd never been together sometimes.

An endless parade of women had been on his arm all these years. My only response had been to wish them luck, and I never even did that out loud.

I'd never done anything to him to have him treat me the way he had—not that there would've been any excuse for what he'd done—but for him to keep trying to mess up my life was preposterous. And frankly, I was over it.

Fuck him and fuck the poor high horse he was riding in on. I'd had enough.

“Adi baby? Grab your backpack. We're going to Aunt Katie's.” I tossed my phone in my purse and tried taking deep breaths to regain my composure.

No matter what, I couldn't let Adi see how upset I was.

She popped her head into the kitchen a couple of minutes later with her backpack over her shoulders. “I thought we were going to build that puzzle?”

“We will. Later.”

I plucked up my keys and made my way to the door, making sure to lock it behind us. With our damn neighbors leaving the gate open all the time, there was no guarantee Craig couldn't get in here.

If he'd gone to see Chris, there was no telling what else he would do. Or what he was really up to.

I texted Katie to ask if she could watch Adi for me for an hour or so. Then we made our way to her place as fast as we could get there. Katie widened her eyes in a silent question when Adi breezed past her.

“I need to run a few errands,” I lied. “I’ll be back in a bit. I just need to take care of something.”

“April,” she warned. “I know when you’re lying to me and I know when you’re pissed. What’s going on?”

“Like I said, I just have something I need to take care of. See you later.”

If I stayed with Katie for even another minute to explain, she would talk me out of what I was about to do. I’d always been the impulsive hothead between the two of us. That was what had landed me with Craig in the first place.

For all of Katie’s faults and convictions, she was a lot more like Luna in that regard. They were patient, measured in their reactions. For every thought, they had two more before they acted on them.

Me? Except for when it came to Chris, I didn’t overthink things.

I embraced being an impulsive hothead. I was even fucking proud of it. Someone needed to stand up and tell people what they really thought, and I was happy to be that someone.

Craig was done fucking with me and he was done fucking with Adi. That manipulating son of a bitch wouldn’t bulldoze me again, and I sure as hell wasn’t about to let him screw up the first good thing that had come into our lives just because he was a controlling, jealous prick.

He had no right to be.

Not with me.

Not anymore.

When I left Katie’s building, I went straight to Craig’s mother’s house. He was living here now. I’d heard through the

grapevine that he'd lost his job—again—and had gotten kicked out by his last girlfriend.

Serves you right, asshole. The guy was a total freeloader. *Just ask the girl who worked to put him through school only to be cheated on and dumped a couple of months after he graduated.*

I pounded on the front door of the suburban shack and felt sorry for his mother that she was shackled to him for life. Apart from the fact that she indulged every whim and bought every excuse her darling boy told her, I didn't have any issue with the woman.

As long as she didn't try to get in my way today, it would stay that way. Thankfully, it didn't come to that.

The tattered door swung open to reveal none other than my stinking ex himself. He smirked when he saw me and grabbed his pathetic junk, making a disgusting thrusting movement with his hips.

“Finally came back for more, huh?”

“You wish,” I sneered, planting my hands on my hips. “I'm here to tell you to back the fuck off. You stay away from us, and you stay the fuck away from the hospital.”

“Why would I do that?” He let go of his stupid crotch and reached up to grip the top of the doorframe. “You don't want me near your precious pretty boy boyfriend? Is that it?”

“I don't want you near my daughter,” I yelled, feeling heat rushing to my cheeks. “You could've killed her the last time you took a supposed interest in her, you dumb dildo. I don't know why you're suddenly sniffing around the hospital, but just stay the fuck away.”

“Or what?” He lowered his voice, dropping his chin and scowling when he met my gaze. “What are you going to do about it, bitch? She's my daughter, too.”

“You donated sperm for her conception. That's about it.” I didn't step back or avert my eyes. “You're no father to her. You never have been and you never will be. Stop harassing us or I'll call the cops.”

“Well, if you don’t, sweetheart, I will.” He flicked his hand to indicate the neighbors’ houses. “This is going to be great for the custody battle. There I was, just sitting at home and minding my own business when the crazy mother of my child came to yell at me in the middle of the day.”

My heart nearly stopped at the mention of a custody battle, and my blood ran cold. But I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing the fear those words caused me.

I decided to call his bluff instead.

“You don’t have any money, Craig.” I laughed. “No money and no knowledge about legal proceedings. You’ll never take her away from me. No judge would let that happen.”

He smirked again, shoving his hands into his pockets. “You’re wrong, darlin’. I got a lawyer. He thinks I’ve got a good case.”

“You’ve got a good case?” My eyebrows went all the way up. “Your lawyer must be as dumb as you are.”

He cocked his head before he doubled over laughing. “The only dumb one here is you. Did you really think I’d ever let my little girl stay with a mentally unstable woman who got her injured?”

“You got her injured, asshole.” Unlike some other people, the angrier I got, the softer my voice became. “There are hospital records and staff who will testify for me.”

He laughed some more before straightening up to wipe his eyes. “You mean your boyfriend and his bodyguard? I got it on good authority that no judge will believe them. They got a conflict of interest.”

“No, they don’t. Neither do the paramedics or dozens of others who were working at the hospital that day.” My mind was racing now. Every bit of jargon I’d learned from legal dramas came flying out of my mouth. “I have years’ worth of records from her schools as evidence. I’ll get statements from every person who saw you at the hospital and the staff who treated her there. I’ll bury you in documentary proof that

you're a useless shitbag who wouldn't know a good father if one hit you in the face."

I was breathing so heavily that I was practically panting, and I could feel the heat from my cheeks all over my face now. My heart was frozen and my fingers had gone numb. At least half my vision had faded to red.

Craig, however, looked perfectly unaffected—just like the fucking psychopath he was. "Tell yourself whatever you need to if it'll help you sleep better at night, but you'll be hearing from my lawyer. I'm going to take full custody of Adi and there's nothing you can do about it."

A strangled scream died in my throat. I itched to smack him right through his smug face, but on the off chance that he really had hired a lawyer, I knew it wouldn't help my case.

Still, I couldn't think straight. I couldn't even breathe properly. But somehow, I managed to take a step closer to him to get in his face.

"Keep dreaming, asshole." I narrowed my eyes and stood up to my full, albeit not very imposing, height. "Just know that if you get so much as one day with her, I'll kill you. Or worse, I'll publish the pictures I still have of your tiny dick on every website from here to Timbuktu. You'll never live that down. I've got your face in some of them, *darlin'*."

Without another word but feeling somewhat vindicated at the horrified expression on his face, I spun around and stormed away from the douchebag. Come what may, I had the truth on my side.

That had to count for something.

CHAPTER 23



CHRIS

Dinner with April earlier this week had been good. It had been nice to get to spend some time with her alone. As much as I knew Adi was a part of the package if our relationship was to get serious and as much as I truly enjoyed getting to know the little girl, building a relationship with April meant wanting and having to spend time with her sometimes too.

Almost a week had passed since our dinner date, and I still caught myself grinning every so often at some of the jokes she'd made. When I'd arrived at her place, I'd still been worried about Craig having come to the hospital and what he might be planning.

April had waved my concerns off and told me she had it under control. I couldn't get it out of her how she had it under control but she'd assured me everything would be fine. We'd done some talking about him and how shitty he'd been to her, but eventually, we'd decided to stop wasting our time on him.

What followed had been a discovery of April in a different light to how I'd seen her before. I'd caught glimpses of her lighter, more carefree side, but I'd finally gotten a chance to experience it when it was her being that comfortable with only me.

As I lay in my bed on Friday morning with the sun barely peeking over the horizon, I let my mind wander to what had happened after dinner. April and I had a few drinks and had ended up necking on her couch, which had quickly turned to heavy petting but nothing more.

Fooling around without taking that final step was underrated, if anyone asked me. It didn't always have to be about the rush to the finish line. Just thinking about her moans and her sighs as she straddled me while grinding against my cock was making me hard all over again.

I ran my hand down the length of my torso and got comfortable on the bed, about to reach into my underwear when my phone buzzed. With a frustrated sigh, I flipped over onto my side to check the caller ID.

Hunter's name flashed on my screen, and the phone stopped buzzing only to start again. *Fuck.*

"What?" I snapped when I answered.

He chuckled. "Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Jesus."

I shoved my hand through my hair and rolled onto my back again, sending a piercing glare at the white ceiling above my head. "What do you want?"

"For you to meet me at the corner of Crescent and Cliff in an hour. No questions asked. Just come."

"Fine. I'll meet you there." I would've said pretty much anything to get him off the phone as soon as possible, but Hunter and I had a *no questions asked* policy. Which meant I had to be there.

But I had an hour.

My mind kept conjuring up images of April with her lips parted and her eyes half-lidded, her skirt ridden up and her head dropped back. It wouldn't take me long at all.

Hunter thankfully hung up after I agreed to meet him, and I got down to business before getting up to take a shower. I ended up getting to the address he'd sent me exactly one minute late and found him standing in front of an abandoned warehouse.

It was in an up-and-coming district with tons of warehouses just like this one that had been renovated already and tons more just waiting for someone to restore them.

Hunter grinned when I approached him, spreading his arms wide open as he turned in a slow circle.

“What do you think?” he asked.

I pulled my sunglasses off and dipped my head back to survey the wrecked building in front of me. The windows were blown out, the small garden overgrown, and there was probably an entire short story’s worth of graffiti on the walls, but it looked structurally sound at least.

“I like the neighborhood and I think the building could be a real investment once it’s fixed up. You looking at moving in?”

“*We’re* looking at moving in.” His grin grew even wider. “This is the new home of Hunter and Chris’s Building for Fixing People.”

I blinked back my surprise and took a step forward, seeing the building in an entirely new light. “We’ll keep working on the name, but this location could definitely work.”

“I knew it.” He punched the air and dangled a set of keys. “Want to take the grand tour?”

“In a minute.” I turned to him, frowning as I locked my gaze with his. “Did you buy this place?”

“Yes.” He gave me a guilty smile. “I was meeting with the realtor the other day when I left early.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mentally trying to calculate how much a building like this would have set him back, a deep sense of guilt came over me. “We could’ve bought it together.”

Hunter’s ginger curls bounced from the force with which he shook his head. “No. Look, I know you’ve got a lot of money but I also wanted to contribute something to the business.”

“Your skills weren’t enough?”

He sighed. “My skills aren’t what’s going to bring in the patients. Yours will. Plus, we’ll have to buy all the equipment and office supplies. I knew you wouldn’t let me chip in for

those. This place needs some work, but we can do it ourselves. If you don't like it—”

“No, I love it.” I grinned at my friend and held out my hand for him to shake. “We'll do the work ourselves, but whatever materials we need are on me. Deal?”

He slapped his beefy palm against mine and nodded. “Deal. I'm pretty tapped out now anyway.”

“Yeah, we're also going to talk about that.” Releasing his hand as I took a step back, I gestured toward the cracked concrete path that led to the front doors. “How about that tour?”

“I'll lead the way.”

I fell into step behind him, already trying to picture what the outside of the building would look like once we were done with it. Thousands of ideas raced through my head, but first, we needed to figure out what to do about our patients.

“I've been thinking about making a deal with the hospital to outsource the physical therapy department to us,” I said. “They've been complaining about all the space we take up for ages. I just need to set a meeting with the board to discuss it.”

“You think they'll go for it?” He twisted around to glance at me while turning the key in the lock. “I've been trying to come up with ways for us to take our patients with us, but I've come up dry so far. Once I saw this place though, I couldn't get it out of my head. I figured since it needs so much work, we have months before we'd be able to move in anyway.”

“It sure won't happen overnight,” I agreed, narrowing my eyes as I thought. “I'll have to get right onto making that deal. We might need months to get this place in shape, but it's also going to take some time negotiating with them.”

“I knew you'd figure something out.” Hunter stepped inside and gave me a stupid little bow as I followed. “Welcome to your new humble abode, doctor. I hope you'll be happy here.”

I punched him in the shoulder and rolled my eyes. “*Our* humble abode. If we're really doing this, we're going to be

fifty-fifty partners.”

He raised both of his eyebrows. “That hardly seems fair to you.”

“It’s more than fair,” I said firmly, planting my feet and looking at him expectantly. “Are we in agreement because, if not, the tour will have to wait until we are.”

His eyes darted from one of mine to the other, and he suddenly barreled forward and enveloped me in a giant, backslapping hug. “I never expected it, but yes, we’re in agreement.”

“Great.” I gave him a final thud before I stepped away. “Let’s get this show on the road then. Tell me what I’m looking at.”

The ground level was one massive, cavernous space. An industrial-looking walkway ran around two thirds of the top with doors leading off it at odd intervals. There was a single set of steel stairs to the far left. Piles of discarded rubble, machinery in various states of disrepair, and dirt covered the floor.

All things considered, it could have been a lot worse. Windows high up in the walls let in some natural light, and once the place was cleaned up, I could see how well it would work for our purposes.

Hunter took about ten large paces forward and swung his arms out. “I was thinking we could install some sort of divider here to have the reception area facing the street and the therapy floor behind it.”

“That’s a good idea. We wouldn’t want people from the street being able to see our patients in the middle of their sessions.” I walked toward him and stopped about three paces away. “There could be a reception desk around here somewhere with security on either side of it, as well as at the front doors.”

He shot me a grin. “Now you’re talking. I was worried it would be more difficult to get you to buy into this plan.”

“I bought into this plan months ago. It was only the patients we’d be leaving behind that worried me, but this is close enough to the hospital that we’d easily be able to commute if necessary for emergency situations.

“Exactly.” He gestured toward the upper level. “We could have our offices and storage up there, but I also thought we could have a playroom for kids who need to wait for their parents and a waiting room for parents who’d like to have coffee while their kids are in their sessions.”

“Great ideas.” I took a deep breath as I envisioned what he had just described. “This space is fucking perfect. Thank you for finding it.”

“It was the least I could do. It’s going to cost you some money to get it into shape but I’ll—”

“Fifty-fifty, remember?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “But you’re going to be investing a lot more than me if you take the renovations and equipment into consideration. Maybe I should look for some secondhand equipment to even things out.”

I waved him off. “Nope, we wanted a state-of-the-art facility and that’s what we’re going to have. You found this place for us, Hunter. That’s already more than doing your share. You’re also going to be running the business side of things. We already agreed to being fifty-fifty partners. There’s no backing out now.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I won’t.” Without a doubt, I knew Hunter more than deserved to be an equal partner. “Let’s check out the upstairs. Then we’re having lunch to celebrate. I’m buying.”

“If you’re buying, who am I to say no?” He skirted around a pile of what appeared to be discarded building supplies and headed for the stairs. “Cleaning this place up is going to be a bitch.”

“I’ll get an industrial cleaning crew in. They’ll get it done sooner and better than we could. This place is going to need

more than a couple of guys with brooms and mops if it's going to pass for a medical facility.”

“Good point.”

Our footsteps echoed on the metal stairs as we ascended. When we got to the top, Hunter paused to prop his forearms against the railing and peer down at what would become the heart of our practice.

“I think we're going to do well here,” he said.

“Yeah. Me too.” It was only a little better than a dump at the moment, but in a few months, we could be up and running with barely a memory of what it looked like today. “We should take some pictures of our progress for the reception area.”

“I doubt anyone but us will be interested in that.”

I shrugged. “But it's our space now, right? It doesn't matter what anyone else is interested in.”

“Really, no one else?” he asked with a teasing note to his voice. “Not even April? If she tells you it's a tacky idea, will you still do it?”

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes, chuckled, and stepped away from the railing. “If you say so. I kind of thought you were going to give half of your half to your new wife, which would mean she could take down our tacky crap.”

“Let's just get to work on the building. We can get April to weigh in on the tacky crap later if you're so intent on having her as a partner.” I was joking, but I also instantly imagined a sweeping front desk with her sitting behind it.

I smiled. *That would definitely be a sight I could get used to seeing every morning.*

CHAPTER 24



APRIL

“**W**hat do you want to do today, baby?” I asked Adi on Saturday morning. We’d just had breakfast and were lounging around after doing the dishes.

Neither of us would be content with sitting still for very long, though. It just wasn’t us.

Adi lifted her shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe we should find out what Luna and Cyrus are up to? I miss them.”

“They’re both working.” One of the things that hadn’t changed about my friend since she’d married her Prince Charming was her work ethic. They’d hired people to help out whenever they weren’t in the city, but otherwise, she still insisted on working full time.

Few people ever thought about what happened after the happily-ever-after, but for Luna, it had really been everything she’d ever wanted. She had a loving, devoted husband who made her laugh and, much to my disappointment, was her best friend. It didn’t hurt that he was hot as hell or loaded either, but she refused to admit that had anything to do with it.

She got to travel and she’d also gotten to not only keep her flower shop but expand it. She and Cyrus had worked together to turn her into one of the most sought-after florists in the city for weddings and functions.

Her happily-ever-after had really seen every one of her dreams coming true—and then some. Unfortunately, that now meant that I had to share her with not only Cyrus but every starry-eyed bride in the city.

They vied for her attention and she gave it to them since she adored love and weddings even more now than she had before. I hadn't even known it could be possible for her, but it had been, and it had happened.

Where I used to see her a few times a week, I now had to make do with once every few weeks. Well, except for that time right after the accident when she'd popped in every day.

It had taken some adjusting on my part, but she was so happy that I really couldn't complain about the time-sharing. It was the natural course of life, I supposed.

Adi snapped me out of my reverie when she got off the couch. I looked up at her, frowning when she started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear the knocking?"

"Nope." I jumped up and motioned for her to stay behind me. With that fucking gate downstairs having been open again this morning, God only knew who could be at the other side. Just in case it was Craig or one of his buddies, I didn't want Adi anywhere within grabbing distance.

"Who is it?" I called once I reached the door.

"Chris."

Unexpected warmth spread through my chest at the sound of his voice. I undid the latch with shaky fingers and smiled as I stepped back to let him in.

"Hey."

He grinned, holding up two gorgeous bouquets of flowers. "Good morning, ladies. Happy Saturday."

Adi came out from behind me and squealed when he handed a bouquet to her. She brought it to her nose immediately and inhaled deeply. "These are so pretty. Did you get them from Luna? She knows Gerbera daisies are my favorite."

Confusion flicked across Chris's eyes, but he shook his head. "I didn't know they were your favorite or that I could get flowers from Luna, but I'll keep that in mind."

He brushed a chaste kiss against my cheek before stepping into the apartment and pressing the other bouquet into my hands.

"Thank you," I murmured. "These are beautiful. What's the occasion?"

"I wanted to show you something," he said. "Are you available today?"

"We sure are." Adi beamed at him, clutching the flowers to her chest. "What do you want to show us?"

"Something I'm really excited about. I thought I'd bring the flowers to help butter you up so you would say yes."

"As if you need to butter us up." I rolled my eyes, laughing as I shut the door. "We haven't said no to you yet, have we? Actually, now that I think about it, we should say no sometime. Aren't we supposed to be playing hard to get?"

"Nope." He winked as he passed me, then scooped Adi up for a hug. "I like you just the way you are. So what do you say? Will you come with me? No questions asked?"

His green eyes were lit up with excitement when he glanced at me after setting my daughter back down on her feet. As he straightened up, he came to stand next to me, so close that our arms touched.

Goosebumps raced across my skin, and I sighed when I realized today wasn't going to be the day when I'd start playing hard to get with him. "I'm not good at no questions asked, but we'll come with you."

"Thank you." He jerked his head toward the door. "Are you ready to go now, or did you have something to do before we can leave?"

"Hold your horses, cowboy." I held up my flowers. "Somebody brought us these. I'd better get them in some water before we go anywhere. Luna will never forgive me if I

let bouquets like this wither and dry out the same minute we get them.”

“Luna again?” he asked, nudging his shoulder into mine. “I feel like I need to meet the mythical Luna. She keeps coming up.”

My hands trembled a little at the thought of introducing Chris to the power couple. They’d both go into overdrive and would probably be planning our wedding for the week after. Call me crazy, but I wasn’t even close to ready to even think about getting married again.

As much as I liked Chris, this was all very new. Cyrus and Luna might just be a little intense in their excitement about meeting someone I was dating.

“Yeah, I’ll find out when they’re available. They’re pretty busy.” I held my hand out for Adi’s bouquet. “I’ll go get these in vases. You put on some shoes and we’ll meet you at the door.”

Chris came to the kitchen with me, leaning with his hip against the counter while I fished out two vases from a trip to Brazil Luna had given me for Christmas last year.

“What are they so busy with? It’s okay if it’s just that you don’t want me to meet them yet.”

“They’re busy people,” I said vaguely. “Traveling, working, fu—” I cut myself off and cleared my throat. Luna would kill me if I actually said *fucking* to someone she didn’t even know. “Fun.”

“Fun?” Chris laughed, arching a brow while I filled the vases with water. “Is that what the cool kids are calling it these days?”

I shrugged but I couldn’t quite hide my smile. “I wouldn’t know. I’m not one of the cool kids. Anyway, I’m sure they’d love to meet you too, but I’m afraid meeting them would send you running for the hills.”

“Would I be the one running for the hills, or would you?” He tilted his head to the side, giving me a meaningful look before taking one of the vases and dumping a bouquet into it.

“Luna would also kill you if she saw you treating flowers that way, so maybe you wouldn’t be running for the hills. Maybe Cyrus would just be having his henchman burying you in them.”

He chuckled but moved forward until he was right in front of me. He took the second vase out of my hands and gently set it down on the counter beside us. He brought his palms to my hips and splayed his fingers across my back, tugging me closer to him.

Once I was there, he lowered his head to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “I wouldn’t run for the hills unless you were running with me, April. I don’t know where this is going either, and I don’t want to scare you off, but you don’t have to be so afraid all the time that I’m going to disappear in a puff of smoke. I thought we’d established that.”

“We have but...” I trailed off when I heard Adi’s bedroom door closing. “We’d better go.”

I moved out of his grasp and went to hunt for my purse, wondering why my heart was like putty in this guy’s hands. Any other guy who tried saying something like that to me, I’d laugh in his face and probably mock him just a little bit.

But with Chris? The damn butterflies were back. *I’m not going to disappear in a puff of smoke.*

I liked the sound of that.

Or at least, I did until we got to the building he wanted to show us. An ominous feeling in my stomach squished all the butterflies.

A realtor’s sign with a SOLD sticker hung from a stand planted in the overgrown grass. “What is this place?”

“It’s my new practice.” He grinned, slinging his one arm across my shoulders and the other over Adi’s. “What do you think?”

“You’re leaving the hospital?” My tummy sank. “When?”

“It’s going to take us months to renovate this place,” he said cheerfully. “I’ll also probably remain on staff there in

some capacity for at least the first couple of months after we leave. I'm working on a deal with the board, but until I know for sure it'll work, I won't leave anyone high and dry."

"I'm proud of you," I said but my throat felt like it was closing. I really hadn't seen this one coming. I wasn't a clingy, needy little sap, though. Rallying mentally, I even managed to force a smile. "Really, I'm so proud of you. This is going to be great."

"Yeah, it should be." He turned his head and waited for me to do the same, then looked into my eyes with something that looked a lot like hope. "Would you come work for us when we get the place up and running?"

"Seriously?" I felt my jaw loosening.

He nodded. "Seriously."

I glanced up at the building and then back at him, finding him still looking at me. A hesitant smile formed on my lips. "I'll have to weigh my options."

"I'll take it." He nodded in the direction of what could best be described as an abandoned warehouse. "I won't give you the tour now. The cleaners still have to come in. Once they're done, I'd love to show you around."

"I'd love to see it," Adi said. "I think it'll be very cool to work here."

"I'm glad you agree." He smiled at her. "How do you feel about celebratory ice cream? There's a place just around the corner that I think will help me convince your mom to say yes to my offer."

The ominous feeling dissipated somewhat. Just because he was leaving the hospital didn't mean he was already going back on the promise he'd made less than half an hour ago.

He wasn't disappearing into a puff of smoke, even if the warehouse would've been a pretty cool place for a magic trick like that.

Watching him and Adi together, I couldn't deny that the immediate disappointment I felt over him leaving the hospital

might have been a touch of an overreaction. I was so used to people leaving me or just plain leaving me behind that I'd automatically assumed the worst.

But he'd brought us here when he'd only found out about the place himself yesterday apparently. He wanted us to be a part of it, to celebrate with him, and to stick by him when he did it.

That's what family is supposed to do, right?

My head jerked when I realized I'd just thought of him as family. But I had. That was what he was starting to feel like, and I had to admit that I kind of liked the feeling.

CHAPTER 25



CHRIS

April was pale when they came in for Adi's therapy session. As soon as I saw her, I knew something was wrong.

Not only was she pale, but her eyes seemed like they'd been stuck open with invisible sticky tape, and her mouth was slightly open like she'd forgotten how to close it. A mostly dormant protective instinct roared to life deep down inside me, and my fingers curled into my palms.

Hunter noticed April's expression too. He frowned at her when they pushed through the doors, then elbowed me in the side and bent his head closer to mine. "Go talk to her. I've got Adi."

"Thanks." I met them a little more than halfway across the room, smiling at Adi when I reached them. "Hey, sweetheart. I need to have a chat with your mom real quick. Hunter's ready to start warming up with you."

"Okay." She gave me a hug around the waist before she released me and fist-bumped with Hunter. "Hi, Hunter."

The two of them got along like a house on fire, and he had her in hysterics almost immediately. April, however, looked like she might be about to start crying.

"Whatever it is we need to talk about, could we not do it today?" she asked, her eyes tinted with a red so watery that it didn't take a genius to figure out she was close to tears.

I took her hand and guided her to the office, closing the door and dropping the blinds for privacy. "What happened?"

“Nothing,” she said without lifting her gaze to mine. She collapsed in the chair and immediately hung her head, covering her face with her hands. “Okay, it’s not nothing. It’s Craig.”

That protective instinct growled and red spots danced across my vision. “What did he do now?”

“I thought he was bluffing,” she said so softly it was almost like she’d said it to herself.

With two strides, I was in front of her, sinking down to my haunches. My pulse started to spike and I felt the sudden urge to break something—or someone.

“Bluffing about what?”

She released a shuddering breath into her hands before she looked up. “He’s going to take me to court.”

“What for?”

Tears glistened in her eyes as her shoulders slumped. “For Adi. When he first told me he was going to sue for full custody, I really thought he was bluffing. But I just got a message from someone claiming to be a lawyer who wants me to call them.”

I scooted forward on my knees to wrap my arms around her. “He’ll never get custody. Too much bad shit has happened with him. His employment record is spotty, he’s never supported her, and he hardly ever sees her.”

“I know.” She buried her head in the crook of my neck. “The truth and the evidence should support my case but I wouldn’t be able to present that case if I don’t have a good lawyer. I can’t afford any lawyer, never mind a good one. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’re not alone in this, April,” I murmured, lifting a hand to stroke her hair. “I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry. I’ll find us the best lawyer in the city.”

She pulled away from me with a firm shake of her head. “That’s not why I told you. I’ll make a plan. I was just shocked by that message, and I guess my stupid face gave me away.”

“Your face isn’t stupid.” I cupped her cheeks in my palms and swiped a few stray tears away with my thumbs. “I know that’s not why you told me, but it doesn’t change anything. Believe it or not, I’m not even offering for you. I’m offering for Adi.”

“Dragging her through all this just seems terrible. I don’t want to do it, Chris. Why would he even want custody of her? He’s never spent longer than three hours at a time with her in her entire life.”

“He’s a manipulative prick. That’s why. We’ll fight this, baby. I promise you we’ll fight it, and we’ll win. If we can get it done soon enough, Adi might not even have to know about it.”

“He’ll never make it that easy,” she whispered, her eyes round. “I don’t know how he’s affording a lawyer, but if he’s found one willing to represent him for what he can pay, he’ll just keep going until he gets what he wants.”

“He won’t ever get what he wants.” Fresh tears landed on my hands, but I let them pool, looking at her intently while trying to assuage her fears. “Do you really think he could out-litigate me? I have the best law firm in the city on retainer and I’ve never even been sued.”

I linked our fingers together. “I pay them an exorbitant amount of money each month just in case. If they don’t have someone who specializes in family law, we’ll find someone else. My point is that I probably pay those guys a month what Craig will pay his lawyer for the next ten years.”

“But that’s your money, not mine.” She squeezed my hands and shook her head with a watered-down smile. “I could never ask you to spend that amount of money on us.”

“You didn’t ask. I offered, but I also won’t let you refuse my offer.” I didn’t even really care if I was being too pushy with her right now. I knew we hadn’t known each other all that long, and I knew, technically, this was none of my business, but fuck it. “Money is no object where Adi is concerned. Just repeat after me. We will fight this, and we will win.”

“Why are you doing this?” Her whispered question made her sound broken, but I knew she wasn’t. “Why do you keep helping us?”

“Adi deserves better than Craig.” I drew her back into my arms. “I know what it feels like to feel helpless because you don’t have money. No one should ever feel that way, and you don’t have to. Let me take care of this for you, please?”

“You’ve already done too much,” she protested before putting her hands on my shoulders and looking into my eyes. “Let’s just see how this plays out, okay? For all we know, the message was from one of his idiot friends pretending to be a lawyer.”

“But if it really was from a lawyer, you’ll let me know and let me help you?”

She managed a weak smile. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Thank you for always being there for me. I have no idea what I ever did without you.”

You’ll never be without me again. The errant thought jumped into my head out of nowhere and made me question my own sanity. Who thought that kind of thing after spending time with someone for only a few weeks?

Then again, my father had proposed to my mother after knowing her for two weeks. They’d been married by the time they’d known each other for seven. Eleven months after their wedding day, I was born. And they’d stayed true to their vows until death really had done them part.

Dad had always said that when you knew, you knew. Maybe that was what was going on. I wasn’t one-hundred percent sure, but considering I’d just offered to pay the woman’s legal fees, I had a sneaky feeling it was.

“We should get out there,” I said once April had wiped her eyes, taken several deep breaths, and even had some color back in her cheeks. “Looks like the initial shock has worn off.”

She laughed dryly. “Give it a few minutes. It might just hit me again. But yes, we should get back out there.”

She stood up, and I gave her a final hug. Dropping a kiss on top of her head, I just held her until she stopped trembling.

When we got to Hunter and Adi, a different Adams was crying. I gave Hunter a questioning look. He pressed his lips together and lifted his hand in response.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” April rushed to her side and enveloped her in a hug. “What’s going on out here?”

“I can’t get it right.” Adi sobbed into her mother’s hair, really breaking down now that her mom was there. “My hand is never going to work well again. Never.”

April whispered soothing words I couldn’t hear, holding her until sobs no longer wracked her body. While she was busy with her, I went to speak to Hunter.

“What the hell happened?”

“We were working on fine motor exercises again. I stuck to the treatment plan, I swear. She should’ve been ready for these.”

His eyes were filled with so much sadness that I thought he might burst into tears as well. It wouldn’t be the first time. The guy really was as soft as he was big.

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I believe that you stuck to the plan. Don’t worry. Let me see what I can do, okay? The exercises might just need some minor adjustments.”

Adi stepped away from her mom, looking positively miserable. “I’m sorry I’m not doing well enough. If you want to stop treating me, I’ll understand.”

I smiled gently as I shook my head, opening my arms to her. “Nonsense. You’re doing way better than you think. Everyone has setbacks sometimes, honey. It’s the comeback that really matters, not the setback.”

She burrowed into my chest, clinging to me like I was her last hope, greatest cheerleader, and biggest protector. *Otherwise known as what a father should be.*

Rage filled me again over the fact that her dad was such a useless fucking prick. Despite the fact that he should never

have caused her any pain at all, he should also have been the one here soothing her now that the pain and the fear was there.

And yet, a part of me was glad he wasn't here. Because his absence meant that I got to be there for her. *Yep. I'm going straight to hell.*

I didn't even feel guilty for being glad that I could be here for her. Craig didn't give a shit and Adi deserved someone who did. Why did it matter if that person also really *wanted* to be there when she needed them?

When she let me go, I motioned toward the corner of the room where we kept the different fine motor activities. "Want to come look over there with me? I'm sure we can find something that will be better for you."

"I just want to go home." She pouted, actually looking her age for once. It was difficult to remember at times that the child was only nine. "I'm done for the day."

"That's fine," I said. "But let's go look over there anyway. You don't have to try any of the activities if you don't want to. Let me at least show them to you. That way, you can jump right in next time and already know what to expect."

After a long pause, during which I was half expecting her to stomp her feet, she simply nodded. "I want to see, but I don't want to do them."

I smiled. "Let's just go have a look at what's over there. You might just change your mind."

When we reached the shelf, I let Adi choose items that looked interesting to her. I patiently demonstrated and explained to her how they worked, and before anyone knew it, she was doing them herself.

I didn't interrupt her to point that out, though. She was still on track with her treatment plan, and judging by how well she was doing on some of these new activities, she was even a little bit ahead.

"You fixed the problem," Hunter mumbled to me when he came to join us. "Asshole. I don't know how you always do that."

I wiggled my fingers at him. “Magic.”

April came up to me after the end of the session, a relieved smile on her face. “You’re kind of becoming our knight in shining armor, do you know that?”

I pretended to fan my face. “Aww shucks.”

She gave me a light punch in the arm, and it was good to see her laughing again. “Even knights have to eat, though. Can I cook you dinner again sometime?”

“I’m free on Wednesday.”

“Perfect.” Hooking one finger into the gap between two buttons on my shirt, she yanked me closer and brushed a lightning fast kiss to the bottom of my jaw while Hunter was with Adi. “I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

CHAPTER 26



APRIL

“**S**ince when do you like jazz?” Katie asked as we danced around my kitchen while making dinner.

I hadn’t been relegated to company-keeper this evening, but I was actually quite enjoying cooking with my sister for a change. She lifted her arms up in the air, tongs and all, and moved her hips to the sultry rhythm.

“I’ve rediscovered it recently.” My mind flashed on a number performed by the servers while we’d been having dinner with Chris. “It’s the perfect music to cook to, don’t you think?”

“I like cooking to French, but this isn’t bad.” She smiled and kept swaying her body but brought her arms down to turn the chicken in the pan. “How did you rediscover it? Radio?”

“No.” I rolled my lips into my mouth and released them with a soft pop. “Chris took us to a restaurant where they performed all kinds of music, but the jazz with dinner stuck with me.”

“Chris again, huh?” She pursed her lips, stopped dancing, and shot me a worried glance. “That doctor seems to have wormed his way into your lives quite thoroughly.”

I exhaled deeply with a shake of my head, abandoning my dance to amble over to the fridge. “He hasn’t wormed his way into our lives. We want him with us.”

Her brows climbed up on her forehead. “You do? Since when?”

“Since I’ve gotten to know him and he’s a really nice guy.” I began piling ingredients for a salad into my arms. “It’s nothing serious. You still don’t have to worry about my Pretty Woman story.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” She turned the last piece of chicken and leaned back against the counter, folding her arms as she gave a pointed look to the living room where Adi was doing her homework. “I’m worried about you, but I’m also worried about Adi. What if she gets attached to this guy? It’s tough bringing someone new into her life as it is, but more especially so when you don’t even know where things are going with him.”

“Does anyone really know where things are going in their relationships when it’s still new? No. It’s always going to be a leap of faith.”

“Sure, but that’s why people usually get to know the person and try to gauge what the prospects for the future are before they get their kids involved.”

I set the fresh ingredients down and looked at her just so she could see me rolling my eyes. “There’s no rule that says it has to work that way. Plus, Adi already knew Chris the first time we went out. I needed to know that he knew I wasn’t just looking for a hookup.”

“As far as I knew, you weren’t looking for anything,” she said, sighing before she bent over to check on the veggies in the oven.

“I *wasn’t* looking for anything.” I shredded the lettuce into a bowl I’d gotten out earlier, but my gaze stayed on my sister. “There’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing, Katie. I wasn’t planning on dating again, and I didn’t want to, but things change.”

“Evidently.” Twisting her ponytail around itself to make a bun, she snapped an elastic off her wrist to fasten it and then pulled up a stool to sit on. “I’m not saying you’re doing anything wrong. All I’m saying is that you have to make sure this is the right thing to do. “

“It’s the right thing to do,” I said firmly. “You don’t know him, and if you did, I think you’d agree with me. He’s really good for us. He makes me feel safe without making me feel like I need him to feel that way.”

“Safe from what?” She frowned. “Is there something going on I don’t know about?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not really what I’m talking about. I meant it more generally. Chris is loyal to a fault. He’s reliable. He’s fun, smart, and hot. Name a single one of those characteristics that makes you doubt this is the right thing to do.”

My sister’s head dropped to the side, and she studied me with a puzzled expression on her face. “What’s going on? Reliable and loyal used to equal boring to you. Now that’s something you’re looking for?”

“It’s always been something I wanted. I just didn’t find it before. Seriously? Who wants someone unreliable and disloyal? No one.”

“You used to.” She pointed at my chest. “I thought you liked the bad boys.”

“Bad boys are only fun until you realize that a lot of them really are bad. No girl really wants a guy who’s unreliable or disloyal. We just keep hoping that we’re the one the bad boy will turn good for.”

“Fair enough.” She chuckled. “This doctor doesn’t bore you then?”

“Not at all,” I said honestly. “Just because he has a good heart doesn’t mean he’s boring. He has all the attractive elements of a bad boy but none of the shitty ones.”

“How so?” Donning an oven mitt, she pulled the tray of vegetables out of the oven and placed the chicken pieces under the broiler.

I sliced through a tomato, almost cutting off my finger, as lost in thought as I was. “He’s confident, assertive, protective, somewhat mysterious, and lives his life on his own terms. But he’s not arrogant, aggressive, or dangerous.”

“So that makes him what?”

“Perfect,” I joked, wagging my eyebrows at her. “Can we drop this now? I like the guy. Adi likes him and he likes us. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that you still haven’t told me what’s going on that I don’t know about and that two months ago, you were firmly in camp *Down on Love*.”

“What’s the use of a mind if you can’t change it?” I tapped my temple while sprinkling croutons over the salad with my other hand. “I also never said I was in love with him. Love has nothing to do with this.”

She snorted. “If that was true, you wouldn’t have had a problem with him just being a hookup. Now stop stalling and tell me what’s going on.”

I braced my hands against the counter and lowered my head, knowing that Katie was going to kill me for not telling her sooner. “Craig plans on suing me for full custody of Adi. Long story short, he’s not bluffing and I don’t know what I’m going to do. I can’t lose her, but I also can’t afford a lawyer.”

The string of words that left her mouth would’ve made even the most experienced sailors blush and take cover. She ranted for five full minutes before the timer on the oven cut her off.

After she yanked the chicken out and shut the broiler off, she slammed the tray down on the counter and spun around to face me. “That’s such freaking bullshit. I have some money saved up. We’ll get a lawyer. We’ll get the best flippin’ lawyer we can afford and sue him for child support while we’re at it. If he’s got money for this farce, he can afford to help with Adi’s expenses.”

“That’s a really good point, but we need to get through the custody suit first. Chris offered to help too, and to be honest, I still don’t really know what to do. I’ve been thinking about nothing else for days. I think I just need a night away from it all.”

“Want to have a girls’ night out?” she offered. “There’s karaoke at Bottles tomorrow night. We can call Luna to come with us and get that sitter from your building to watch Adi.”

“Actually, Chris is coming over for dinner tomorrow night. I was hoping you might be able to watch Adi so I could get a night away from it all with him.”

She looked surprised. I didn’t often turn down the opportunity for karaoke. “I thought you’d be all in for a night of singing and drinking with me and Luna. You’d really rather spend it with Chris?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “I’d love to go out with you two sometime but not tomorrow. I’m not really in the mood for letting loose and partying like there’s no tomorrow.”

“Then okay. Of course, I’ll watch Adi.” She smiled softly. “I’m actually kind of proud of you for this. You’ve definitely grown since you met him.”

My eyes widened. “Why does it look like you suddenly approve of my relationship with him when less than ten minutes ago, you were telling me I was making a mistake?”

“I never said you were making a mistake. All I said was to make sure you’re doing the right thing. For the record, I never said I didn’t think you were doing the right thing.”

“So you’re okay with this?” My mouth nearly dropped open. “I’m so confused right now.”

“Don’t be.” She laughed. “You need tomorrow night, and I’m happy to watch Adi for you so you can do whatever it is you want to blow off steam in whichever way growing April wants to.”

“Why are you okay with this? I thought you would kidnap me and keep me locked up in your bathroom with some food until I got over the notion that a relationship might just work out.”

She shrugged. “I might still do that. Who knows? In the meantime, Adi talks about Chris all the time. I know a lot more about him than you think, and you need to keep him.”

I was so shocked that I was, for once, speechless. The only thing I could even think was how it was so weird that it was possible that people could surprise others so much even when they'd known them all their lives.

But this was a good surprise. I wasn't even going to question it.

CHAPTER 27



CHRIS

“It’s been a long day,” I said to April when we met in the parking lot at the hospital. “How about we go out for dinner instead? That way, neither of us has to cook.”

She smiled and looped her arms around my shoulders, letting her head fall back to look into my eyes. “Have I told you today how much I appreciate you? That sounds heavenly.”

I wound my arms around her waist and pulled her right up against my chest, not giving a damn who saw us together. “Consider it done. Anything particular you’re in the mood for?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a really big pizza and a pitcher of beer.” A dreamy look came into her vivid green eyes. “There’s a restaurant on Midway called Backpackers’ that has a rooftop that does a two-for-one special. How about it?”

I chuckled and kissed her forehead. “I love how you could choose any restaurant in the city and that’s the first place your mind goes.”

“I like it there.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not exactly the type who enjoys fine dining and having to get all dressed up just to grab something to eat.”

“I noticed.” It was another one of the things I really liked about her. “I’m the same way, but the last few years, I’ve been expected to dial it up a notch.”

“Fuck expectations. More people should do what makes them happy instead of what would make other people happy. As long as it doesn’t negatively affect the people around you,

every person ought to take care of their own happiness first. You can't pour from an empty cup."

"Agreed." I allowed myself a few more beats of holding her before I stepped away. "But if you want to get to dinner, we should go. Otherwise, I'm hauling you to my place and not letting you go until morning."

"I wouldn't mind that either," she teased. "Let's go get some food into our bodies first, though. I haven't eaten a thing all day."

"It was one of those crazy days again. Hunter ran out to get us sandwiches at some point, but we didn't even get to finish them."

We climbed into my car, our hands joining as if they had magnets in them as soon as we were settled. I pulled out of the parking spot and got on the road with a good idea of where the place she'd mentioned was located.

"Have you made any more headway on the practice?" she asked. "Hunter said you were still working on a name."

"If you heard the suggestions he's come up with, you'd understand why we haven't picked one yet. We haven't had any time to do much more there, but at least the cleaners have been through this week."

"You guys don't waste time, do you?"

I shook my head. "We've been talking about this for so long that now that it's actually happening, we're both raring to go."

"Have you managed to work out a deal with the hospital yet?" She stroked my palm with her thumb, and my nerves lit up under her touch. It was like I could feel that finger on my dick, but like she'd said, we needed to eat first.

It had been way too long since we'd gotten to do anything except for casual touching. Weeks in fact. The last time we'd done anything more together was that night at her apartment, and while that had been great, it'd been nearly two weeks ago.

Touching her while not being able to *touch* her was starting to drive me a little insane. To distract myself from the thoughts of turning around and driving her straight to my house, I refocused my attention on the question she'd asked.

“I have a meeting with the board next week. The members I've spoken to in passing seem quite interested. Our department takes up a lot of space out of necessity for the nature of our work, but if they put beds in there, their capacity would increase significantly.”

“I heard they were trying to acquire more space, but they're not having any luck nearby.”

I nodded. “They've been trying for two years. With all the budget cuts to other facilities and the increased demand for some of the specialized services only we provide, they need to do something. That's why I'm positive they'll accept my proposal.”

“If anyone can convince them to take it, it's you.” She adjusted her grip on my hand to hold it tighter and leaned over to rest her head on my shoulder. “I'm glad it's just going to be the two of us tonight. I really need to talk and think about other things than the clusterfuck my life has become.”

“I'm really happy to be getting some time with you too.” I turned my head to plant a quick kiss on her hair before turning my eyes back to the road. “We should do this more often. If you want to, we could even make it a weekly date night.”

“That sounds amazing, but I'd have to check with my sister. It's not really fair of me to leave Adi with her one night every week.”

“Let me know what she says. Adi doesn't need to stay with her every time, though. We could get someone else to watch her.”

She let out a slow breath before lifting her head. “We could but I'm not a big fan of leaving her with strangers. There's a girl in our building who might be able to help out, though. She's watched her for me a few times when I've been in a pinch at work.”

“Well, let’s just think about it, okay? No pressure.” I turned into the underground parking garage a couple blocks over from the restaurant. “If you ever feel like I’m pressuring you, just tell me and I’ll tone it down.”

She laughed. “You’re good so far. In fact, I feel the complete opposite about you. I’ve been so overwhelmed with everything that’s happened that I feel like I keep running to you for help every second day.”

I squeezed into a parking space and shut the engine down, then swept her up for a kiss that left both of us breathing heavily by the time we broke it off. “Run to me anytime.”

“I’m so glad you were the doctor who helped us that day.” She smiled and ran her fingertips over my scalp, still leaning close to me. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if it hadn’t been you.”

“It could’ve been Doctor Keys. He’s seventy years old, but he’s sprightly for his age. You might’ve been out to dinner with him right now.”

“Unlikely.” She let out a frustrated breath and reached behind her to open her door. “Let’s go. Your earlier threat about going to your place if we don’t move is starting to sound better and better.”

I laughed but climbed out of the car before she did. I desperately needed the fresh air if I wanted to avoid fucking her right there in the car. It seemed like it would be an anti-climax, though. We had the whole night together for once. A quick and dirty fuck in the parking lot wouldn’t do the anticipation justice.

April and I walked hand in hand to the building, made out some more in the elevator, and were both flushed and breathing heavily by the time we reached the top. We were guided to a table in the corner, overlooking a decent portion of downtown.

“It’s beautiful up here, isn’t it?” She sighed and rested her chin in her hands with her elbows propped on the table.

Her hair was a bit of a mess from having my fingers in it, her cheeks were still flushed, and her eyes twinkled in the soft light from the strings hanging above our heads. “Yeah, it really is.”

If she noticed I hadn't looked away from her when I replied, she didn't let on. “I can't believe it's been so long since I last came here, but it has to be years. It might even have been before Luna met Cyrus. We used to come here for lunch sometimes.”

“It's a great place.” The waiter who had shown us to our table brought our pitcher and glasses, then left after taking our order. “How'd you find it?”

“We scoured the internet for cheap places with good specials.” She laughed and ran her fingers through her tousled hair. “It was only a few years after my divorce and Luna had been dating this total asshole who didn't like her spending time with her friends. We used to have to sneak away for lunches.”

“My dad always used to say men like that were a waste of testicles. I tend to agree with him.”

“Would it still ruin our night to talk about your dad?” she asked tentatively. “I'd love to hear more. Every time he comes up, you have this smile on your face I never see otherwise. It speaks volumes about the relationship you have with him.”

I sighed and sat back, knowing that the time had come to tell her about him. I wasn't quite ready for the onslaught of pain that would come with it, even all these years later.

“He was the best dad in the world,” I said, the stabbing already starting in my heart and gut. “When I was younger, I believed all dads were like him. I think that's why it still kills me when I see men who have fathered children but don't take care of them.”

“It sure explains a lot,” she said, taking my hand from across the table. “You said he *was* the best dad in the world, not *is*. He's gone?”

I nodded. “About ten years ago, we lost him to MS.”

“Wow, that sucks. I’m so sorry.”

“We had to watch his motor function slowly deteriorating for so many years before that. There were some treatments available even then. No cure, but there was a lot that could’ve been done to improve his quality of life. We couldn’t afford any of it, though.”

Realization dawned in her eyes. “That’s why you do what you do. It’s also why you’re so intent on offering your services for free to those who need it.”

I nodded again. “No one should be without help because of money. I know it makes the world go round, but there’s a lot more to life than dollars.”

“True.” She smiled slightly. “But it’s also a lot easier to say that when you have the dollars. When you don’t, well, I’m sure you remember.”

“Also true.” I toyed with the idea of telling her the other part, the part I’d only been planning on telling her once we’d made it past the beginning stages. But our relationship wasn’t really following the normal trajectory. “There’s something else you should know about this.”

“Yeah?” She gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “What’s that?”

“MS is hereditary. I don’t want to have children of my own because I don’t want to pass it on to one of them.”

Her lips turned down and her eyes filled with so much pain and sadness it was like she knew exactly how I felt about it and was mirroring my emotions. Her eyes didn’t leave mine though, nor did she toss my hands down and call us quits because the prospect of children was off the table.

“You can’t live your life like that, Chris,” she said quietly. “Is it hereditary? Yes. Does that mean any child you have will get it? No. Do you want children?”

More than anything. I’d grown up idolizing my father and there was nothing I wanted more than to be exactly the kind of dad he’d been. But I also remembered what he went through

those last few years. There was no way I'd take the chance of having children only to have them sentenced to that.

"That's not really relevant," I said, then spotted the waiter carrying our pizzas to the table. "Oh, thank God. I think I might just order another one."

April's gaze remained locked on mine for another long moment. She knew I was trying to change the subject, but it appeared she didn't know if she was ready for it to be changed.

In the end, she decided against pushing me and grinned at the waiter when he dropped the pizza off instead. "Thank you. This looks amazing."

The guy gave her a quick salute. "I'll send your compliments to the chef. Please enjoy your meal."

She dove into telling me stories about her and Luna and all the things they used to get up to back in the day. I appreciated her attempt to lighten the mood, but there was something else we needed to talk about before we could let all the serious stuff go for the night.

There was a lull in her stories while she was practically inhaling her last slices of pizza, and I decided to just jump in. "While Adi's not here, I also wanted to talk to you about Craig."

"What about him?" She scowled. "Do we have to talk about him tonight?"

"I spoke to the law firm that represents me. They've got a family law department and they're willing to represent you. I've already spoken to the head of the team and he's taking your case himself."

She gaped at me after swallowing her pizza. "Are you serious? You really didn't have to do that for me. I told you I'd make a plan."

"Now you don't need to." I grinned. "Also, I didn't do it for you. I did it for Adi, remember?"

“Well, at least now I know why.” Another smile lit her eyes and a meaningful moment passed between us. “You’re really quite a guy, Chris. Every time I think I have you even a little bit figured out, you add a whole ‘nother puzzle to the one I thought I solved.”

CHAPTER 28



APRIL

The lights in the cavernous living area of his penthouse apartment came on when we walked inside. Chris dropped his keys and phone on a modern glass table before he turned to hold his hand out to me.

“You want something to drink?”

I shook my head. “I want to see more of this place. It’s huge. I love how much space there is in here.”

It was tastefully yet sparsely decorated with dark furniture, light walls, and the occasional gray or teal accent. Metal and glass dominated the space, but the pictures on the walls, area rugs, and personal touches made it feel warm instead of soulless. “I didn’t even think there really were apartments this size in the heart of New York City.”

“Some.” He shrugged. “Not many.”

I’d heard of these places, but seeing one for myself was almost surreal.

Luna had told me stories of Cyrus’s bachelor pad back in the day, but I’d never seen it for myself. They’d since moved to a mansion in the suburbs, and I was pretty sure this penthouse was about the same size of that.

It was unfathomable to me what one did with so much space, but it would be cool to try figure it out. One entire part of the room was set a little lower than the rest of it, and it was filled with all kinds of guitars on stands.

“Can you play?” I asked, instantly even more attracted to him. *What was it about men with the dexterity to handle a guitar that made them so freaking sexy?*

He nodded. “It’s a hobby I’ve had practically since birth. I thought you wanted a tour?”

I rocked my head from side to side. “Now I’m not so sure if I want a tour or a song.”

“Let’s do the tour first, then end up back here. We can have a drink and you’ll have time to think about a song you want to request.”

The way he looked at me didn’t say he was thinking about drinking, guitars, or even giving a tour. After the sexually and emotionally charged night we’d had though, I couldn’t say I blamed him.

I also really didn’t mind him looking at me like I was a lollipop he wanted to lick all over. In fact, the thought of having him licking me all over made my nipples pebble and brought my own need to the forefront of my mind again.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Let’s do that.”

He didn’t need to know yet what I was planning. Hell, *I* didn’t even know what I was planning yet. All I knew was that I wanted to surprise him in a special way.

“Right this way then.” He gestured for me to precede him, but I shook my head.

“Nope, you’re the tour guide. You get to lead. I’ll follow.” A plan was also slowly coming together in my head and I needed him to be in front for it to work.

He frowned at me but then shrugged and beckoned for me to follow him. Hopefully, his bedroom would be included in this tour. Otherwise, my plan might not work.

When we started going deeper into the apartment, I quickly shrugged out of my jacket and left it at the entryway to the living area. As we went along, I quietly shed a piece of clothing at every door.

A few rooms in, he turned to look at me just as my jeans hit the floor. I hadn't been wearing many items of clothing, so I was kind of down to my panties already. *Shame. I wanted to be naked by the time he realized.*

"What are you doing?" he breathed, desire suddenly burning in his eyes as they slowly trailed down the length of my almost-naked body. He wasn't even trying to hide the need anymore, obviously having realized I hadn't been serious about having a drink and some singing.

"I'm leaving a trail of the only breadcrumbs I could think of," I said innocently, batting my eyelashes and spinning a lock of hair around my finger. "This place is huge. I might never find my way out again."

"If I ever let you out," he said darkly, his pupils dilating as his lids become heavier. "Leave the panties on. I want to be the one to take them off. We didn't even get to that part last time."

His voice was rougher and lower than usual. A shiver of anticipation traveled through me and settled right at the apex between my thighs. Soon, I hoped I'd be hearing that raspy, needy voice crying out my name.

I gave him a sassy smile and propped a hand on my hip. "If memory serves, we didn't get that far because *someone* couldn't wait any longer."

"*Someone*, huh?" His gaze zeroed in on me, keeping me rooted to the spot while he stalked me with all the grace and patience of a jungle cat. "That's funny because I only remember one of us begging that day."

"Was that what turned you on so badly you couldn't even wait long enough to take my panties off?"

"Nope. It wasn't the begging. It was just you." He dropped to his knees when he reached me, grazing his teeth against the sensitive skin of my thighs. "Don't worry, baby. I'll do it right this time."

"You got it pretty damn right last time too," I whispered. My mouth was suddenly too dry to speak.

He ignored my compliment and brought his hands up to join his mouth, dragging his fingertips all the way up the length of my thighs, then around to trace the bottom of my ass before he started all over again.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” he murmured, releasing a ragged breath.

Suddenly, he was on his feet again but only for as long as it took to walk me backward until I was against the wall. He sank back down to his knees and spread my legs until his broad shoulders fit between them.

Slowly hooking his fingers into the elastic of my panties, he started rolling them down my legs. The fabric stung at times when it dug into my skin on account of how wide my legs were open, but I didn’t mind. The tiny bites of pain even kind of made the whole scene that much sexier.

Once I was completely exposed to him, he let out a low moan that made me wobble on my feet. As always though, Chris was right there when I needed him.

Without skipping a beat, he circled my hips with one arm to anchor me. “Hang onto my shoulders if you need to baby, but I’m making you come before we take one more step.”

“Jesus.” I gasped when he buried his gorgeous face in my pussy and started eating me out with no further words, warning, or hesitation.

He knew what he wanted and knew I was willing to give it to him. Licking me in a skilled, gentle way that only a man who really knew what he was doing could do, he had me quivering and clenching in no time. Whenever I needed to feel just that little bit more, he gave me that too.

He was exquisitely rough and perfectly gentle at the same time. In the back of my mind, I awarded him a gold star. There was no over-stimulation, no uncertainty, and no stopping or breaking his rhythm at inopportune times.

When I got to that point where I needed to be filled, he slid two thick fingers into me without me having to say a word.

My mind melted out of existence as I moaned and bucked my hips against his face.

Between his mouth and fingers, he hit every spot imaginable and teased every nerve I had out of hiding. Tension built and built until it hooked below my belly button and the dam burst. Whimpers fell from my lips as my fingers twisted into his soft hair.

Pleasure yanked me into its grip with that hook, and there was no getting away from it as it crashed over me in wave after powerful wave. Chris's large hands steadied me, whispering sexy words for the time it took me to ride it out.

"You're beautiful when you come, April. I'll never get tired of seeing it." He peppered my upper thighs and lower belly with kisses. "Just breathe. I've got you."

He stood up when the trembling stopped and pulled me into a hug, murmuring to me while he stroked my back and waited for my brain to come back online. When it did, I became aware of how he towered over me, of how firm his body was against mine. His heart beat in a steady rhythm, and again, I felt that overwhelming feeling of being safe with him, protected by him.

He was so damn big and strong, yet he had the best heart and a sense of humor to boot. It wasn't really any of those things that drew my attention in that moment, though. It was his cock throbbing against my stomach.

Even though he was still fully clothed, I felt the intensity of his need as though it were my own. Not wanting him to have to wait any longer, I brought my hands up to the buttons on his shirt to undo them. I slid the metal tabs through their holes and pushed the shirt off his shoulders, letting it join my clothing on the floor.

Once the shirt fell, he wound his arms around my waist and lifted me up against him, issuing commands between fervent kisses. "Wrap your legs around my hips. If I put off taking you in the car earlier, I'm not about to do it against the wall. Hold on tight."

He marched us down a hallway with more doors than I could keep count of with my sneak peeks between his kisses. Eventually, he carried me into a room that was clearly his bedroom.

The bed was massive, but so was everything else about this guy and his penthouse, for that matter. It wasn't like he'd have a single twin bed in a room this size.

He set me down on it, stepping back to do God only knew what. My gaze had drifted to his chiseled, gorgeous torso with all of the subtle yet sexy lines I'd known would be there. Right down to those perfectly formed fuck-me lines I'd literally dreamed about.

I stared unashamedly when his fingers deftly undid the button of his jeans, gripped the tab of the zipper, and pulled down on it. The sight of his long, thick cock when it finally came into view knocked a moan out of me. I just couldn't hold it back.

He was hard and so fucking ready, his tip glistening and his veins protruding, that I had no idea how he managed to keep as cool as he was. I knew how he felt, considering that I'd been feeling the exact same way only minutes ago.

The only difference was that I'd been ready to drop to my knees and beg again, while Chris seemed perfectly content to take his time. At the sound of my moan though, whatever hold he'd had of his control snapped and he pounced on me.

He crawled over me, his voice strained and his muscles tight. "Keep making noises like that. Let's see what happens."

"I'm game if you are," I teased but the effect was kind of lost with how breathless my voice was. Winding my arms around his neck, I pulled him down until he was pushing me into the mattress and his mouth met mine again.

We kissed until we were both moaning and grinding before he finally pulled away and reached into his nightstand. The box of condoms he pulled out was a new one, I noticed with a strange sense of satisfaction taking root in my chest.

He ripped the plastic off and delved into the box, coming back with a foil package before tossing the rest down on the floor. Moving back to sit on his knees between my legs, he rolled the condom on under my eager gaze.

When he was done, he lined himself up with my entrance and looked into my eyes as he thrust home. I arched my hips into his, loving how full I felt with him inside me but still craving more.

He started moving, slowly withdrawing before sinking back in but never taking his eyes off mine. I rocked in time with the rhythm he set, growing more desperate by the minute. Our bodies moved together until we reached a frenzied crescendo and he drove us both over the edge.

We came together, our moans and curses mingling in the air. Electrifying pleasure coursed through me when he finally jerked against me and lost track of his rhythm.

Our limbs tangled as we collapsed in a heap on his bed, our breathing labored and my head on his chest. His heart raced against my ear, seemingly as out of control as my own.

As I closed my eyes, his hand found its way to my hair and he pulled me closer for another kiss. The moment was intimate, almost loving.

But there was no use in denying it anymore. I was starting to have real feelings for this man, and there was nothing I could do about it.

CHAPTER 29



CHRIS

Hunter grunted when he lifted a can of paint to carry it into our building. “Man, you’re a billionaire. Couldn’t you just have hired someone to do this?”

I laughed. “Nope. This was what you wanted, remember? You said we’d fix it up ourselves and that’s what we’re doing.”

“I was an idiot.” He wiped sweat off his brow with the back of his arm. “Can I take it back? Hire whatever crews you want to.”

“What, you aren’t having fun?” I joked. The heat was blistering today, and it felt like we were moving through wall after wall of humidity.

“Usually when I take a day off work, I do have fun. I’d rather be back at the hospital right about now, though. At least we have air conditioning there.”

“Toughen up, big guy. There are going to be a lot more days like this before we can move in.” I would’ve hired a crew to do the work in a heartbeat if I thought he was serious, but I knew he wasn’t.

Everyone who would listen had been told about the building and how we were going to fix it up ourselves. It had also been two weeks since the cleaning crew had come through here, and we’d been here almost every spare minute we had.

Unfortunately, that meant seeing less of April and Adi. I still saw them, of course, just less than I would’ve liked to.

The building would be ready eventually, though. I had to agree with Hunter. It was better to do it ourselves.

Seeing it all coming together as a result of our own blood and sweat—because there'd been a few instances of actual bleeding—was pretty damn satisfying. There was already a fresh coat of paint outside and about half the inside was done. We had ordered our furniture and equipment and had redone the stairs and railing.

Hunter cracked the paint open just as my phone started ringing. April's name came up on my screen, and he rolled his eyes at my smile when I saw who was calling.

“Jeez. You two are inseparable these days.”

I shrugged. “Don't pretend like you wouldn't have been the exact same way if you had a girl like her.”

“Dude, I've told you. I'm too busy for women.” He winked and picked up a paint brush. “You'd better get that.”

Sliding my thumb across the green bar, I flipped him off with my free hand and pressed the phone to my ear. “Hey, babe. What's up?”

“Could you meet me at the lawyer's office?” she asked, her voice shaky. “He just phoned me to ask me to come in and I'm fucking terrified.”

My brow furrowed. “Of course. Do you want me to come pick you up?”

“No. We'll be late if you do. Are you sure you're not too busy?”

“I'm shooting the shit with Hunter at the new building. It's fine, April. I want to come with you. He can manage some painting by himself.”

The man himself raised a brow at me when I hung up, concern pulling his eyebrows together. “What happened? That didn't sound like the happy kind of ‘I want to come with you.’”

“It wasn't. I set April up with my lawyer weeks ago to represent her in case Craig follows through with his threats.

Something must have changed because he's suddenly asked her to come in."

"Fuck." He rubbed the spot right over his heart like the news was causing him pain too. "Go, brother. Let me know how it goes or if there's anything I can do to help. I was there the day Adi came in, after all."

"I'll do that." I gave him a curt smile before turning around and racing to my car.

When I got to the lawyer's office, April was already there.

I saw her through the window to the conference room and didn't bother waiting for the receptionist to usher me in. The door to the room slid open soundlessly, but the lawyer and April both looked up anyway.

Relief filled her expression and she held her hand out to mine instantly, gripping it hard when I went to sit down beside her. The lawyer, some guy called Howard who I'd been assured was the best in this business, acknowledged me with a dip of his head.

"Doctor Matthews, I presume. Thank you for joining us." He folded his hands on the table. "We've only just gotten started. I'm sorry for calling you in on such short notice."

"It's fine. What's the emergency?" I looked into his icy-blue eyes, and when I saw the regret in them, I already knew what was coming.

"I received communication from the attorney acting on behalf of Mr. Ludwig. I'm afraid he's provided me with proof of his appointment and his letter was to inform us that they intend on suing for full custody of Adi."

April's hand shook in mine. She seemed to be beyond words, with silent tears tracking down her cheeks, so I took the lead. "What do we do now?"

"They haven't filed a suit yet. They've simply given us notice that they intend to do so. I assumed you'd want to meet with me at my earliest convenience regarding this matter, so I cleared some time for you."

“Thank you.” Not that he deserved any thanks for what he was billing per hour, but I still appreciated that he’d contacted us immediately and had ensured he had time to see us. “What do you make of his claim? What are his chances of success?”

The older man pursed his lips and shook his head. “He won’t get full custody. There’s no basis for a suit to that effect at this point in time. I’ve seen many an opportunistic litigant in my day, but Mr. Ludwig seems to be right up there with the best of them. Unfortunately, he’s found an attorney willing to act on those ludicrous instructions, which means we have to prepare for the battle.”

“Worst-case scenario?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

April’s fingers tightened on mine until I thought she might cut off all the blood flow to them, but I didn’t mind. If this was difficult for me to hear, it must be hell for her.

Howard uncapped a fancy pen and pulled a notepad closer. “The worst-case scenario is that Mr. Ludwig will be granted unsupervised visitation with Adi over weekends, some holidays, and a weeknight or two every second week.”

I felt April’s shoulders falling next to mine. Driven by pure instinct, I slung an arm around her and pulled her right into my side while also fixing the lawyer with a glare. “That can’t happen. Adi would be in danger with him. I’m not just saying that on a whim or a suspicion either. Have you read the report of what happened the last time he had her for only a few hours?”

He nodded. “I can assure you that we will fight against any order that includes unsupervised visitation. But I would be remiss if I didn’t ask you whether there was any amount of time or conditions of visitation that you were willing to offer him in order to make this go away.”

“It won’t go away.” April’s voice was still shaky, but her jaw was set with determination. “I don’t want him getting any visitation with her. If there has to be some kind of order, I wouldn’t want it to be anything more than one hour per week under my supervision and in a public place. It might sound like nothing, but it’d be more than he’s ever seen her.”

Howard scribbled on his notepad. “I understand. I will make sure that our counterargument is structured in such a way so as to illustrate that even the bare minimum would be more than fair.”

He asked us more questions and walked us through the process. An hour later, April moved like she’d aged at least twenty years and hung onto my hand as we left.

“Why is he doing this? I just don’t get it. He’s never been interested in her. Why now?”

I hugged her closer to me. “He’s just trying to make you miserable.”

“Well, it’s working,” she spat. “I hope he knows I wasn’t kidding about those pictures. Revenge is a dish best served online for all the world to see.”

I stopped when we walked into the parking lot, then walked around her to look into her eyes while taking her hands in mine. “I get where you’re coming from, but you can’t release those photos right now, baby. It’ll be too easy to trace them to you and you could get arrested or sued for a whole host of other things.”

She blew out her breath before leaning forward and resting her forehead against my chest. “I know. I just feel so helpless.”

Closing my arms around her, I put my cheek on top of her head and did what I could to reassure her. “Everything’s going to be okay, baby. Howard’s the best. He’s taking care of this for us. Just let him do his job. We’ll keep fighting until we win.”

She nodded against my shirt, burrowing her face even closer to me. “Are there really any winners in something like this? It doesn’t feel like there will be. Adi sure as fuck can only be worse off for it, and if she loses even an ounce of her innocence because of this, we all lose.”

She got that right, but I didn’t have to tell her so. It went without saying. Adi might not biologically be my daughter, but I wasn’t letting that man hurt one hair on her precious head if I had any say in it whatsoever.

CHAPTER 30



APRIL

The physical therapy department was becoming like a second home to us. Adi and I spent so much time there that we were as comfortable there as in our own living room. Laughter rang out behind me as I went to pull up a chair to watch them work for a while.

“You look like a seal.” Adi giggled as Hunter struck a pose on the floor. “Can I try?”

“Sure.” He grinned and patted the mat beside his. “Just let me know if any of your muscles feel a bit stiff.”

“You should do just fine,” Chris said from where he’d been working on some fine motor activities with her at a low table. “Your progress over the last couple of weeks has been great.”

“Thank you.” She sat down on the mat and slowly lowered herself into position. While Hunter showed her what to do, Chris kept a watchful eye over her movements until he was satisfied she wasn’t hurting.

“She’ll have her full function back soon,” he said, walking over to me. “A few more sessions and then we’ll have a PT graduate on our hands.”

My heart gave a little pang. Seeing Adi this happy and carefree again was nothing short of amazing, but I would miss coming there once her treatment ended. “She’s going to be ecstatic once she can do everything she used to be able to, but I think she might want to keep popping in.”

“Any time.” He smiled, and a lock of his hair fell across his forehead as he looked down at me. “We’re going to miss having you two around to hang out with us. You’re welcome to come see us whenever you want. Some of the younger kids enjoy having recovered patients around to encourage them.”

“Really?” I frowned. “Do lots of your patients hang around even after they’re done with their sessions?”

He shrugged. “More than you’d probably imagine. Some come in to say hi whenever they’re in the hospital visiting someone. Others still have treatments in other departments or follow-ups happening. Mostly, they come in if they’ve volunteered for our graduate program.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“We offer the kids the opportunity, if they want to, to come to sessions with patients who have to come alone. If their parents can’t be here, it’s nice for them to have support from someone other than us. Regardless of our relationship with them, we’re still the people doing the treatment. Sometimes, they just want someone else around to encourage them.”

“Sounds like a cool program.” I eyed Adi on the mat. “I think she might like to join something like that. Will you continue with it once you move to your new building?”

“We’ll try.” He glanced at the open door. “Realistically, we might have fewer people signing up or be willing to come back when they won’t be around the hospital anyway. We’ll have to see how it goes.”

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. Chris was still having trouble making his deal with the board, and I knew he was worried about leaving the patients behind if he couldn’t get it done.

Eventually though, I knew he would get something worked out with them. It was just a matter of what and when.

“How’s the building coming along?” I asked. “Have you picked a name yet?”

“No, we—”

Hunter cleared his throat. “Actually, I’ve come up with another possible option. What do you think about ‘The Therapy Hounds’?”

“Hounds?” Chris shook his head. “That’s terrible.”

“I have to agree with him,” I said. “I’m not sure it’s going to create the impression of a reputable, reliable practice with a name like that.”

“PT Superheroes?” he suggested hopefully. “I think kids will love that.”

“And adults will think it’s a pediatric practice only,” Chris said. “We’ll have to keep thinking.”

“I like both,” Adi offered.

Hunter smirked at us before pretending to dust off his hands. “My work here is done then. Adi’s a patient and it’s all about what they think, right?”

“Right.” Chris rolled his eyes at his friend before giving his attention back to Adi. “How’s that arm feeling? You’ve managed to hold the pose for a couple of minutes, which is fantastic, but let’s not push it.”

She nodded and pushed back to sit on her knees, eyes shining with excitement. “That felt good. What’s next?”

“Hunter’s going to show you some new stretches to cool off with. I’d like you to keep doing them at home after you’ve done your exercises.”

“I will,” she promised. “Am I getting new exercises too?”

“Yep.” He grinned and lifted the tablet in his hand, tapping the screen with his thumb. “I’m going to print out your new homework before you leave and I’ve already emailed it to your mom. A few more weeks of these and you’ll be good as new.”

Clapping her hands as she stood up, she turned toward Hunter and bounced on the balls of her feet. “I’m ready.”

“Great, so am I.” He led her to the cabinet with all the equipment in it and started rummaging around for something.

Chris and I watched in silence as he handed over a small weight and demonstrated what he wanted her to do with it. Once they were immersed in their exercises, I fished my phone out of my pocket and showed Chris the email I'd received from the lawyer earlier.

Anxiety pinged around my chest at the mere thought of what he was reading. "Our first court date is in a month."

He scanned the contents of the message, his eyes narrowing when he got to the end. "Is this really the earliest date they could get? It hardly seems fair that you have to wait that long for this bullshit."

I sighed. "Part of me would've liked to have it heard tomorrow, but I'm also glad we're going to have some time to prepare."

"I suppose that's true. What do you need from me?" He handed my phone back. "I'll speak to Howard about it as well, but is there anything I can do to help *you*?"

"You've done more than enough already." I looked up into his eyes, wishing I could just fall into his arms and stay there until the court case was done. "Howard mentioned again that he might need you and Hunter to give evidence about the day of the accident, but he says we're not there yet."

"We'll be ready when he is," he said before leaning over to drop a kiss on top of my head. "I hate that you're going to have to live with this hanging over your head for another month, but try not to stress too much about it. Okay?"

I laughed but the sound came out bitter and dry. "Yeah. That's about as easy as telling an orange not to be orange."

He slung his arm around my shoulders and hugged me close for just a few moments. "I know, but you'll drive yourself crazy if you spend the next month worrying. Craig's not going to be successful with his case. He's got no chance."

"I'd like to believe that, but I just don't know." I hated the uncertainty winding its way around each of my vital organs in turn. "Even Howard says we can't be a hundred-percent sure

what the court is going to say. Craig is still her father, despite the fact that he's never acted like it."

My voice cracked, prompting Chris to drag me into his office. Once we were out of sight, he pulled me fully into his arms and crushed me to his chest.

"We're going to fight it, April. He might be her father, but that doesn't mean he'll get anything he's asking for. The truth is on your side, remember?"

I released a shuddering breath and tried to blink back my tears. "I know. I just hate this so much. I feel like I'm stuck in a singular kind of hell and there's no way out until this nightmare is over."

He hugged me closer. "Are you sure you don't want me to see if we can get the court date moved up?"

"No. The only thing worse than waiting would be going and losing because we didn't take the time to prepare properly."

There were no good scenarios that came from rushing to court. I wanted this fight to be over more than anything, but I also kind of wished the court date would never come. If Craig got unsupervised visits with Adi, I didn't know what I would do. But if he got custody? I felt sick to my stomach just thinking about it.

I leaned into Chris's chest and took a few deep, calming breaths. Getting through this wasn't going to be easy, but at least I had him. And Hunter and Katie and even Luna and Cyrus.

My support system was strong and so was I. I just needed to let them support me. If I was going to get through this case, I'd need all the support I could get. Luna had pointed out to me that they were all there for me and that I just needed to let them be. She claimed that people who accepted help from those who loved them were stronger than those who tried to go at it themselves.

Since Chris had come into my life, I felt like I'd allowed him and everyone else to give me a lot more help and support

than I should have been comfortable with. But the last few months had warranted accepting a little help.

Adi's accident seemed to have been the trigger for a chain of events that had irrevocably changed me. I didn't feel weaker for that change though. I just felt different.

On the other hand, I doubted any parent could go through what I had and be facing a lawsuit for sole custody and come out unscathed. My baby being so badly injured that she needed months of therapy and still wasn't completely back to normal would've been way worse than bad enough by itself. But this?

It was enough to drive anyone a little insane.

Being enveloped by Chris's powerful arms and rich scent helped me calm down enough that it no longer felt like I was about to hyperventilate. When he let me go, there was a brief moment of panic before his gaze caught on mine.

"I'm here for you, April. Anytime. Day or night." He planted a kiss on the tip of my nose before gesturing to the door. "But they're bound to be finishing up any moment now. Let's go see how those last exercises went."

I nodded and closed my eyes, taking another beat to get my emotions under control before I followed him out. Adi knew something was going on but I still didn't want her seeing me as close to tears as I was every time I thought about the court date.

As we walked out of the office, a nurse came running into the room and looked around wildly until her gaze landed on Chris. "Doctor Matthews? We need you down in ER right away. Everyone else is already busy but there's a man who's just come in and he can't wait."

"What happened?" Chris barked, immediately jumping into action. "Who's with him now?"

"He was in motorcycle accident and he wasn't wearing a helmet. I left Nurse Rhonda with him, but she said to hurry. He's in real bad shape."

"I'm right behind you," he said before shooting me an apologetic smile. "Hunter and I will review Adi's progress

when I get back. I'll give you a call later."

I nodded but I was feeling strangely numb. The words "motorcycle accident" and "wasn't wearing a helmet" had thrown me right back to that moment when I'd gotten the call about Adi.

Blood drained from my cheeks, and my hands trembled, but I couldn't let him see how upset I was. Someone else needed him the same way we had that day. I didn't want him to be worried about me when his focus had to be on them.

"Go," I said. "We'll talk later."

He ran out with the nurse and Hunter took off after them. There was a bad feeling in my stomach as I watched them go. Without really knowing why, I held my hand out to Adi and nodded toward the door.

"Let's go, baby. I think we might be needed downstairs."

CHAPTER 31



CHRIS

Hunter was only steps behind me when I ran into the ER. My shoes squeaked on the floors when I took the final corner and spotted the nurse waving frantically at me.

She was standing next to a gurney with a bloodied mess of a man lying on it. All I could see at first was his torn-up leathers and matted dark hair.

“He’s in bad shape, Doctor Matthews,” the nurse said when I skidded to a halt beside her. “We tried pulling Doctor Kelso away from his patient, but they’re rushing to surgery.”

“Do we know his name?” I asked, glancing up at her. “Or any other details about him? Allergy bracelet, organ donor card? Anything?”

She shook her head. “The paramedics searched his pockets. They said they didn’t find anything.”

I cursed under my breath but nodded my acknowledgment of what she’d said. “Let’s get him hooked up.”

Machines were beeping wildly in the ER and all the closed rooms were taken, leaving us to rush our patient to an area separated from the screaming, crying, general chaos by only a privacy curtain.

Allowing it all to fade into the background, I took my first good look at the man. He was a big guy and there was something vaguely familiar about him. His face was pretty messed up, but I noticed Hunter growing pale when the patient tried to turn his head up toward him.

At this new angle, I was only barely able to make out the few inches of his skin that wasn't battered, bloody, and swollen. My heart kicked into overdrive in my chest.

Craig.

“Get April,” I said to Hunter while getting Craig connected to a bedside monitor to measure his vital signs. “We need to know if he's got a DNR.”

From the looks of things, chances were good that we were going to need to resuscitate him within the next few minutes. While I determined which one of his injuries to attend to first and started stabilizing him, Hunter yanked open the curtain and, to my surprise, stopped dead in his tracks.

“April, could you come here for a minute?” he asked urgently. “Rhonda will stay with Adi. It's important.”

Frowning as I nodded at the nurse to go, I turned slightly and saw April and Adi had followed us after we'd left the PT rooms. April was as white as a sheet, clearly already having figured out who the patient was.

The gurney was too far away and too high for Adi to be able to see her father, but I repositioned my body to block her view anyway. As I stemmed yet another bleed, I sensed April's trembling body next to mine.

“Is it him?” she asked, her voice tight with fear.

“Yeah. Do you know if he has a living will or anything else that would prevent us from working on him? The paramedics couldn't find anything.”

She stiffened. “Not that I know of. He's allergic to bees, but Chris...”

I gave her a sharp look. Without her having to say a thing, I knew what that “but Chris” was about. This man had made her life hell on more than one occasion. He was taking her to court and trying to take her daughter away from her out of jealousy and spite.

Given the seriousness and extent of his injuries, there was a very good chance he might not make it anyway. No one

would look twice at his case if I just didn't quite give it my all.

The erratic beeping of the monitors told me I still had the opportunity to save his life—maybe if I was lucky. Or I could give April what she wanted more than anything in the world. Peace.

If he didn't make it, the court case was over. He'd never bother her or injure their daughter again. They'd be free to become my family and none of us would ever have to worry about the piece of shit again.

I could save Adi from a possibly protracted court battle, countless hours of therapists, and court-mandated lackeys trying to get into her head. She wouldn't have to go to sleep wondering why her mom was crying or wake up terrified of having to spend the weekend with a father she didn't even really know.

We would be free to live our lives without ever really thinking about him again. All of that, and all I had to do to get it was be a little slower than normal.

"I'm not saying you have to do anything," she murmured before looking up and catching my gaze. "Just don't be too hard on yourself if this patient doesn't pull through."

April turned on her heels, marching out with her head held high and shoulders squared. My brows lifted as Hunter walked back to the gurney. "Did you hear all that?"

"Yep," he said. "Can't say I blame her. Hell, I've been itching to put him in a state like this myself. I know you have too."

"It's been a dream for a while now." I motioned to Rhonda to close the curtain when she came back to us after saying goodbye to Adi.

"What can I do?" she asked.

I barked orders at her and Hunter for God only knew how long after that. With every injury we found and got temporarily sorted out, something else would come out of the woodwork.

“He’s going to need brain surgery,” I said eventually after shaving half of his head clean to get a good look at what was going on inside it. “There’s a decent bleed. Heart’s still thready, too.”

The next moment, his monitor went completely haywire. I snapped my gaze up to see his blood pressure spiking again. Rhonda jumped into action instantly, filling a syringe and passing it to me.

Hunter arched an eyebrow at me. “What’re you going to do, boss?”

I rolled my eyes and inserted the plunger into Craig’s IV line. Almost immediately, the monitors started slowing down and Rhonda let out a relieved breath. “That was a close one. Let me call up to surgery and find out if they’ve got an operating room available for him. He won’t be with us much longer if he keeps misbehaving.”

It was a phrase I knew many people had thought about him in his life—Hunter, myself, and April being prime examples of such people—but it was quite literal now. There wasn’t much time if something kept going wrong every time we got another issue fixed.

Rhonda drew the curtain aside and disappeared from the room just as Craig started seizing. Once again, the monitors blared, and this time, the built-in alarms went off too.

Hunter and I made eye contact over the man crashing on the gurney between us. He lifted a ginger brow at me again.

“It’s now or never. Maybe. Maybe you’ll get a second chance to make your decision in a few minutes either way, but you never know. What’s it going to be?”

I dragged in a breath. It was like time slowed down in our little corner of the ER. So much depended on this moment.

My earlier thoughts about the peace of mind April would have if Craig wasn’t around to bug her came rushing back. But I also tried to envision a future in which I had to look Adi in the eye on a daily basis and live with the knowledge that I hadn’t done everything in my power to save her father.

I just didn't know if I could live that way. Unfortunately, I also didn't know if April could live with the constant threat of having him looming over every move she made.

The wild beeping continued while I stood there trying to decide what to do. Hunter waited for me to act with no judgment in his eyes or demeanor. He knew the possible implications of this decision, and he trusted me to make the call.

Whatever that call might end up being, I knew he would have my back.

The next thing we knew, the erratic beeping suddenly ceased and was replaced with one flat noise. For all intents and purposes, right in that moment, Craig was gone, and all of April's problems—and a fair share of my own—were gone with him.

"We need a crash cart in here," I shouted before turning to rip the privacy curtain open.

April and Adi stood against the wall at the other side of the hallway, their gazes riveted to me. My mouth tightened when I met April's eyes, but the cart I'd called for was already being barreled toward me.

"Paddles," I snapped at the nurse who'd run the cart in.

She handed them over in the blink of an eye and told me when they were charged. For the next grueling minutes, there was no telling what would happen.

"They're waiting for him in surgery," Rhonda yelled as she hung up the phone at the nurses' station and came racing back to us.

"We'll send him up as soon as we can." I kept working him over, uncertain whether those few seconds that had passed before I acted would change the outcome of the effort I was putting in now.

"Clear," I ordered, watching as both Hunter and Rhonda stepped back. Pressing the paddles onto his chest, I kept my eyes on the monitor as they administered the potentially life-saving shock he needed.

A few more seconds passed before, just as suddenly as it'd stopped, his pulse came back. Sweat dripped from my brow, and regret already swirled around in my stomach, but I knew I'd done the right thing. I had made an oath to do no harm, and I had kept that oath today, as difficult as it had been.

“Let's get him up to surgery,” I said to Rhonda, accepting a paper towel from Hunter as I unplugged the monitor from the socket above the gurney. “It's going to need to be done fast. We might lose him again on the way. There's a lot of damage.”

She nodded just as one of the surgical interns came running around the corner. There was panic in his eyes, but his voice and general demeanor were confident. “Doc sent me down here to get him. Is he ready?”

“Ready,” I confirmed before giving him a quick rundown about what we knew on the way to the elevator. They wheeled the gurney in with assurances to keep me updated throughout his surgery. Then the doors slid closed in my face and Craig was out of my hands for now.

For better or worse, I'd saved his life. I had done the right thing.

Now I had to face the consequences of that decision.

CHAPTER 32



APRIL

Katie arrived at the hospital confused. The parking lot in front of the emergency room was packed, but thankfully, the security guard knew her car and let her idle in a loading zone.

Adi and I ran up to her, and she cocked her head as she looked at me through her open window. “I thought you weren’t on shift today.”

“I’m not,” I said. “Could Adi spend the afternoon with you? I need to get back in there. I’ll explain everything later.”

She gave me a long look before she nodded and twisted around in her seat to smile at Adi. “Come on, sweetheart. I have some cover photos to go over this afternoon. I think you’re going to love them. You can help me choose one.”

Adi smiled but shot me a wary glance. “Are you sure everything is okay?”

“It’ll all be fine, sweetheart.” I bent over to kiss the top of her head. “I just need to finish some stuff at work.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek, but when I opened the door for her, she climbed in. “Will we see you later?”

“Absolutely. It’s not going to be a late one.” At least, I hoped it wouldn’t be. I brought my gaze back to my sister’s after shutting Adi’s door. “I’ll bring dinner. Thanks for this.”

“Any time.” She frowned and glanced in the direction of the ER. “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“It’s fine. I just need to get back inside.” Straightening up, I waved goodbye and waited until the wheels were rolling before letting out a heavy breath.

When I’d gotten that bad feeling up in the therapy room, I hadn’t for one second expected to find Craig lying on that gurney. Especially not in the condition he was in.

I might not be a medically trained professional, but I wasn’t fucking stupid either. Anyone would’ve been able to tell that he was severely injured.

The worst thing was that, for a beat that lasted longer than I was proud of, I’d been relieved. If he died, I could live again.

But then I gave myself a mental bitch slap. As much as threatening to kill someone was fairly common, I didn’t think many people meant it seriously. If he’d died, sure, I wouldn’t have killed him, but feeling relieved that he might not walk out of the hospital felt like very much the same thing.

Maybe it wasn’t exactly the same thing, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling an intense sense of guilt about it. Moving off to the side to take a minute to breathe, I shoved my fingers into my hair and covered my eyes with my palms.

Adi and I had walked out shortly after the crash cart had arrived. By a stroke of pure luck, Katie had been finishing up a meeting with a photographer nearby, so she’d been able to get here within minutes of my text.

I didn’t know what had happened after we’d left obviously, but there was every possibility he hadn’t made it. Right now, my ex-husband and the father of my child could be lying lifeless inside my workplace.

Now there’s a lovely thought.

What would I tell Adi if that was true? How would I explain to her what had happened? Would I ever be able to go inside again without replaying the events of this day?

I didn’t have the answers to any of my questions. Least of which what I would do if he *had* made it. The court date was still looming, and so were all the worries about it.

Would Craig try to put a spin on his near-death experience? Would he try to use it as a way to win sympathy from a judge or to mitigate his past behavior?

The what-ifs were awful, but at least some of the answers were waiting for me just a few yards away. I didn't know if I'd ever be ready to face the truth of whichever way Chris's attempts at saving his life had gone.

Then there was the fact that I'd all but asked him not to save Craig's life. It had been a spur of the moment comment that had just slipped out of my damn filterless mouth—an errant thought that should never have wormed its way past my tongue.

Chris and I were still settling into a relationship. It was entirely possible that he would now think I was a murderous witch while he'd taken an oath to preserve human life at all costs. We might not have put a label on this thing between us, but somewhere along the line, it had gotten a lot more serious than I'd initially planned for. Losing him now would suck balls.

But if there was one thing I'd learned, it was that the only way to the other side was to push through. Which meant it was time to buck up and start making my way to whatever was waiting for me just inside those doors.

Tipping my head back toward the hazy sunlight of the late afternoon, I let it wash over my face while I tried to get my racing thoughts under control. Horns honked, people milled around, and in the office buildings all around me, people were going about their normal daily lives. None of them even had any clue of the moral and emotional dilemma I was having, nor would they care.

Sad, but true.

I filled my lungs with smoggy, thick air several times before I finally plucked up the courage to do what needed to be done. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I marched past several co-workers and couldn't find the strength to give any of them much more than a forced smile.

Chris stood at the nurses' station filling out paperwork, but he looked up as soon as I started down the corridor toward him. The apprehension in his expression and the grim set of his jaw weren't promising, but I'd made it this far.

Either way, I was about to find out several things that would change the course of my life. We locked eyes as I walked up to him and stopped only about a foot away. The hand that wasn't holding the pen shifted at his side like he'd wanted to reach for me, but he stuck it into the pocket of his coat instead.

"What happened?" I asked, glancing toward the empty bay where Craig's gurney had been earlier.

The muscles in his throat worked and I couldn't quite decipher the look that came into his eyes. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, a clear indication that he was having a hard time talking about it, before he swallowed and kept his statement simple.

"I saved his life." He signed and set the pen down on the counter, turning his body to face me fully. "He died on the table and I brought him back."

My gaze bounced from one of his eyes to the other, but I was still unable to make out what I saw in them. "Why?"

"It's my job." He sighed softly but never broke eye contact with me. "You know who I am, how seriously I take my job, and why I got into it in the first place. I couldn't just let him go."

Something that looked a lot like regret suddenly clouded his irises, and I knew he knew what I hadn't asked him to do. I also knew he knew why I'd even thought it. Clearly, he felt bad about not doing it.

The problem was that I didn't know how to feel about it. Guilt or no, part of me still kind of wanted to not have to worry about a custody battle when my child would be in actual danger if he won. Maybe that made me psycho, but maybe it just made a mom. No mother wanted their child in danger, but

especially not from someone who only wanted to see them to fuck with you.

“I do know who you are, and I adore that person,” I said, keeping my voice low enough that no one passing by would be able to overhear me. “But I also know that this was a way out, and you brought him back to life.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “It was a way out, and I did bring him back to life. But I wouldn’t have been the person I was if I handled it any other way.”

“I know.” I crossed my arms to hug my chest as a shiver passed through me. “I just have mixed feelings about it. This could’ve all been over. Adi would never have had to go through a lawsuit in which *she’s* the subject matter.”

“True.” His chin lifted a fraction of an inch higher. “I’m not apologizing for saving him.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Moisture started burning the backs of my eyes. “But I have to go. I need some time to process everything that happened today.”

“Fair enough.” Slowly bringing his hands out of his pockets, he burrowed one of them between my arms to squeeze my hand while the other went to my hip. Green eyes blazing intently into mine, he took a step closer until our chests were touching. “Call me when you’re ready to talk.”

“I will,” I promised, my throat closing as I tried to choke back tears. I didn’t understand why I suddenly had the overwhelming urge to cry, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold it in much longer.

With one last teary-eyed look at the man I was pretty sure I’d been falling in love with, I wrenched out of his grip and took off back toward the parking lot. I didn’t go to my car though.

There was still about an hour before Adi’s regular dinner time, so I had plenty of time to try to make sense of what I was feeling enough to reel it in before I got to my sister’s place. Since it was still warm and nice out, I decided to take a walk in an attempt to clear my head.

When that didn't work, I realized I needed to talk this out with someone. The nearest seat was a bus bench, but that would have to do.

As I made myself small in a corner, I pulled my phone out and called Luna. If there had ever been a time I needed my friend, this was it.

"Hey, you," she chirped into the phone when she answered. "How are you? How're things going with the hot doctor?"

The tears from earlier jumped back into my eyes at the sound of her voice. They burst out of me when I told her everything that had happened. Cyrus's voice came over the line next. I had no idea if he'd been listening all the time or if she'd put me on speaker at some point during the story, but I was actually kind of happy he was there.

"Craig is the biggest piece of shit in the world," he declared. "I'm not surprised you thought what you did, nor do I think you have anything to feel guilty about."

"I agree with him," Luna said. "That man has done nothing but make your life hell for more than a decade. You lost everything because of him and you've had to claw your way back despite all the debt and stuff he left you with."

I swallowed hard. "Yeah, but is that really a good enough excuse for asking Chris to let him die?"

"You didn't ask him that," Cyrus said. "You thought it and it slipped out. It doesn't even really matter because he didn't do it."

"He didn't, but now I think I might be pissed off with him about it. If I think about all the grief we could've been spared if he'd just not done anything..."

I couldn't say any of the words, but with Cyrus and Luna, I didn't need to. They knew what I meant anyway.

"Hey, listen to me," Luna said. "You're allowed to be peeved with him. We get peeved at the people closest to us even when it doesn't make any sense. They love us, and therefore, they have to live with the brunt of our emotions."

“I don’t know if he’ll see it that way.” My teeth sank into my lower lip. “I also don’t know if I can see it that way. Not right now anyway.”

“If he doesn’t see it that way, he’s not the right guy for you,” Cyrus said. “Trust me on that one. He knows what you’ve been through with Craig, right?”

“Right.”

“Then he better fucking understand, and if he doesn’t, fuck him. Metaphorically, of course.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry. Excuse all those fucks and replace them with fricks.”

“Got it.” An unexpected smile spread on my face. It was so sweet when he was trying to pacify Luna by taking back all the cuss words that so often came out of him when he wasn’t even thinking. “So you don’t think he’ll worry that I have murderous tendencies?”

“You do have murderous tendencies.” Luna’s voice was gentler now. “But only when it comes to the safety and wellbeing of your daughter. You’re one fierce mama bear, but every child deserves a mother who’d be willing to kill for them. Maybe not literally, but you know what I mean.”

“Especially when the father is an asshole who wouldn’t lift a finger to help,” Cyrus chimed in. “Also, she might say you shouldn’t be willing to kill for your child, but I would be. I’m ninety-nine percent sure anyway. It’s too early to tell for that other one percent.”

“Too early?” My eyebrows shot up and my own troubles leaped into the backseat. “Does that mean—”

“We found out this morning,” Luna said. “We’re just on the way to the doctor. It should be around six weeks. That’s what we think anyway.”

While I squealed like a lunatic, sitting on a bus bench in the middle of the city, I realized I’d been wrong earlier. There were people who cared when your life had been irrevocably changed. All you had to do was reach out to them and hope they could help you find the silver lining.

Luna's pregnancy might not change my circumstances directly, but it did give me hope. New things were always happening. New relationships were formed, tested, and sometimes, if you were lucky, they survived.

It'd happened for Cyrus and Luna. Now if I could only figure out how to get past my own mental baggage and roadblocks, maybe it could happen for me.

CHAPTER 33



CHRIS

“Did they let you know that he made it through the surgery yesterday?” Hunter asked as we were setting up for our first patient of the day.

I nodded. “I can’t say I’m surprised. Parasites don’t die that easily.”

“Not unless you let them.” He gave me a meaningful look. “That was a hell of a thing you did.”

My heart did the strange clenching thing it had done every time I thought about what it would’ve meant to April if Craig wasn’t around anymore. “I know.”

My friend was silent for a minute while he unpacked a new tricycle I’d ordered for one of our much younger patients. We needed to work on his balance and his birthday was coming up. I’d been looking forward to the look on his face when I gave him this gift for weeks. Now that the day was finally here, I wasn’t feeling very festive.

The way April had looked at me after I’d told her I’d saved Craig’s life did not bode well for any future between us. Ultimately though, I’d done what I had to do. I desperately wanted her and Adi in my life, but not at the cost of neither of us ever having a clear conscience again.

He had come in as my patient, and that was how I had to treat him. No more, no less.

“Since he’s out of surgery, you remember you have to go check in on him today?” Hunter asked.

“I know.” I’d rather have gone in for surgery myself than to pretend to give a fuck about that asshole’s wellbeing, but I had a job to do. “I’m going to go now before our sessions start. We’re pretty much set up for now.”

“That we are,” he agreed before cocking his head and narrowing his eyes at me. “Do you want me to come with you? Just in case you decide to unplug him or something?”

I snorted. “Nah, I’ll be fine. I received some news earlier that will make it easier to deal with him.”

The news I’d received had been something I’d expected, given the scent that had been coming off Craig when I’d worked on him, but it had only been confirmed this morning. The knowing look on Hunter’s face told me I didn’t even have to share the news with him. He already knew what it was.

“Grit your teeth and bear it then.” He grinned. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

I nodded and decided to get it over with before I changed my mind. If I went now, I wouldn’t have it hanging over my head for the rest of the day.

Craig was lying in one of the smaller rooms at the end of a corridor. It was literally the farthest away the nurses could have put him from their station, and I wasn’t surprised. April was a sweetheart around here. Being on her wrong side meant you were on everyone’s wrong side.

They would take care of him just like I had, but no one would be doing him any favors. He looked up when I opened his door, his face bruised and swollen. Without the dark hair, he looked more like a cue ball than ever, especially since most of his features were swollen into a big blob.

His dark eyes might be slits, but even that couldn’t hide the venom in them when he saw who had entered his room. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

I strolled in casually and lifted the chart at the foot of his bed, checking over everything I had to. “I’m required to check in on patients I’ve treated. I’m checking in on you just like I’m required to do.”

What little color he had regained in his cheeks drained away again. “You’re the one who saved my life?”

“Unfortunately.” I shrugged while signing off on the form left for me by the surgeon. “How are you feeling?”

He grunted instead of answering my question. “Why didn’t you let me die? If I was you, I would have.”

“You’re not me.” I finished going over the chart before letting it drop with a clatter on the table over his bed.

“What? You’re so much better than me?” The effect of his words fell flat with how purely pitiful he looked lying all beat up, all alone in a room where no one had even opened his blinds.

“No.” I walked over to the window and started rolling them up. Heaven forbid we got a complaint of mistreatment from the asshole. “Letting someone die is the same as killing them as far as I’m concerned.”

“So?” He dropped his head back on the pillow and groaned. “I’m sure you’d much rather have seen me dead.”

“You’re not worth it,” I said honestly. “It came down to knowing that I could help April at the expense of my morals or I could save a life. April didn’t need that kind of help. She’ll win at court without breaking a sweat.”

“So you did it for her?” He scoffed. “We may have gotten divorced years ago, but I still know her. I doubt she agrees with you on that one.”

“What we agree or disagree about is none of your concern.” I wound the beaded chain around its hook and turned to face him again.

The early morning sunlight now streamed in, making him look even worse. I didn’t particularly enjoy seeing anybody in pain, but I didn’t have much sympathy for him either.

“The police came by to see you last night,” I said. “Your blood alcohol level was off the charts. As soon as you’re stable, they’re coming back to take you in for drunk driving.”

His jaw was covered in so many grazes and purple bruises that I couldn't be sure, but I had a feeling it had slackened. "What the fuck? Who called them?"

"The hospital. It's policy." I shrugged again. "Enjoy your last few days of freedom. There's almost certainly an arrest in your future."

I pushed away from the window and strode toward the door, turning around with my hand on the handle. "You can use the call button if you need something. Someone will probably be by eventually. Provided they have a minute to spare."

"You should have just let me die," he groaned, no doubt also feeling the effects of the alcohol now that the sun had made its appearance in his room. "Why would you let me live just so I can be arrested?"

"There's no easy way out of this life, Craig." I twisted the knob on the door and yanked it open. "Be a man and grow up already. All this shit you've been pulling is pathetic."

Letting the door slam shut behind me, I inhaled deeply once I was out of his room. It still smelled like shit in there.

The police would be by again every day until Craig was ready to be discharged. Later today, they would be coming to take his statement. One sniff at the fumes in there, and I doubted they would need to ask many questions.

As much as I didn't revel in the misery of others, in this one instance, I decided it would be okay to not feel sorry for the guy at all. The healing process was going to be a painful bitch. It would require extensive therapy that I sure as shit wouldn't be providing, and he might or might not have done permanent damage to more than one part of him.

I'd never asked April point blank but I was sure he'd been arrested in the past. If this wasn't his first conviction, he might also be facing prison time. Hell, even if it was, he might end up behind bars.

Since I hadn't been there when the police had arrived last night, I didn't have many details about the accident. If

someone else had been injured, he might as well become acquainted with the size of that room. A much smaller one would be waiting for him.

I couldn't say I'd been shocked to receive the message from the surgeon informing me of the police's visit. He'd reeked of alcohol while we'd treated him. I just hadn't been sure if he'd consumed it or if he'd had several bottles of bourbon dumped over his head before the accident.

Consumption had been my first guess, of course, but that wasn't the kind of thing I was at liberty to guess out loud. Drunk driving was a serious offense, but more especially so when there had been an accident. If push came to shove and I had to testify against him, I couldn't have been overheard talking about how drunk he was before we'd even done the blood tests.

I sighed just thinking about all the different possibilities of the capacity in which I might be called to testify against him. As Adi's doctor or his, as her therapist or April's boyfriend. *Or at this point, ex-boyfriend is probably more accurate.*

My phone had been ringing and beeping off the hook again, just like it did every day, but none of those calls or messages had been from her. I hadn't been expecting to hear from her last night, but I'd kind of wondered if maybe she'd be ready to talk by this morning.

As it turned out, saving her ex-husband was something she evidently needed more than fourteen or so hours to get over. But I got it. Adi meant everything to her, and as desperate as I was to keep them in my life, she was even more desperate to get Craig out of theirs.

I didn't blame her for it, nor did I judge her for the way she'd reacted yesterday. I just really wished she'd speak to me about it. With the arrest for drunk driving coming, there was even less of a chance of Craig getting custody than there had been before.

Moreover, Adi's father wouldn't be *dead*. But if time was what she wanted, time was what I would give her. I hated the

thought of so much as a day away from her, but I had made my decision. Now it was time for her to make hers.

In the meantime, there were other pieces of the puzzle I could get in place. Hunter was in our office when I got back to the therapy department.

He looked up from the computer when I walked in and gave me a hesitant grin. “You don’t look like a man who just murdered someone.”

“That’s because I didn’t.” I went to sit in the chair he usually occupied and let my hands hang between my knees, bringing my eyes up to his. “But it’s time for us to make our practice our priority. I didn’t only receive news about Craig this morning. I also heard back from the board. They’re prepared to offer us a deal. So are you ready to leave?”

“Whenever you are,” he said, a weight suddenly seeming to lift from his shoulders. “Talk to me. What are they offering us?”

CHAPTER 34



APRIL

What is that annoying thing tickling my nose? It took my subconscious a second to catch up to the fact that it felt exactly like Katie's old, annoying way of waking me up.

I groaned and tried to flip over on my side, but my boobs hit the leather upholstery of her couch instead of my bed. Cursing myself for not taking Adi and going home after dinner, I rolled over and cracked open an eye.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Katie was fully dressed already, looking as impeccable as always with her hair pulled into a low bun at the nape of her neck and clad in a pressed white dress. She peered down at me with a steaming mug of coffee perched between her manicured fingers.

"You got out of telling me what in the world happened yesterday because Adi was awake, and then once she was asleep, you were just too deathly tired to utter a single darn word."

I flung my arm over my eyes dramatically. "So you thought it was better to wake me up to talk about it now? What time is it?"

"Just after five." She shrugged. "You've had enough sleep. If you're super nice to me, I might even go fix you a cup of coffee before I make you spill the beans."

"In all honesty, I'm surprised you waited this long." I let out a long breath as the events of the day before came crashing

into me. “So please will you get me some coffee while I just go brush my teeth and stuff?”

“It’s a testament to how often you stay here that you even keep a toothbrush here,” she said before turning to head toward her kitchen. “Make sure that never changes, okay? No matter what, I don’t want to lose our sleepovers when we only started having them again after Luna fell in love.”

“That’s not true. We just didn’t have them so often before, but we’ve always had them.” I realized that I didn’t have it in me to keep arguing with her. “We won’t lose them again though. Why would we?”

“Oh, you know.” She flicked her hand as she paused in the doorway. “Just now that you’re seeing a guy. Please buy different toothbrushes for his place and leave those ones here. I’ve grown used to seeing them all over my bathroom.”

“Oh, ha,” I replied humorlessly. “Very funny. I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

When I got back to the living room, she was seated in her armchair and my coffee was standing on a coaster on her table. I climbed onto the couch I also preferred to sleep on when we stayed over here, and I pulled my blanket over my knees.

As I leaned over to get my caffeine fix, I felt like I’d aged ten years overnight. My back ached, my hip felt like it was cracked, and my neck was so stiff I could barely turn it.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. “He’s going to be the cause of my death one of these days.”

Katie frowned at me. “Who? Chris?” Her face fell and her nose scrunched up. “Eww, don’t tell me you’re moving like that because of whatever acrobatics you two were up to before you came over here last night.”

“Definitely not.” Although I kind of wished that were the case. “I was talking about Craig actually.”

“You slept with Craig?” she whispered furiously, confusion darkening her eyes before she tore them away from me to look down the hall to where Adi was sleeping. “What were you thinking, April? Why?”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” I hissed. “Is she awake? Why are we whispering?”

My sister cleared her throat and sat back. “If it’s not that, we don’t need to whisper. It was just either a whisper-yell or a yell-yell, if that was what you had done.”

“It wasn’t. Fuck.” I set my coffee down to drag both hands through my hair. “You scared me.”

“Well, you scared me yesterday and you made me wait until now to find out what happened. Enough is enough. What the heck was going on inside that hospital? Don’t tell me it was work because I already know it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t,” I admitted, letting my head drop back against the couch and staring at the black flecks in her ceiling. “Craig got into an accident. He wasn’t wearing a helmet. It was bad.”

Her back shot ramrod straight and some coffee spilled, rolling down the side of her mug. She didn’t even seem to notice, which was very unlike her. “Is he okay? How bad?”

“Bad enough that Chris had to ask me if he could resuscitate him or if he had anything in place saying they weren’t allowed to.”

“Holy flying antelope.” Her eyes grew wide and her lips parted. She gave them a quick swipe with her tongue before her gaze darted back toward Adi’s room. “What did you say? Please tell me you didn’t do what I think I would’ve done.”

“I did,” I said before closing my eyes for the next part of my confession. “I mean, I didn’t tell them they couldn’t resuscitate him. I just asked Chris not to if it came to that.”

“Make that flying flipping elephants instead of antelope.” I opened my eyes just in time to see her scooting to the edge of her seat. More coffee sloshed out, but she still didn’t notice. “Did it come to that? Is Craig alive?”

“He’s alive. Chris saved him.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed. “You asked him to let Craig go and he didn’t do it?”

I nodded. “I didn’t exactly ask him. There were no words, but he knew what I was thinking.”

Katie sat back again, the most satisfied smile on her lips. “I wasn’t sure about Chris before, but I am now.”

“What?” I gaped at her. “It could all have been over. We wouldn’t have had to worry about Adi with him or about him coming after her or hurting her ever again.” There were about ten more points on the tip of my tongue, but Katie had heard them all before.

She simply smiled wider. “Yes, it could have. But it wouldn’t have been right.”

“Why not?” I blew on the surface of my coffee before testing a small sip.

My sister sighed but she also still looked way too smug for my liking. “He had a job to do, and he did it.”

“Yeah, but why would that make you like him even more? That’s ridiculous.”

She shook her head, a sad light entering her eyes I wasn’t sure I’d seen before. “Nope, it makes me like him even more because he became a doctor to save lives, and he did exactly that when it was hardest.”

“He saved the life of a man who’d have ended mine in a heartbeat given the opportunity.”

“I wasn’t only talking about Craig’s life. He saved yours too when he saved Craig’s—and Adi’s. You should be with Chris right now, April. What are you even doing here?”

“How did he save our lives?” I jabbed my free hand toward the bedrooms and lowered my voice. “He saved a man who’s trying to take that little girl in there away from me. I know his job is to save lives, but did he really have to save that life?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “What’s really going on here? You can’t honestly be mad because he didn’t let a man die?”

“I am, but...” My brows pulled together as I squeezed my eyes shut once more. “I’m also just really embarrassed that I

asked him to do that. And guilty. There's a ton of guilt too."

She waved her fingers with a flourish as she pursed her lips. "Listen, if he can't take a request like that from you under the circumstances, he's not the right guy for you anyway."

"That's what Cyrus and Luna said too."

"See? Everyone who really knows you knows you didn't mean it. I'm sure he knows it too. You'd never have been able to live with yourself if he had done it, sis." She leveled me with a look that meant business. "If you feel this bad about him not doing it, can you even begin to imagine how you would've felt if he had done it?"

"No." I lifted the blanket to my chest and snuggled underneath it like it was a shield that could hide me from all the worries in the world. "Even though I know I shouldn't be mad at him for it and even though I know he probably didn't take me seriously, I *am* still mad. I just don't know what to do or how to get over this."

"You don't get over it." She rolled her eyes at me. "You go to Chris, you talk to him about it, and you two get through it as a couple."

"How, though?" I'd never been very good at the couple stuff in general.

The love, light, forgiveness, and all that? I sucked at it. Then again, I hadn't had very many chances to practice forgiveness in the past. None of my relationships had ever made it to the point where we really had to forgive each other for something. It was usually over before then.

I sure know how to pick 'em.

"I think it's easy enough for you to work through this," she said. "It's a really simple question if you think about it. If Adi ever asks you about any of this, would you be proud of Chris for what happened, or would you have been proud of what could have happened?"

"Well, when you put it like that," I murmured, already feeling some of the anger melting out of me. If Chris had done what I'd asked, what I'd thought I wanted in the heat of that

moment, I wouldn't have been able to look my daughter in the eyes again.

I would never have been able to talk to her about honesty, fairness, or integrity with a clear conscience ever again. Whenever there was a lesson to be learned about any of those things, which would be often, I would have had to lie.

Eventually, I wouldn't even have been able to keep track of all the lies. They would've eaten me up from the inside out and I'd never have been able to be proud of myself or of Chris ever again.

I'd fallen for him because he was different than any other man I'd met before. If he'd done what I'd asked of him, he wouldn't have been different. He'd have been worse than all of them put together.

What he'd given me by ignoring my request had been a gift, a chance to win this fucking court battle once and for all, and to do it with my head held high and my soul intact.

"You're right," I said, pushing the blanket off my knees. "He did save our lives too. You're also right about me needing to see him. Are you busy today?"

"I have a shoot to get to, but Adi can go with me." She grinned but then waved her fingers in front of her nose. "You'd better go have a shower before you leave. While you're at it, go grab some clean clothes out of my closet too. I'm related to you and I wouldn't take you back if you look and smell like that."

A shout of laughter left me. I suddenly felt like I'd been carrying around a elephant on my chest and the damn thing had finally moved.

Despite all of that, I couldn't quite imagine myself showing up to win him back while wearing anything my sister owned. "Thanks, but I think I'll get dressed at home. If this goes well, you might not want me wearing anything of yours."

She paled but then burst out laughing too before waving me off. "Welcome back, my little lunatic. It's good to finally see you laughing again. When you get him back, I think it's

time to introduce him to the family. I have a feeling he's going to be around for a while."

CHAPTER 35



CHRIS

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me you’d ordered a sign,” I said as we walked up the stairs to our building. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell me the name that’s on it?”

“Nope.” He grinned, fishing the keys out of his pocket before unlocking the front doors. “I ordered it last night and the guy should be here any minute now. The reason I didn’t tell you is because you’d had a rough day and I wanted it to be a surprise. Waiting a few minutes longer to find out the name won’t kill you.”

“It might,” I grumbled as the door swung open.

Hunter walked in first, planting his hands on his hips as he surveyed the space from what was now our reception area.

We had come a long way with the renovations, but there was still a lot to be done before we would be able to open. In the meantime, we would be splitting our time between here and the hospital.

“You’re sure you rescheduled with all our patients for this morning, right?” I asked, following him inside.

After I’d told him that it was time to make the practice our priority, he’d beamed at me and then told me he had news. We had our first couple of sessions, but he’d cleared the rest of our day so we could be here when the sign got delivered.

He’d also promised that he’d stocked up on beer. Once the sign was up, we planned on having one to celebrate. Day drinking wasn’t really my thing, but I figured the occasion

merited one damn beer. Even if I was doubtful that whatever name would be on the sign would be the one we stuck with.

He turned to face me with a shake of his head. “Of course, I contacted all the patients. Who do you take me for?”

“Someone who’s very excited about his express order and may well have skipped one or two names on our list.”

“I didn’t skip anyone.” He let out a long-suffering sigh, but humor lit his eyes. “Now, are you ready to find out what our name is going to be?”

I looked over my shoulder to see a delivery van pulling up outside. Apprehension rolled through me, but I gave him a tight nod. “Sure. Let’s see what you’ve come up with this time.”

We walked to the curb, but Hunter motioned for me to stay back while he signed for the order. A man who was almost as big as he was heaved a package out of the bag and handed it over, causing Hunter to slump a bit before he adjusted to the weight.

“Whenever you’re ready for the main signage to be created, just let us know,” the man said. “Those will take longer to manufacture, so the turnaround will be a few weeks before they get delivered.”

Hunter nodded. “I understand. Thanks for the effort you guys put into getting this to us so fast. I just need to confirm with my partner, but we’ll be in touch.”

“We hope to hear from you soon.” He gave us each a curt nod before climbing back into the van and taking off.

Hunter held the sign so close to his chest that I still couldn’t see the name. He smirked and carried it past me. “This one is only the sign that will go up behind the reception desk. If you approve of it, I can order the signage for outside, stickers for the equipment, and stationery.”

“You have to show it to me before I can approve of it,” I said.

His smirk grew before he turned his back on me and disappeared inside. When I walked in after him, he was holding it up behind the plastic-covered desk that was currently the only furniture occupying the space.

He held it almost exactly where we'd decided the divider would go, high enough that I could see it from the steps. The font he'd chosen was bold but playful with clear, clean lines and cupped hands below the words.

It read "The Helping Hands," and was absolutely fucking perfect. I scowled at it for a moment to build suspense, then broke into a wide grin and started clapping.

"This may just be your finest achievement," I said. "I can't believe it, but I think you've really done it."

"You're serious?" He set the sign down carefully on the desk and narrowed his eyes at me. "I mean it. You're not fucking with me right now, are you?"

"Definitely not. I love it." I walked up to him and opened my arms. "Bring it in, man. Well done."

He enveloped me in a bear hug and thumped my back so hard I was afraid I might cough up a lung after, but it was worth it. When he finally stepped back, he jabbed a thumb up at our office. "Beer?"

"Beer," I said, turning to walk up the staircase.

Our office was the only part of the practice that was already fully functional. We had a desk each, computers that had been set up, and even a few couches. In a room right off from the office, there were even two futons in case we ended up working late and decided to crash here.

Hunter also insisted they could be used for naps, but I was hopeful we wouldn't have time for many of those. Especially now that we'd reached our deal with the hospital.

We also had a fridge in there, a coffeemaker, and a small round table where we could grab lunch. It had been important for us to get all that set up so we could move our base of operations here while splitting our time. Like getting our

treatment plans and reports drawn up, our admin would be done from here with immediate effect.

The hospital would start slowly redoing the therapy rooms there while we were moving out, which suited us perfectly. Even if it meant we'd be losing our office there as early as next week.

All in all, it was working out really well. Hunter grabbed us each a beer, and we sank down on the couches in the office. Both of us could see the lower level from here, and for a minute, we just drank our first sips and stared at our space.

“Can you believe we really did it?” he asked quietly, his gaze never leaving the floor below.

I shook my head. “If you hadn't found and bought this building, I'm not convinced we would've ever done it. This is all thanks to you.”

“Not really.” He shrugged. “You're the one who came up with it in the first place. I just pushed to make it happen.”

“Why?” I frowned, glancing at him over the top of my bottle. “I never really understood why you started pushing when you did.”

“Neither of us could spend much more time in the ER without getting sucked down there permanently, but neither of us want to be there for good.”

“What makes you think that?”

He sighed and dragged a hand through his shaggy hair. “I overheard some people talking one day about how they could outsource physical therapy to gain our space and keep our skills.”

I nearly choked on my beer. “You didn't think to tell me about this?”

“You've been preoccupied recently. I didn't want to stress you out even more.”

Lowering my chin, I gave him a sharp look. “It doesn't matter whether I've been preoccupied in my personal life. You still should've told me.”

“Nah.” He gave me a slight grin. “I’ve been waiting for a long time for you to meet a woman who captured your attention the way April did. The timing wasn’t great, but it wasn’t like I couldn’t handle finding us the space.”

“Clearly, you could handle it, but you shouldn’t have felt like you had to do it by yourself.”

“If I’d told you, I knew you would insist on buying the building yourself. We’ve talked about why I wanted to be the one to buy it. My reasons for keeping quiet weren’t purely selfless.”

I held my bottle up to his. “Even so, thanks for acting when you did. I’d have hated getting sucked into the ER.”

“We’ve been spending more than enough time down there as it is.” He clinked his bottle against mine, sipped, and then started scratching at the label. “Speaking about spending time down there, are you okay after what happened yesterday?”

My brow furrowed. “Sort of. Why? You don’t usually ask.”

“You don’t usually have to decide between saving your girlfriend’s ex who is also the scum of the earth or allowing him to leave said earth.”

“Yeah, well, making that decision wasn’t as easy as it should have been,” I admitted, sinking back against the couch. “I’m still struggling with it. A part of me thinks I should’ve just let him go while the other knows it was the wrong thing to do. None of us would’ve been able to live with something as dark and heavy as that.”

“I didn’t tell you this yesterday,” he said after a long pause, “but I’m proud of you for doing what you did.”

“Why? I didn’t do anything other than my job.”

“Maybe not, but you still saved a life. The life probably didn’t deserve it, but most people wouldn’t have had the courage to do what you did. Even working on him would’ve been a stretch for most, but you went above and beyond for him.”

“I did what I needed to do.” I wasn’t trying to be modest or humble, simply honest. “Trying to get him back for longer than others might’ve was only because I was the one who’d hesitated in the first place.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “You hesitated for *maybe* a couple of seconds. It might’ve felt like longer to you, but it wasn’t.”

“Sometimes, a couple of seconds is what makes that vital difference between life and death.” I took a long sip of my beer, licking my lips when I drew the bottle away from them. “It doesn’t really matter now anyway. The douche is alive and we’re still heading to court.”

If April ever spoke to me again, that was. I still hadn’t heard a peep from her, and I was starting to wonder if I would again. Sure, it had only been a day, but she wasn’t one to twiddle her thumbs.

Hunter sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “He’s going to have a criminal record for drunk driving after this. That has to improve your odds even more. What judge will award custody to a man when his daughter was injured riding a motorcycle without a helmet just months before he nearly killed himself the same way while drunk?”

“Hopefully, no judge.” I drained the remainder of the beer. “It’s not an exact science, though. Judges are only people, which means they’re always going to be influenced by their own experiences to a certain extent.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose that’s true. Whatever happens, we’ll get through it. All of us. I don’t want April to lose custody of Adi any more than you want it.”

“Which is why I’m struggling so much with that fucking decision.” I set the bottle down with a loud thud and scrubbed my palms over the stubble on my jaw. “April was right. It could all have been over. Instead, I just had to let my conscience get the better of me and save him.”

He finished the rest of his beer before standing up. “Your father would’ve been proud of you for doing what you did.

You have to face the court challenge, but you will win. Even if you don't, there has to be a better way of going about things.”

I frowned up at him when he slid his phone into his pocket and picked up his keys. “Where are you going?”

“Oh.” He smirked. “It looks like I should get going.”

Twisting around on the couch, I looked down to see April walking through the door. My heart picked up speed and I suddenly felt hot.

I felt like shit and I was pretty sure I looked it too. April, on the other hand, looked like she'd walked off the cover of a dirty magazine. Not that she was wearing anything very revealing but because the way she looked would kickstart any guy's libido.

The difference was that it wasn't just my libido she kickstarted when she walked in. It was my heart too. Her black skirt hit just above mid-thigh, her kitten heels made her legs look a hundred miles long, and her shirt was cut low enough to give more than just a hint of her cleavage.

But while I noticed all that, it was her eyes I couldn't look away from. Even from all the way up here I could see the intensity in them. It was like she had laser vision, and when that gaze landed on me, I realized that I couldn't just let her go.

I fucking loved her.

CHAPTER 36



APRIL

H*ow does he always look so damn good and put together?* When I'd gotten back to my place earlier this morning, I'd looked like I'd had a fight with the Goddess of Mascara and had a raccoon stuck in my hair for a better part of the day, and I still wasn't sure if my clothes could be saved.

They'd been so rumpled and wrinkled that, short of having them professionally cleaned and ironed, I was pretty sure I might as well just toss them in the trash. I'd looked so bad that it had taken me hours to get presentable again.

Then it had taken me several more to blow out my hair, choose an outfit, and finally gather up the courage to go see him. I wasn't above layering in a little seduction to convince him to give me another chance, and I'd thought I might be able to do a little play on our first time together if I found him at the hospital.

I was surprised when I got there to find the place empty except for a few inspectors in their office, already planning on where and how to knock out the walls. I'd taken a chance by coming to the practice, but then I'd spotted the open doors, and my heart had soared.

Now that I was inside though, I felt practically naked in the skirt I'd chosen. I hadn't worn the thing since I'd bought it for a girls' night out with Luna once, and that had been before she'd even broken up with her ex-boyfriend. Which meant it had been at least four years since I'd worn anything this short, and I was feeling it now.

Hunter grinned when he walked past me, letting out a low whistle between his teeth. “Looking good, girl. I’m glad you’re here. Do me a favor and don’t leave until you’ve both put this behind you, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, though I wasn’t convinced that was up to me. I was the crazy chick who’d all but asked him to kill her ex-husband. I still couldn’t believe I’d done that.

Who does that?

Oh, right. Me. That’s who.

To top it all off, I’d also gone and told Chris I was pissed off at him for saving said ex-husband. And I had been *really* pissed off about it.

“I’ll give it my best shot,” I told Hunter. I managed to paste a smile on my face and waited until I heard the door closing before looking back up at Chris.

He was standing against the railing outside their office now, looking as gorgeous, confident, and cool as always. *I bet it didn’t take him hours to achieve that look.*

I, on the other hand, was a cool imposter. Having given myself a proper onceover in the mirror before I left, I knew I looked the part. But I also knew I didn’t feel the part.

Chris wore dark blue jeans and a black button-down shirt. His short hair was styled perfectly in that “oh, this? I didn’t do a thing to it” way that I happened to know meant he really hadn’t done a thing to it.

Those green eyes tracked my every move when I walked toward the staircase to meet him up there, but he didn’t say a thing. The closer I got though, the more I realized he wasn’t quite as cool and aloof as he’d appeared to be from down below.

There was tension in the rigid set of his shoulders and the tight line formed by his jaw. To my surprise, his first words to me weren’t “Get away from me, you insane woman,” or “I’ve called the cops,” or even “Have you forgiven me for not turning myself into a murderer for you?”

Instead, concern filled his eyes and he took a few steps closer to me when I reached the landing. “Are you okay?”

My eyes nearly fell out of my head, and the pure shock of hearing those words from him first made me stumble a little. Happily, I grabbed onto the railing before I fell flat on my face.

“I’m fine. You?” I straightened out my skirt, more to have something to do with my hands—other than reach for him—and stopped several feet away.

He surveyed the distance I’d left between us, sighed, and then nodded. “Sure.”

“Do you mind that I stalked you here?” A slightly nervous laugh bubbled out of me. “I went to the hospital first. I would’ve tried your place next, but I’d never have gotten in there anyway, so I figured I’d try here.”

“You can always get in there, April. I gave the doorman your name ages ago. He’d have let you up.” His brows pulled together. “So would I, if you’d told me you were there.”

A tiny burst of hope radiated through me. “So you haven’t told your doorman to be on the lookout for a possibly murderous redhead who has anger issues and a large cruise ship full of baggage that she drags around with her?”

The smallest hint of a smile touched his lips. “Actually, I told him that if he saw an assertive redhead who thought she saw an opportunity to get everything she wants and spoke before she really thought about it, to grab her and keep her for me.”

“You told him to kidnap me?” I joked. “Well, that’s a good sign.”

He scratched the side of his neck before he laughed. “Yeah, I guess that did come out a little creepier than I’d intended. What I meant was that I was so afraid you were never going to speak to me again that I would’ve had him ask you politely to wait for me if he did happen to see you.”

My eyebrows arched. “*You* were afraid *I* would never speak to you again?”

“Of course, I was. You weren’t exactly happy with me when you left the hospital yesterday.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I said. “But I wasn’t exactly happy with myself either. What I asked you to do...” I couldn’t even get the words out. My throat and mouth dried up at even the thought of having to speak them.

Chris gave his head a firm shake. “What you *didn’t* ask me to do was completely understandable, April. Show me any mother in your situation who wouldn’t have had the thought, and I’ll show you someone who’s lying.”

“You really feel that way?” I asked, not proud of how small and disbelieving my voice was.

“Is there any other way to feel about it?” He dipped his head to the side. “I don’t even know everything he’s put you through, and I was thinking it before you’d even *not* asked.”

“You were?” My brows swept up and I crossed my arms. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“No.” Moving slowly, he started walking toward me. “It was a difficult situation. He was already really badly injured. Both of us know what kind of person he is. It’s impossible not to think about whether the world would’ve been a better place without him in it.”

“So you’re not worried I’m the kind of person who might kill you in your sleep after that?”

He blinked back surprise, then laughed again as he shook his head. “I know you’re not. You had a fleeting thought when the guy was on the brink of death anyway. Now that you’ve had time to think about it, how would you have felt if I’d done nothing?”

I blew out a heavy breath. “Wow. That’s a pretty tough question, but my sister said something very true this morning. I want a story I can be proud about telling Adi, and this is one that I feel that way about you.”

“We’re in agreement that we wouldn’t have been able to look her in the eyes again otherwise?” He came to stand right in front of me, peering down at me with such hope in his eyes

that I couldn't really believe he felt that strongly about how I felt.

"I know I wouldn't have," I said softly. "I also know I had no right to be mad at you. In that moment, it just felt like the answer to all my problems had fallen right into my lap. I know it sounds harsh."

He reached for my hands, taking both of them in his without moving his gaze off mine.

"But it's true. It did feel that way. Even to me. It doesn't change the facts, though. I'm not a judge, jury, or an executioner. I'm a doctor, and he was my patient."

"I know." I sighed, turning my palms to wind my fingers around his. "So where does this leave us then?"

"I think that depends on you." He adjusted his grip on me to tug me gently closer to him, then bent his knees to look right into my eyes. "I don't want this to change anything between us. If it already has, I need to know if there's a way we can move past it."

I searched his gaze for a long minute, looking for anything that even vaguely resembled doubt or dishonesty. When I didn't find it, I gave him a soft smile. "I think it has changed things between us but maybe for the better. This was our first big fight."

"You call that a fight?" he asked, but his voice was light and teasing. "We had a disagreement about something we felt similar about. That's it. I won't deny that I'm still struggling with the decision I made, but there wasn't really any other decision to make."

"You're right." I let out a slow breath. "What you did was the right thing to do. There wasn't any other decision to make. I'm not even really sure why I thought there was."

"You didn't really," he said. "If you did, you wouldn't be feeling the way you are now. It was a momentary lapse in judgment on both our parts. But more importantly, neither of us acted on it. You didn't ask me to do anything or to not do anything, and I did what I had to do."

“So what you’re saying is we’re allowed to have fleeting thoughts about murder?”

“Don’t most people?” He smiled but his expression turned serious again almost immediately. “We were just placed in a position most people who wish someone would just die don’t usually get placed in. His accident was that serious, and that’s on him.”

“Yeah, but I still feel horrible about it.”

Chris pressed his lips to my forehead and breathed in deeply. “I know. So do I. But I also feel horrible about what Adi’s going to have to go through because I worked so hard to pull him through.”

“We’ll get through it together,” I said, and for the first time, I really, truly believed it all the way down to my bones. “We have the truth on our side.”

“Craig will have a shiny new drunk driving charge,” he said. “So there’s that too.”

I pulled my head back, but I wasn’t really surprised. “He was drunk? I thought I smelled alcohol, but then I figured it had to be something in the hospital.”

“Nope, it was him. He should’ve known better than to get on a motorcycle intoxicated. They’re not called ‘donor’ cycles for nothing, and when people drive under the influence, it’s even more dangerous.”

“Yeah, but a lot of people don’t see it that way. I really didn’t think Craig would go that far though. Drunk on a motorcycle without a helmet? It’s a miracle he made it to the hospital in time for you to even have to make a decision.”

“Let’s hope it was a miracle that will make him change his ways.” He hugged me tightly before pressing a chaste kiss to my lips. “But he’s going to do what he’s going to do. In the meantime, how do you feel about going to get some lunch?”

“I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.” I smiled, slipped my hand into his, and thanked my lucky stars that Cyrus had been right too. Chris really did know me well, and

somehow, despite my mouth lacking a filter and everything else, he still wanted me as much as I wanted him.

CHAPTER 37



CHRIS

April and I walked out of the practice hand in hand. I couldn't believe how good it felt to have her by my side again, even if it had only been less than twenty-four hours since she'd last been there.

The possibility that I wouldn't have her there again had made it feel like it had been weeks. With her fingers entwined with mine and everything between us out in the open, I had a renewed sense that we would last.

Now, all I had to do was convince her, especially since I still hadn't told her about the revelation I'd had earlier.

It hadn't felt like the right time, but now every time I opened my mouth, it was like the only words that wanted to come out were those.

April turned to look at me and walked sideways, her hand still in mine. "What do you feel like having for lunch?"

"Street tacos," I replied without having to think about it. "I should probably warn you that I eat a lot of those. They're my comfort food, my celebratory food, and my go-to for anything in between."

"Yeah? Why's that? I love a good taco, but I can't say that I eat them for any special occasion."

"My father had a taco stand." I smiled at the memories of seeing him standing in his truck, grinning at customers who were all like friends to him, and chatting up a storm to them all. "They were the best tacos in New York. People came from all over to have them."

The expression in her eyes softened. “That sounds amazing. I wish I could’ve tried one. You never thought about taking over the truck from him?”

“I did. That was the plan.” I tightened my grip on her hand and dodged a jogger scrolling on his phone who almost ran into me. “But then he got sick. Everything changed for me after that.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“You know most of it. How close we were, what a shock it was, and now you know how it catapulted me into an entirely different career.”

“Do you regret it?” She wound a lock of hair absently around the fingers of her free hand. “Do you think you might have been happier if you’d taken over his truck instead?”

“No. I love my job.” I pulled her to a stop as we neared the stand, then wrapped my arms around her again. “Plus, I might not have met you if I’d been slinging tacos instead of working at the hospital.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she flashed me a wide smile. “Your lines are so cheesy sometimes, but I like them.”

“Except for the fact that it wasn’t a line.” Lowering my head, I claimed her lips for a kiss that wasn’t really appropriate for public viewing, but I also didn’t really care. When we finally broke apart, I added, “That’s how I really feel. Loving what I do for a living would have been enough for me, but since it also let me meet you, I really wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

She turned a deeper shade of red but threw her arms around me for a kiss that was even less appropriate for being out in public. By the time she pulled back, I’d just about decided to let go of the idea of eating anything other than her for lunch.

But then she grabbed my hand and dragged me the rest of the distance to the stand. Once we’d ordered and gotten our food, we each took one taco but wrapped the rest in the paper bag.

“You want to go eat back at the practice or find somewhere else?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Back at the practice? I’ll show you all the progress we’ve made since the last time you were there.”

“Really? It’s only been a couple of weeks. Are you suddenly in a hurry to open up?” She munched on her taco between sentences. “I thought you weren’t opening for months.”

“We’re not, but we’ve decided to make it our priority.” We stopped to wait for the pedestrian light before crossing the road. “Both of us think it’s better to get away from the hospital sooner rather than later.”

The light changed, but April didn’t start moving when I did. She stood with her feet planted and looked up at me with confusion darkening her eyes.

“Does that mean Adi and I are out?” she asked. “Because earlier, you said differently. Now suddenly, the practice is your priority and you can’t wait to leave the place where we both work?”

“I want you to come join us there, remember?” I frowned as I walked the few paces back to her again. “I offered you the job as our receptionist and I meant it. If you don’t want to, I’ll respect your decision. But that doesn’t mean anything for the two of us.”

“You still want me to join you?” She smiled. “Even after everything? Because I kind of thought you hadn’t asked about it again because you changed your mind.”

I released a long breath, narrowing my eyes at her while not completely able to hide a smile of my own. “You thought I was having second thoughts just because I didn’t want to put pressure on you to accept a job you told me you’d think about?”

“I guess I’m going to have to work on the whole ‘trusting you’ thing.” She put air quotes around the words. “Have I mentioned that I have a boatload of baggage?”

“You have, but that’s still not scaring me off.” I popped the last of the taco into my mouth and wound one arm around her while I chewed.

She wiped some sauce off the side of my lips, then pushed up on her toes to kiss the same spot. Her eyes were bright and happy when she lifted them to mine again. “Well, that’s probably good, considering that I’d love to take you up on your offer.”

“You’re not kidding?” I asked once I’d swallowed, wrapping the other arm around her as well.

“I’m not kidding. I’d love to come work with you guys.” A brilliant smile broke out on her lips just before I lifted her up in my arms and spun her around.

Locked in our own world even though we were on the sidewalk with hundreds of others, I came this close to telling her how I felt about her. But then she laughed and wriggled to get out of my grip.

“Let’s go eat. I’m starving.” She slid her hand into mine and swung her arm all the way back to the practice. Her smile never faded and she seemed to have endless questions about what Hunter and I would expect from her in her new position.

“Am I allowed to be sassy when someone deserves it?”

I grinned. “Yes, we wouldn’t even try to keep you from being exactly who you are.”

She chuckled, shrugging while we walked. “Could we have a pizza party after work one day a week?”

“Absolutely. Hunter might insist on doing it more often, but once a week is a start.”

Once we got to the building, she paused on the top step and turned to loop her arms around my neck. “Do I get to kiss you whenever I want to?”

“Yes.”

Since she was on the step, she was at my eye level. The emerald crystals in her eyes shone in the sun, her expression relaxed and happy.

She pulled me closer to her, her finger stroking through my hair. She smiled before pressing her lips lightly against mine. “Good. I plan on doing it often.”

As if to prove her point, she kissed me again and again before giving my lower lip a final nibble. Then she lifted her head. “We should go inside now. I think there have been enough public displays of affection today.”

“Totally your fault,” I teased but took her hand as we walked in.

She stopped just inside the doors, surveying the space with a new kind of interest. Looking at me over her shoulder, she raised a questioning eyebrow. “Is this where my desk would go?”

“Your desk can go wherever you want it, but I can show you the plans we’ve had drawn up for the floor layout. We’ll take any suggestion you have, except that Hunter’s insisting on a ‘Gone Fishing’ sign for the door.”

She laughed and inclined her head. “Duly noted. Let’s go eat upstairs and we can look over the plans while we eat. I’d love to help wherever I can.”

“You’ll help just by being here.” I swept an arm out in the direction of the stairs and motioned for her to precede me. “People will line up around the block just to see that face welcoming them.”

“You and your lines.” She laughed again, and the sound seemed freer than it had before. I was starting to realize that the more I heard her laugh, the more I noticed the nuances there were to it.

I supposed everyone had different laughs, but she was the first person I’d ever really bothered to notice. Then again, there wasn’t much I didn’t notice about her.

I wanted to hear that laugh for the rest of my life, and even then, it would never be enough. *So man up and tell her that.*

April fished the tacos out of the bag when we sat down in the office, but all I could think about was how to tell her what I needed to.

After a minute when I still hadn't sat down, she frowned at me. "Are you okay? You have a really weird expression on your face right now."

"I'm fine." I closed the distance between us and sank down to my knees in front of her, capturing her face between my hands as I decided to just go for it. "I was just wondering how to go about telling you that I love you."

Those startling green eyes flew wide open as they studied mine. While I hadn't been expecting her to say it back to me, I definitely didn't expect the taco she suddenly shoved into my mouth.

I was so surprised that I laughed while I chewed and swallowed, but then she took me by surprise again when she slid off the couch to join me on her knees on the floor after setting the rest of the taco aside. "Are you still hungry?"

"What?" I frowned, utterly confused. "No. Why?"

"Good. Neither am I." She shuffled as close to me as she could get, flung her arms around my neck, and brought her lips to mine in a kiss that told me she felt the same way.

CHAPTER 38



APRIL

He loves me? That couldn't be right, could it? I'd known for a while that I was falling for him, but I really hadn't expected that he felt the same way.

He did, though. I could question it, or I could accept the truth that had been in his eyes and his voice when he said it.

He loves me. My heart soared in my chest as I thought about the incredible man I was kissing. I should've said it back, but I was too overwhelmed to do anything except to get as close to him as I possibly could.

Part of me still felt like this had to be yet another dream about him, but the rhythmic beating of his heart against my chest and the feel of his firm lips beneath mine convinced me that it wasn't.

The kiss was sweet and soft at first, like he was welcoming me home after missing me for seventy years apart. Like he was trying to fuse our souls together. Honestly, I thought he was succeeding.

I warmed up from head to toe, inside and out. This kiss was a branding, but it was coming from both sides. It felt like a new beginning and the end of a chapter all at the same time. Whatever happened after this, we wouldn't emerge as the same people we had been just minutes before.

My legs shook as I pulled away and looked into his eyes. Thankfully, I was already on the floor so I wouldn't fall, but I also knew that if I did, he'd catch me.

Chris wasn't a man I would ever have thought of as vulnerable, but as I looked at him now, that was exactly what I saw. I'd been right. Our kiss had been more than a simple touch of lips. It had opened his heart and soul to mine, and mine to his.

A moment of total peace and acceptance passed between us. Neither of us were going to fight this anymore, and neither of us were going to be scared away by anything that happened from here on out.

The realization made my heart skip a beat. I'd never had as much certainty about anything in my life as I had about him right then. I mashed my chest against his in an attempt to get even closer to him. At this point, if I could've, I would've happily fused our bodies together as a literal representation of what had happened to our souls.

He looked at me in a way that said he felt the same. Cradling my face in one large hand, he placed the other on my lower back and pressed me even tighter against him.

"I love you," he whispered. Then he smiled against my lips before moving his to brush over my jaw, neck, shoulders, and even my eyelids.

As he held me to him, he slowly brought his mouth back to mine and groaned as our tongues met once more. With our bodies pressed as tightly together as they could get, I felt his hard length against my stomach, and suddenly, our kiss became hot and wet. Tender and loving turned to strong and needy, so intense and all-consuming that there could've been an earthquake and we probably wouldn't have noticed.

My fingers speared into his hair from the nape of his neck, tugging at the silky strands while his hands roamed lower until they were cupping my ass. Not caring that we were on the floor, I pulled him down until he was lying on top of me, then wrapped my legs around his waist.

My skirt might as well not have been there for the way it rode up, but it hadn't covered all that much to begin with. Chris moaned when he realized I was pretty much naked from

the waist down, except for a lacy scrap of panties that were literally the smallest pair I owned.

Rolling his hips against mine, he continued to devour my mouth. Both of us let out soft sounds of pleasure as he ground his hard length against my core. Sparks of pleasure rippled through me on each one of his thrusts, like he knew my body as well as the machine he himself had created.

My hands acted of their own accord when I reached between us to find the buttons on his jeans. I wouldn't be able to do much from this position, but I wanted to touch him, to feel him, and make him feel as good as he was doing to me.

Chris broke our kiss and a soft growl ripped out of him when I dipped my fingers into his waistband, brushing the tip of his cock. It wasn't a lot of contact, but it was something and pretty much all I could get.

My own need also ramped up about a million times when I realized that the backs of my fingers were wet. I let out a low, almost pained-sounding moan that made him rest his forehead against mine. Both our hearts raced wildly and our breathing was labored.

"I really don't want to stop what we're doing, but there's a futon in the other room," he said, his voice no more than a rough whisper. "Here's what going to happen. I'm going to get up and hold my hand out to help you up. You're going to take it. Then we're getting to the futon as fast as humanly possible. Lie down exactly as you are now, and then we'll hit un-pause and carry on from where we are."

I scrunched my nose in disapproval that he wanted to stop right then, but he had a point. This wasn't really the kind of moment for doing it on a concrete floor.

My clit throbbed, and my nipples were practically poking holes in my shirt, but I nodded despite my aching body's protests. "If you insist, but I'll race you there. In less than thirty seconds, I want you right back where you are."

"Deal." The muscles in his arms bulged beside my head when he planted his palms on floor on either side of me,

hovering there as he ran his nose down the length of mine. “It’s not like I’m all that eager to stop either.”

He jumped up then, following through with his plan of helping me up even though I’d said we were racing. His eyes smoldered as he looked down at me, but he smirked and smacked my butt once I was on my feet.

“Your thirty seconds start now.” We just about tripped over our own feet to get into the adjacent office, but when I hit the mattress first, I realized he had no intention of following me down.

He sat between my knees instead, his gaze riveted to mine as he spread my legs to fit between them. Still without breaking eye contact, he rolled up the front of my shirt to expose my stomach before lowering his mouth to plant a kiss beneath my belly button.

Electricity tingled over my skin from the feel of his soft lips there. Goosebumps rose in the wake of the electricity and a shiver ran down my spine.

He dragged his fingertips over my bare thighs before eventually hooking them around my waistband and pulling my skirt and panties down at the same time. Despite the clock I’d put on us, his movements were unhurried as he undressed me.

Parts of his fingers or hands touched me all the time, like he couldn’t bear the thought of not having some point of contact between us. His gaze followed his fingers, caressing me almost as surely as he exposed every inch of me.

Then his mouth joined the party as he kissed and nipped at my sensitive skin. Breathing in deeply once I was naked before him, his lids grew heavy and he let out another soft growling sound.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of seeing you like this,” he said as he brought his hands to the insides of my thighs, dragging his burning gaze over my most private parts. I didn’t mind it, though. Not with him.

In fact, I spread my legs even farther apart and let my head fall back against the firm mattress. “I’ll never get enough of

having you looking at me like that, but if you don't touch me soon, I'm pretty sure I'm going to combust spontaneously."

"As much as I would love to test that hypothesis sometime, it's not going to be today. Today, I'm going to make you come until I'm about to combust spontaneously. Then I'm going to make love to you until Hunter comes in tomorrow morning."

Emotion choked me up for a moment. "Make love to me, huh?" I never thought I would feel this way about him or anyone else, but I did. "I like the sound of that."

"There will be plenty of fucking in our future, but that's not what today is about." He bent down and sucked a nipple into his mouth. As he swirled his tongue around it, I decided not to let out a smartass retort about his assumption that there would be plenty of fucking in our future.

There would be, and we both knew it. Besides, I just didn't have it in me. Surrendering my body to his soft kisses and tender touches, I was nearing orgasm by the time he blew warm breath over my pulsing clit.

I cried out when he kissed it like it was his long-lost lover. My legs shook as he moaned against me and made me need him even more. His hands were everywhere as he worked his mouth over me, but when one of his long fingers slid inside, I couldn't hold back anymore.

My orgasm was so powerful that I almost fainted. Stars exploded behind my eyelids and my muscles clenched him so tightly I wasn't sure I would ever let him go. Even my gums were tingling by the time it subsided.

Chris kissed my skin lovingly, almost apologetically as I lay panting on the bed. He didn't stop there, though. When I finally caught my breath, he started working me up all over again and sent me hurtling toward the blissful abyss again in no time.

"April," he moaned when my brain eventually came back online. Trailing kisses up my abdomen, there was a tortured expression his eyes when he lifted them to mine. "I need to be inside you now."

“So do I.” I didn’t know when he’d gotten naked, but he was very much naked when he crawled over me. His searing-hot cock slid through my slick folds. His muscles were tight with tension, but there was such a storm of emotion in his gaze that it brought tears to my eyes.

That’s how deeply he feels for me. Even in a moment as supercharged as this one, I could still see how much I meant to him.

“You’re everything to me, Chris,” I whispered as I wound my fingers together at the nape of his neck and my legs around his hips. “I love you too.”

He blinked way too many times, but then his lips came down to mine. He kissed me with the kind of passion I thought only existed in movies as he sank into me. His hands found mine and held on to them while we lost ourselves in a sea of love and sensation.

When I felt him tense above me, I was right there with him. It felt like even our hearts were beating as one, our bodies so completely in sync that no words or communication were necessary.

When he finally let go, so did I. The orgasm that washed over me was unlike anything I’d felt before. It was better than taking my bra off after a really long shift or ice cream on a hot summer’s day. And the best thing was that it felt like it would never end.

When it finally did, having Chris in my arms, unable to move or speak as we tried to recover, was somehow even better. That was how I knew that I really did love him. I’d just had the most intense, powerful orgasm of my life, and I was glad it was over so that I could have this moment with him.

Love really is crazy sometimes.

CHAPTER 39



CHRIS

It had been two weeks since the first time I'd told April I loved her, and I still hadn't really stopped smiling. Hunter looked up from hammering down the last of the flooring at our new practice and rolled his eyes when he saw me grinning while staring at nothing.

"You're thinking about it again, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded. "I can't help it. I thought reports of realizing that you loved someone, saying it, and hearing it back from that person were grossly exaggerated, but they're not."

"Don't worry. Adi will be a teenage girl soon. You can braid each other's hair and gush about how amazing it is to be in love." He smirked. "Are you going to help me finish this up or keep daydreaming about the day you defiled our office?"

"I didn't defile our office. I christened it. There's a difference." I shrugged. "Besides, what this is really about is you being jealous."

He pretended to flip his hair and stuck his nose up into the air. "As if. You haven't given me enough details to be jealous. All I know is that you two made up and said the big L-word."

"That's all the detail you need. You know I don't kiss and tell." I grabbed my hammer and got back to work. "You'll see when your time comes. You won't want to give me any details either and I won't want to hear it."

He scoffed. "Stop talking like that. My time isn't coming. I've got a business to run, remember? I just need my partner to

stop being all starry eyed about his girlfriend and finish installing the floor instead.”

I pointed at the expanse of laminate flooring behind me. “Excuse me? Your starry-eyed partner has done more than half the room.”

“Semantics.” He wagged his brows at me before standing up to examine what we’d done. “You know, if this whole private practice thing doesn’t work out, we can always start a renovating business. We’ve done well here.”

“No thanks.” I wiped sweat off my brow with the back of my arm. “There’d be tools involved. I’d hate to hear the names you could come up with, given that kind of ammunition.”

His eyes lit up. “That’s an excellent point. We could call it ‘Chris and Hunter’s Tools For You’ or ‘Our Tools Are Better Than Yours.’”

“I doubt we’d get much work with those names.”

“Nah.” He grinned. “We’ll market it at women who’ve been trying to get their husbands to start doing all that stuff they’ve been promising they’ll do for six months.”

I laughed, shrugging as I inclined my head. “That might actually work, but we’d get beaten up often.”

He gasped and pointed at his face. “That won’t work at all. Look at this mug. It can’t get messed up.”

“You mean it can’t get more messed up than it already is?” I joked.

Hunter started lifting his middle finger but then quickly dropped it and pasted a wide smile on his face. “Hey, look. It’s the A-Team. Hi, ladies. Come to help us brainstorm names for a renovation business?”

I looked up to see April and Adi walking in, and my heart jumped at the sight of them. April’s brow furrowed and she tucked her chin closer to her chest. “You and names for a renovation business when there are tools involved? I’m sure you don’t need our help to come up with a good one.”

“Great minds think alike,” I said, getting to my feet and going over to pull April into my arms. “You should hear what he’s already come up with. If we use those names, we’re going to have angry husbands targeting us for the rest of our lives.”

She laughed. “Okay, now I want to hear it, but later. Can I talk to you for a minute first?”

My stomach turned to steel as I released her. “Sure, what about?”

Opening her purse about an inch, she showed me an envelope wedged inside. “Outside?”

“Yeah.” I ran a hand over my head. “Sure. Let’s go.”

I glanced at Adi, winking before I pointed at Hunter. “I did most of the flooring, so he promised to clean up. Mind keeping an eye on him while he sweeps so we know he hasn’t just swept everything into the corners?”

She giggled, bouncing her head up and down. “I’ll make sure he does a good job.”

Hunter pretended to be offended but then stepped back as he grabbed two brooms. “You know, you’re moving so well again now it’s like you were never even hurt. How about you sweep with me?”

Taking the broom from him, she moved like she was about to start sweeping but then suddenly wielded the broomstick like a sword. “Think you’ll be able to keep up with me?”

He laughed and mirrored her pose. “Bring it on, little one. I can sword fight for days.”

Adi leaped into action like she was a champion on a mission to defend her title, her laughter echoing in the mostly empty cavernous space. Hunter looked taken aback at first but quickly realized he’d underestimated her.

“She gets better every time I see her,” I said to April, reaching for her hand. Adi knew we were together now and was thrilled about it, but we still tried not to be overly affectionate in front of her.

Not that we'd do anything inappropriate anyway, but with the court case still hanging over our heads, we had to assume our every move was being watched. Howard had warned us that people often hired private investigators against their exes during custody battles and that even one picture of us kissing could be spun as something much, much worse.

Until the hearing was over, which would only be in another two weeks at the earliest, we were unable to really move on. I wanted them to move in with me, but I couldn't even bring it up right now. Adi wanted me to go to her school's career day, but Howard said it might look too much like I was trying to muscle Craig out of her life.

April desperately wanted to go away for a weekend, but we couldn't even do that in case something happened with the case while we were away. Technically, we could do all those things. We just didn't want to take any chances.

None of what we wanted was worth the risk of losing Adi. I'd had several meetings with Howard by myself. Our back-up plans had back-up plans, but he'd assured me that going through with this hearing was the best possible first step.

Craig had been quiet since his accident. He'd spent over a week in the hospital and had a long road ahead of him in terms of recovery, but he was also still staring down the barrel of criminal charges. Adi never had been his first priority and I was pretty sure keeping himself out of prison had taken precedence over his fight about her.

Howard had been in touch with his lawyer on my instructions. At first, the man said they planned on going ahead with the custody suit. But Howard had assured me he was on it and had been keeping me in the loop every so often when he'd spoken to our opponent.

I knew he'd had a meeting with the man yesterday, and I suddenly thought I knew what was in the envelope April wanted to show me. Excitement whacked me like a truck to the chest. If it was what I thought it was, we'd finally be able to put all the worry about the custody suit behind us.

April's eyes reflected my excitement when we stopped underneath a tree outside. The sky was blue, the lawn outside the building finally green again.

Despite the sounds of the city all around us, I could hear birds in the tree and Adi and Hunter laughing inside. It was one of those moments that would put us at a crossroads again. I knew I'd remember it for the rest of my life. The only question was whether the memory would be good or bad.

She slid the envelope out of her purse and handed it over. "It's from Howard. Craig has signed over all of his parental rights to Adi."

Unable to speak from the intensity of the relief I felt, I could only look at her. *Thank God.*

"We won, Chris," she said, taking my hands. She dropped her head back and smiled as she breathed in deeply. "We really fucking won. I can't believe it, but not one second of Adi's time has to be spent with Craig. Howard got us everything we asked for and more."

"I *can* believe we won." I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. "You're the best mother anyone could ask for, baby. We were always going to win."

Lifting her against my stomach, I spun her around and grinned as I looked up into her eyes. They were pinned to mine, happier and brighter than I'd ever seen them.

"I love you," I said before setting her down.

"Love you too." She kissed the tip of my nose, a relieved sigh coming out of her. "I don't even know what we're supposed to do right now. It feels so surreal that it's over."

"It's over," I promised, moving my one hand discreetly to my back pocket to make sure my wallet was still in there. "I have a few suggestions about what we could do right now too."

She laughed and batted her eyelashes flirtatiously, lowering her voice when her laughter subsided. "We can't do *that* right now. Adi's here."

“I like the way you think, but I wasn’t talking about that.” I reached into my wallet and closed my fingers around the metal inside. “That’s for later, when hopefully we’ll have more than one thing to celebrate.”

Tilting her head at me, she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “More than one thing to celebrate? What are you talking about? What else are we celebrating?”

I lowered myself down on one knee and opened my palm, presenting her with what I held inside it. It was crazy to ask her this when we hadn’t really discussed it seriously before, but I’d had enough of waiting.

Worrying about them at night kept me awake. Wanting them in my apartment when I woke up created such a sense of disappointment every morning when they weren’t there that I’d had the key cut a week ago.

“Will you move in with me?”

EPILOGUE



APRIL

My life had never been a fairy tale. I never expected it to turn out like one, either. But for the last eight months, I felt like that was exactly what it was. The most perfect fairy tale that I never even would have dared dream about.

As I stood in the doorway of the practice, the signs now up, the equipment unpacked, and our first full day of patients starting in the morning, I couldn't quite believe that this really was my life.

Starting tomorrow, I would be the receptionist and administrative manager for The Helping Hands. Tonight was our grand opening, and I stood with Chris's hand in mine as we welcomed our guests.

Hunter was nowhere to be found, but I'd seen him sneaking off with one of the cocktail waitresses a little while ago. Despite his insistence that he would never settle down, I didn't really believe him. Even if that was what he believed, Cyrus and I were living proof that even those who were the most cynical about love could inadvertently step right into it on any given day.

Chris and I had moved in together eight months ago, and I'd never looked back. Adi and I had a long talk the night he'd asked me, and after making sure she was okay with it, I'd said yes. He'd moved our stuff in the very next day.

Adi had never been happier, and neither had I. With Craig out of our lives for good—he'd gone to jail, gotten married in

Vegas, and was presently living somewhere in Mexico—I was finally able to stop living in fear.

It had taken some time to heal from all the emotional damage he'd inflicted over so many years, but Chris was patient and supportive, as he'd always been, while still being convinced that I was “totally badass” at the same time.

Slowly but surely, I'd really learned to trust him. I'd put *Down on Love* behind me and embraced everything real love had to offer with Chris. Because of him, I'd also learned that what I'd had before had been nothing even in the same ballpark as love.

It wasn't only me who loved him either. Adi loved him more than she did me, or at least that was what I thought sometimes. He'd stepped into the role of her father so seamlessly, with such grace, enthusiasm, and gratefulness that it had made me melt all over again.

She stood on his other side now, his arm draped over her shoulders as he chatted to one of the older doctors from the hospital. The two of them were practically inseparable when he wasn't working and she wasn't at school.

A shriek from the side drew my attention away from the two people my heart beat for, and I turned to look where it had come from. Luna was running toward me with Cyrus laughing behind her.

They still made the picture-perfect couple with their dark hair and light, beautiful eyes. Cyrus wore a suit that probably cost more than this building, but he was also pushing a stroller with the sweetest, most gorgeous little girl with lips like a rosebud and eyes like her mommy's in it.

At just over two months old, little Daisy Anne had kept my friends pretty busy recently. Chris and I had gone to see them a few times, but I'd also wanted to give them space to settle in.

Surprisingly, Cyrus had taken to fatherhood like a fish to water. Not surprisingly, Luna had taken to motherhood the same way. They were both over the moon and head over heels in love with baby Daisy.

Not that I blamed them. Seeing her made even my ovaries swoon, and I'd promised myself a long time ago that this factory was closed for business. But between Daisy and Chris being as great as he was with Adi, I had a feeling the factory might just open up again soonish.

Even Chris was coming around to the idea. We'd talked about it a lot, but there were a lot of things that had to happen first. Like I needed to get through the grand opening of the practice without being tackled to the floor by my best friend, who was running at me like it was the first time in months her cage had been opened.

Although if I remember the newborn phase correctly, that's exactly what it feels like when you get to go somewhere.

Luna threw her arms around my neck when she reached me. "Oh, I've missed you so much. Why is Doctor Sexy keeping you hostage? Actually, don't answer that. I don't want to know."

"Doctor Sexy came with her to see you last week," Chris said, turning his attention to us. He smirked at the use of his old nickname, which Katie and Luna insisted on calling him. "Captors generally don't take hostages out to see their friends."

She sighed dramatically, rolling her eyes at him. "Stop with your crazy logic. That wasn't last week. It couldn't have been. It feels like it's been a month."

"It's well documented that time works in different ways when one has a newborn in the house," I said, hugging her before patting her back. "It gets harder before it gets easier, but I promise you'll get used to it."

Cyrus came up behind his wife, reaching past us to shake Chris's hand while shooting me a mocking glare. "You're always such a ray of fucking sunshine."

He looked at Chris. "I don't know how you put up with her eternal optimism."

My boyfriend laughed. "I guess I just love her that much, but she's also not wrong. Supposedly, newborns are easy when

you look back because they sleep so much.”

Cyrus huffed out a breath but poked Luna in the side with his elbow. “You hear that? She’s supposed to sleep a lot. Maybe we’ll get a better sleeper in the next one.”

“The next one?” She scoffed. “I’ll send your next wife a baby gift.”

He smirked at Chris. “She’s a real jokester, this one. Don’t you think she’s hilarious?”

“Absolutely.” He grinned at my friend. “Cyrus wouldn’t get married again after you. He’d just be sour and miserable for the rest of his life.”

Cyrus nodded solemnly but winked at Chris and held his fist up to be bumped. “Precisely. I’m so glad April found you. I don’t know what I would’ve done without having you to back me up.”

Luna arched a brow at him that wasn’t quite as manicured as she used to keep them. “Ha ha. You’re hilarious.”

She smiled sweetly at Chris. “But I’m glad she found you too. Now, when are you going to pop the question? You know how much I love planning weddings, and Cy insists that I take a full four months for maternity leave. Planning your wedding wouldn’t count as work though.”

She beamed at us, but my cheeks turned beet red.

Chris just smirked at her. “Way to ruin the surprise. I was actually planning on asking her right now.”

“You were?” I blurted out way louder than I’d intended to.

He shot me a look, then sighed. “No, baby. I’m not going to ask you casually while we’re standing in a doorway shooting the breeze with our friends. When I ask you, there will be flowers and candles and a gorgeous fucking ring that people would be able to see from space.”

“It’s a real problem finding one that clearly screams ‘she’s mine, married, and fuck off,’ without it being too heavy or gaudy,” Cyrus said. “I’ve got a guy if you want his number.”

Chris flashed him a confident smile. “Thanks, but I think I’ve got it covered.”

“You’ve got it covered?” I asked, my eyes growing wide. Glancing at Adi, I realized she was taking all this completely in stride, seemingly not surprised by any of it. “Excuse us for a minute. Adi, will you stay with Luna and Cy please?”

“Sure,” she said, smiling as she moved over to Daisy’s stroller. “Can I hold her?”

“Let’s go find someplace to sit first,” Luna said when she saw the line of people forming behind her. “See you guys later.”

Hunter chose that moment to reappear, so I didn’t feel too bad for dragging Chris away in the middle of our grand opening. I started pulling him toward a corner, but he nodded at the stairs instead.

“Let’s go talk in the office. I need to grab something from there anyway.”

I followed him up, my heart thundering as I thought about what he’d said. Sure, we’d talked about marriage, and I *wanted* to marry him, but surely, he’d have given me some warning if he was already looking at rings.

If I had to wear one piece of jewelry for the rest of my life, I wanted some input into what it looked like. Cyrus’s description of what he’d looked for with a ring that clearly screamed “she’s mine, married, and fuck off,” wouldn’t work for me.

On the other hand, if it meant getting to spend the rest of my life with Chris, I’d wear a plastic ring from a cereal box or simply draw one onto my finger. It wasn’t so much the ring I was even worried about.

I was just freaking out and I really hadn’t been expecting that conversation to happen and—

I slammed to a stop when I realized we were in the office already. But the office didn’t look at all the way it usually did.

There were flowers everywhere. Candles were lit on every surface, and on the exact place on the couch where I'd sat when he'd told me he loved me for the first time, there was an open ring box. Inside it, glimmering in the soft orange glow from what had to be at least a hundred candles, was a simple golden band with a cluster of diamonds in the shape of a knot in the center.

My hands flew to my mouth as I tried to process what I was looking at. "What..."

"Told you I wouldn't propose while standing in a doorway, surrounded by our friends," he said. "Hunter thought I was crazy for wanting to propose to you here and tonight, but this practice signifies the beginning of a new life to me. It's one I want to share with you."

Slowly walking around the coffee table, he lowered himself down onto his knee, all the while keeping his eyes on mine. "April Adams, I can't say I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. Or the second time or even the third time. I'd seen you hundreds of times before I fell for you, but I wouldn't want that to change. I wouldn't want to go back and ask you out that very first time I saw you."

I couldn't look away from him as he smiled at me and his own eyes became a bit watery. "The truth is that both of us needed that time. We needed it to become the people we were when we got together. Because those people? Those people are and always have been perfect for each other."

He managed to keep his voice strong even as tears gathered in the corners of his eyes. "I would relive every minute without you again and again as long as it leads us right back here. As long as you, me, and Adi are together at the end every time, I'd go through everything we went through all over again."

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "As long as, from this day forward, I never have to spend another day without you again. Will you marry me?"

Everything in my body stopped working for a second, but then I found my voice, and the next thing I knew, my feet were

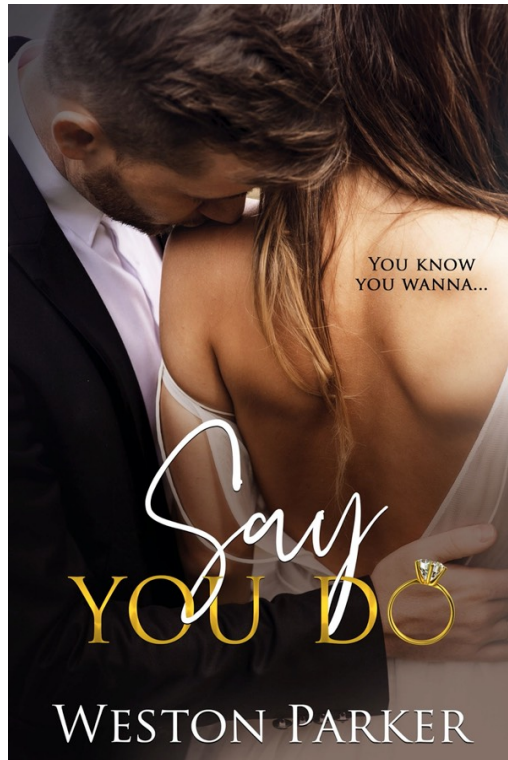
moving toward him. I sank down to my knees and crashed into him, repeating my answer over and over again.

“Yes. Of course, I will. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

The End.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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She's Mine Now

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First Edition.

Editor: Eric Martinez

Cover Designer: [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)