

SOMETHING *Secret*

A SOMETHING SERIES ROMANCE



JESSICA BROWN

SOMETHING SECRET

A SOMETHING SERIES ROMANCE

JESSICA BROWN

Copyright © 2023 by Jessica Brown

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places, and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, places or events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

For all the readers looking for a new book boyfriend.

Something Secret is a steamy romantic comedy, and while a work of fiction, it contains elements not suitable for some readers. This book contains material that should only be read by mature readers (18+).

This book contains triggers including profanity, sexually explicit scenes, stalking, and mention of sexual assault (never on the page and not directly involving the main characters).

Reader discretion is advised.

CONTENTS

- [1. Stupid Lovey Crap](#)
- [2. Casanova](#)
- [3. Hartless](#)
- [4. The Bet](#)
- [5. Casino Night](#)
- [6. Pay Attention](#)
- [7. Punchline](#)
- [8. Something More Important](#)
- [9. Too Long in the Making](#)
- [10. Here Goes Nothing](#)
- [11. That's Just Stupid](#)
- [12. I'm Not Frazzled](#)
- [13. Strictly Business](#)
- [14. It's Just One Night](#)
- [15. Practice](#)

[16. When She Needs Me](#)

[17. My Girl](#)

[18. Keep Your Head Straight](#)

[19. A Matter of Days](#)

[20. Take Me Home](#)

[21. Lover Boy.](#)

[22. Better Be Ready.](#)

[23. Diamond in the Rough](#)

[24. By My Side](#)

[25. Ready When You Are](#)

[26. A Mistake](#)

[27. That's the Easy Part](#)

[28. Far Better Company.](#)

[29. Proud of You, Hart](#)

[30. The Damage is Done](#)

[31. Making a Plan](#)

[32. The Girl Loves You](#)

[33. Better Than Good](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also By.](#)

[About Author](#)

1

STUPID LOVEY CRAP

-Kelsey-



The New Year's decorations come down from the new bakery's windows and walls as Marley replaces them with hearts, cupids, and other stupid lovey crap. I wish Marley didn't find it necessary to decorate for each holiday, but according to her, "Customers love this shit."

Honestly, I think she loves this shit. I don't find it necessary. People know what day is around the corner, but do we need to shove it in their faces every second?

It's bad enough that all of Marley's cookies are in the shape of love letters, teddy bears, or rings. The muffins all have little paper kisses sticking out from the tops. She even reshaped the bagels. No longer can you come to The Sweet Spot and order a normal circular bagel because they've all been transformed into damn hearts.

Who wants to eat a heart-shaped bagel, anyway?

“Smile, Kelse.” Summer pokes my side. She twists her long, thick gray balayage hair into a messy bun. “You’re scaring away the customers. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” I mumble before pasting a fake, exaggerated smile on my face. “Better?”

“Hardly. Now you’re the psychopath working the counter who will murder them.” Summer laughs. “You’ve been in a mood all week.”

“Yeah, well, you would be, too, had you gone home for the holidays to have your younger sister gush all over your ex—her current—boyfriend only to have him propose to her on Christmas in front of your whole family and exclaim that there’s never been a better woman than the love of his life, Hanna.”

“Ouch. That’s gotta sting.” Summer winces., but as a customer sidles up to the counter, she smooths her features and smiles. “What can I get you today?”

“Just a smidge.” I hold my fingers a fraction apart.

“Three large coffees and a half dozen blueberry muffins,” the lady responds.

“You got it.” Summer grins at the customer, then turns and fills to-go cups with brew. I sludge over to the glass case of baked goods and toss six muffins into a box, tape the bottom, and shove them across the counter to the customer. Her wide-eyed shock narrows to angry slits when she almost misses the

box. I offer her the psychotic smile, and she shuffles away a few inches, averting her eyes toward Summer.

“Sorry about her.” Summer hands her the coffees. “She’s still learning how to be part of society. Have a nice day!” The woman hurries off, and Summer turns back to me. “You could at least try to tone it down, Kelse.”

I ignore her suggestion. “On top of everything, Mom and Dad raved about how Hanna and Flynn have always been the perfect couple, and they can’t imagine anyone more suited for each other.”

“In front of you?”

I nod. “And it gets worse.”

Summer arches a brow. “How can it possibly get worse?”

“This past weekend, Hanna called and insisted I be her maid of honor. We aren’t best friends. We’re barely friends! The term ‘sister’ is used in the most basic way it can be between us.”

“So what did you say?”

“I said ‘no.’ She just wants to shove this whole shitshow in my face as much as possible.”

“That certainly explains this pisspoor mood you’ve been in.”

“You think?” I look around the bakery at the red and pink reminders of my loneliness. “And all of these ridiculous decorations are just rubbing it in. I should adopt a minimum of

ten cats and update my wardrobe to include only bathrobes and fuzzy slippers.”

“I mean, at least you’d be comfy!” Summer wiped down the counter, ridding it of crumbs and dark splashes of coffee.

“You’re encouraging.” I open the brewers. A damp pile of coffee in a now-stained filter drips as I pull them out. One edge of the filter slips from between my fingers, and the pile of sludge plops to the tile.

“That’s what friends are for.” Summer grabs the dustpan and a paper towel, scooping the muck onto the pan and dumping it in the garbage. She turns to me as I finish putting new coffee in the brewer. “You should do something for yourself, Kelse. Something that will make you happy.”

“The only thing that would make me happy is having my bookshop back. As much as I love working for Marley at the bakery, I miss my store.”

If only my asshole landlord at the time hadn’t evicted me.

Summer leans against the counter and crosses her arms in front of her. “You already know how to run one and what it takes to get one up and going. Why not work toward that again?”

“Expense. I’d need a minimum of ten grand to open and stock it. Then I’d have to have some backup savings until I’m able to make an income from it. Working almost full time at the bakery barely pays the bills.”

I slump over the counter, burying my head in my folded arms. A bell rings, accompanied by the winter chill, as someone walks into the bakery. I should lift my head and look at least somewhat accommodating, but I'm weighed down by misery.

2

CASANOVA

-Beau-



The sun wakes me up before my alarm. Blonde hair engulfs my pillow from the woman lying next to me. I brush it away. She turns onto her stomach, her leg bent at the knee, pushing her bare ass in the air.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed, planting my feet on the lush carpet, and stand, stretching. As I round the foot of the California king, my hand meets the blonde's ass. A stinging, playful smack to let her know it's time to get up and get out.

She squeaks, groans, and begins to crawl out of bed. Two copies of her signed NDA and two of her video consent form sit on the nightstand under my black masquerade mask. Shoving the disguise into the drawer, I grab one of each form. The others she can keep for her records. Can't be too careful when it comes to keeping your identity a secret, especially when your father has expressed his distaste for all of your life

choices. At least the ones he knows about. Imagine what people would say if they found out the mayor's son is ForFans' Casanova.

Especially when that mayor runs a campaign on a family-focused platform.

My father would kill me. Or he'd hire someone else to do it and make sure there wasn't a paper trail to connect back to him. Can't get your hands too dirty when you're a public official.

I sit in my office area in the corner of the room to make sure last night's activities were recorded and saved. Several monitors span the length of three desks. Though neatly grouped and arranged, cords and wires protrude from the computers to various cameras around the room.

"When will my episode air?" The blonde comes up behind me, her voice scratchy with morning drowsiness. Her hand rubs my shoulder. I shrug it off. The key to maintaining my business is not letting the girls get too attached.

"About three weeks, give or take a couple of days." I have a backlog of videos to ensure I always have something to post in case of an unexpected dry spell in women.

I breathe out a silent laugh.

Like I could have a dry spell.

Numerous apps on my phone make this way of life easy to sustain. The moment they see Casanova requesting their services, they practically cream their jeans. Or skirts. Or

whatever they might be wearing when the invitation reaches them.

“That long?” she whines. Disappointment scatters across her features.

They never get it. They think all it takes is recording a video and uploading it to ForFans. But there’s a skill to delivering top-quality videos that require extensive editing and manipulation of images. I wear a mask, but I also need to make sure there’s nothing identifiable that would reveal who I am. Plus, I want the chick to look good. Not all positions are suitable for the public eye. No one wants their ass looking dimpled on camera, even if it’s their natural image and it doesn’t mean they’re any less sexy.

“That long,” I say. “There’s a process.”

She stands next to me, shifting on her feet. Her eyes wander around the room before landing back on the bed. She points toward it. “Do you wanna—”

“I’ve got things to do today.” Not exactly true, but it’s all part of the persona. Sometimes I’ll go another round with a chick, but this one was a little too tame last night to take that bait today. My phone pings. Eric’s name pops up on the screen in view of the blonde. “See? Busy day. You know how it is.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. So, should I...” she trails off.

“Yep.” I nod toward the nightstand. “Don’t forget your copies of the forms. I take the NDA seriously. You mention

anything about who I am, and I'll take you to court without a second thought.”

Her eyes become slits while a frustration-filled pout pushes out her thin lips. She crosses her arms over her chest, shoving her breasts together. Those babies were the reasons I requested her. Extra visual appeal for my subscribers.

I swivel in my chair, raising my brows and crossing my arms. If this chick wants to get in a huff over something she agreed to, that's not my problem. The consent form outlines precisely what is expected of them. Item 3B: ‘You agree to leave promptly after Casanova wakes you up.’

She rolls her eyes, throws her arms down, and puffs out a breath. Then she stomps her foot before grabbing her copies of the forms. In seconds, she's on her hands and knees, picking up her scattered clothes. My subscribers are going to love that view.

“I can't find my bra,” she says, glancing back at me. I shrug. How am I supposed to know where it is? “Ugh, whatever.”

She drags a hand under the bed, pulling out her lacey, baby-blue bra. After draping her shirt over her and shimmying into her pants, she grabs her purse and coat and leaves.

Finally.

I pick up my cell to glance at Eric's text.

Coffee at The Sweet Spot, then the gym. 30 minutes.

I send a quick text back confirming I'll be there. Turning on my monitors, I begin transferring footage from the saved file

to the editing program before logging in to my ForFans account to check the views on the last video.

4,396.

Plus 83 new subscribers. Not bad for being up for less than thirty-six hours.

I turn the monitors back off and stand. My back cracks with a stretch. I grab the rumpled sheets off of it, leave the room, and lock the door.

Dragging my ass down the hall toward the washing machine, I pass my open bedroom, the one only for me, and stop at the door. Women aren't allowed in this sanctuary.

Another California king covered with a black faux-down comforter teases me from inside.

I pull the phone from my pocket.

Give me an hour.

I send the text to Eric, drop the sheets in the hall outside the door, and crawl under the warmth of the black covers.

Time for some actual sleep.

3

HARTLESS

-Kelsey-



The chime from the door rings, followed by deep boisterous laughter.

“Holy mother of goddesses everywhere, get your head up now or regret it forever, Kelse.” Summer squeezes my side, forcing me to giggle and making me jump up. I glare at her, but she doesn’t notice. She’s ogling whoever just walked into the shop.

With an audible sigh just so she knows I’m annoyed, I turn my head to see who she’s looking at.

“Shit,” I whisper. I drop to the floor, back against the counter, hands palming the tile, knees to chest. The smaller I can make myself, the better this will be. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Each shit becomes an increasingly louder hush. I throw a hand over my mouth before dropping it to the floor again.

I glance up at Summer, who looks at me like I need a straight jacket. “What the hell has gotten into you, Kelse?”

“Shhhh!” I place a finger to my lips and then wave my hands erratically at her. “Don’t say my name. Don’t look at me. Pretend I’m not here.”

“Well, I’d love to do that, except we have a handful of customers who look like they could eat the entire bakery.” She focuses on the group of guys, who I assume are now standing on the other side of the counter. Summer gives them an award-winning smile and a wink. A few low laughs follow. “So, if you don’t mind picking your cute butt up off the floor and giving me a hand, that would be great.”

Rubbing my face with my hands, I apply extra pressure over the eyes until tiny colorful dots appear on the black canvas behind them. This year is just going to suck.

I lift off the ground with a silent groan and turn to face the group of men just as Summer asks them, “What can we get for you?”

“Coffee, black. And an almond croissant.” Even after all these years, Beau Valentine’s rumbling voice sends shivers down my spine. My pulse races. My palms get clammy. It’s all too familiar.

Though the clench between my thighs is new.

Run and hide.

The fight or flight reaction is stuck on flight with him. And why shouldn’t it be? Beau did nothing but torment me from

when we were sophomores until graduation. Our quintessential high school could have been the template for any teenage movie. Cliques, circles, and stereotypes ran rampant during those four long, drawn-out years. My quiet, literature-loving nature was prime target material for the jocks and assholes. I don't know why things changed after ninth grade, but I lost a friend when he became my bully.

Beau's always been tall, looming over others, and he's put on at least a truckload more muscle than he had in high school. I gawk at him like the stupid schoolgirl I used to be before the teasing and torture began. He's the most breathtaking monster in my nightmares.

And his smile can still stop women in their tracks. Case in point, Summer's been eye-fucking him without an ounce of shame for the past few minutes. Luckily, he's been eating it up and returning her the favor, leaving me unnoticed.

"Do you mind starting that while I finish taking their orders?" Summer asks without removing her gaze from Beau. He, however, glances over at me.

I offer a non-psychotic smile. Please don't notice it's me.

He stares for a second before his eyebrows lift. "Kelsey Hart?"

Crap. I muster up all the courage and energy left inside me to respond.

"The one and only!" My eyes squeeze closed, and I shake my head. When I open them again, only one of his eyebrows is

cocked. “I mean, probably not actually the one and only. There must be at least another Kelsey Hart somewhere, right?” Shut up, shut up, shut up. “I can’t be the only one. Just like you can’t be the only Beau Valentine. Then again...” What is wrong with you? You’re just giving him ammo. Stop it now. I swallow. “So, that was a black coffee?”

“Yeah, black.” He flashes me a crooked smirk. A fucking panty-dropping kind of smile that betrays the predator he is.

I nod and spin on my toes. At least with my back to him, I can’t see the sickening joy he gets from my embarrassment.

Laughter resonates behind me. I fill the to-go mug, hoping the drizzle of liquid drowns out the chuckling.

“Still the same ol’ Kelsey Hart.” Beau pauses. I can feel his eyes burrowing into the back of my head. “Mostly.”

I snap my head around. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Beau’s eyes widen, and his hands go up in surrender.

“Whoa, there, Hartless.” The old nickname feels like a hundred cockroaches crawling under my skin. “I simply meant that you’re a fuckin’ hottie now. Though still as crazy as ever.”

My cheeks warming at his compliment prove his final statement.

“I guess the real question is, are you the same Beau Valentine?” I hand him his coffee. He takes it, the smirk no longer present on his face. He studies me for a moment. Not long, but enough to make my legs ache for movement. I refuse their pleas and stand still, finally gaining the courage to stare

Beau in the eye. Then the damn smirk reappears. “Maybe you’ll be lucky enough to find out one of these days.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “Hopefully not.”

“But you admit you’d be lucky if you did.” He sips his coffee, winks, and turns to his friends. “I’ll be outside.”

Beau walks out of the bakery and stands in front of the window, looking in. He watches me while drinking from his cup, his eyes never wavering the entire time Summer and I finish serving his friends. By the time they all leave and pull Beau away, I want to rip my skin off.

“What’s up with you and Sexy McGiveMeSomeOfThat?” Summer asks as she begins recounting stock in the glass case that holds most of the baked goods.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“That wasn’t nothing.” She jots some numbers and words down on the pad of paper she holds.

“Just someone from high school sent my way to torment me. I clearly pissed off the universe or something.” I roll my eyes and sigh. “So, it was nothing, and let’s drop it.”

“It’s dropped.” Summer playfully smacks my shoulder. “But it gave me an idea of how you can make money and reopen your bookshop.”

“I’m listening.”

Summer surveys the bakery. She inches up beside me and whispers, “Have you ever heard of The Network?”

“No,” I whisper back. Then, because this is ridiculous, I return my voice to normal volume. “Is that like a computer company or something?”

“Hardly.” Summer gets even closer to me. Her voice is practically inaudible when she says, “It’s an escort service. For the rich and famous of the city.”

This time I glance around to make sure no one’s heard her whispers. The few customers at tables are engrossed in their books, phones, or laptops. I lean into the faux sanctuary Summer has created with our close proximity.

“I’m not having sex for money.” My hushed tones are not nearly as quiet as Summer’s, and we snap our heads up. A man clears his throat, takes a sip of coffee, and continues typing away on his laptop.

“You don’t—” Summer sighs and grasps my arm. She drags me through the kitchen door. “You don’t have to have sex with them if you don’t want to. Most are just looking for attractive dates to parade around at dinners and other events.”

I find that hard to believe, but if it really is the case...

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like something I could do.” I push back through the door, but Summer still holds my arm. She tightens her grip firmly and pulls me toward her. Her imploring and insistent gray eyes give me pause.

“I escort one night a week and make anywhere between two-fifty and five hundred for a few hours of my time.”

Summer's skin tints pink with her sly smile. "On occasion, I make even more."

A few hundred for a few hours? That doesn't seem so bad.

"You seriously make that much?" I ask. Summer's head bobs up and down with confirmation. "The sooner I make money, the sooner I can get my bookstore up and running again."

"That's exactly what I'm saying." She finally drops my arm like she's confident I won't run away. "You're hot. You're single. And you need money. No other job will give you that as quickly as this one."

She's right. And I don't have to have sex with anyone. And getting my bookstore up and running will definitely make this year suck less.

I take a deep breath and push it out.

"What do I have to do?"

4

THE BET

-Beau-



The vibration against my leg has become more of an annoyance than anything else. I should answer it, be respectful, but I ignore the call again.

He can wait.

“What was up with that chick the other day?” Eric shouts over the clamor of the bar. The Tap and Mallet is crowded, as usual. The once-dive bar now caters to rich-under-30s and their friends after an uplift in their style last year. I preferred the dive. No one came here then.

“What chick?”

I take a swig of my beer and look around the congested bar. I know exactly who he’s asking about. He’s been hinting at it all week. The guy can’t see a blonde without wanting to stick

it in her. I wouldn't subject Kelsey Hart to an asshole like Eric Dawson. Hartless deserves better than douchebags.

"The one from the bakery," he says. He downs the rest of his drink.

I shrug.

"Don't pull that shit. You know who I mean. You guys saw her." Eric smacks Jordan in the arm and nods toward Ryan. He holds his hands out in front of him like he's got jugs the size of Dolly Parton. Jordan grunts out a laugh. Ryan shakes his head.

"They aren't that big," Ryan says. He's right. They aren't. But they're damn near perfect on her.

And why is he looking at them anyway? I look over, brow cocked.

He shrugs. "A man can look, right?"

"So they're no double-d's, but I wouldn't mind grabbing onto them while doin' her from behind," Jordan adds, laughing and bringing his bottle to his mouth. I smack him in the back of the head, and he chokes. "What the hell, man?"

"Hand slipped." I look across the crowded bar, downplaying the smirk on my face. Ryan chuckles beside me.

"What's got your balls in a vise tonight, Valentine? Everyone likes suckin' on some titties." Eric says. Our waitress comes by the table. "Ain't that right, Flame? You like havin' your titties gnawed on?" He bites at the air and grabs the redhead's ass as she picks up the bottles, earning him a death stare.

“Knock it off, Eric!” Joy backhands him on the arm and points her finger. “Don’t make me get the bouncer.”

“How well did that work out for you last time, Flame?” Eric winks. Joy rolls her eyes. He wags his finger around the table. “We’ll have another around.”

Ryan leans toward me. “Why do we put up with him again?”

“You know why.” I take another swig to swallow down the acid creeping up my throat. The four of us are bonded for life. Without Eric or his father, we’d be in jail, which we’d be in because of Eric.

“Fucking strip club,” Ryan mumbles through a sip. I nod. No one else heard him.

We were all jackasses chasing tail then, causing trouble. What we did at Desire’s Den was the worst of it.

Maybe it was fine in college, but Eric’s antics are getting old. He never got past that stage of asshole horndog or just asshole. Maybe it has to do with him never being told no or the fact that he went to boarding school with a bunch of other rich guys. Whatever the cause, we’re here to deal with the aftermath.

The crooked grin on Eric’s face makes him look more like a desperate man in a midlife crisis than the sleazebag he actually is. My hand itches to smack him in the head, but I always tread carefully with him. My dad might be the mayor, but Eric’s father practically owns the city, making Eric untouchable. I’m

still not sure what his father does, but you don't mess with the Dawson family.

Eric turns back to me. "Bakery chick an old screw or something? She stared at you like she wanted to rip your nuts off."

I huff a laugh and finish my beer. She probably did, but not for the reason he thinks. Who could blame her? She was always at the wrong place at the wrong time. I wouldn't be surprised if she despised me.

"I'm sure a lot of women want to rip his balls off." Jordan pipes in. He cackles like he's a fuckin' comedian on SNL.

"Never thought I'd be seeing Hartless again," Ryan says. "She's lookin' good. That's definitely not the girl I remember."

It's exactly the girl I remember.

It would have been impossible not to notice Kelsey at the bakery. She's always had a body on her, but six years out of high school has given her the confidence to show it off. No more oversized graphic tees and baggy sweats to hide those curves. With a green sweater and black leggings hugging tight against her, not even the ridiculously bright red apron could detract from her curves.

"Who is she, anyway?" Jordan asks.

"She's nobody." I shift in my seat like a lying kid. "Just someone we knew in high school."

My phone vibrates against my leg again. With an eye roll, I drag it from my pocket. My father's ID shines on the screen

for a few seconds before 15 missed calls' appears in its place. At least he stopped leaving messages seven calls ago. I slide it back into my pocket.

Eric's thumb swipes across his phone screen, over and over. "Too fat. Too plain. Not pretty enough. Here we go—virgin!" He scrolls over the screen some more. "Nevermind. Waiting for marriage."

"Having trouble getting women?" I ask.

"Just being selective," he replies. "You should try it sometime."

"Sounds like something someone having trouble getting women would say."

"Whatever, asshole." Eric's demeanor loses some of its humor. Masculinity is important to him, and he defines it by the number of women he gets. The lines on his face deepen with his scowl. And then, with a blink, he's all smiles again. "I don't see anyone salivating to suck your junk tonight."

What would happen if Eric Dawson ever went off the edge?
I always push to the boundaries but never enough to find out.

"You offering?" I joke.

"As much as you want a piece of this, I don't do dudes," Eric retorts. He goes back to scrolling through one of his apps. His eyes widen, and he snickers. "No, shit."

Before I can ask what's up, a double vibration judders against my leg. A text. I pull out my phone to see my father's ID fade from the screen.

“You might as well answer him,” Ryan says. “He’s just going to keep at it. And when he tires of it, he’ll have one of his minions take over.”

I scoff, but Ryan’s right. I touch the screen and unlock my phone, opening my messages.

I expect you to be at the fundraiser tomorrow. Black tie. No excuses.

“About the fundraiser?” Ryan asks.

“You know it. You going?” I ask as another text comes through.

And answer your phone next time. I roll my eyes.

“Mom and Dad expect me to make an appearance, you know that,” Ryan says. I type a quick text back to my father confirming my attendance and pocket my phone.

Eric taps his palm on the table, getting our attention. He lounges in the seat, arm over the back of the booth. “Since we’ll all be at the event tomorrow, how about we make a game of it?”

“What kind of game?” Skepticism swamps Ryan’s tone.

“We each book a date through The Network. A thousand to whoever books the hottest girl. Extra thou from each guy that the winner makes jealous.”

“How would that be decided?” Jordan asks.

“I’m sure we’ll figure it out,” Eric says. Then he adds, “And five grand to any guy who fucks their date at the event.”

This has “backfire” written all over it.

“I don’t know, man,” I say. “Seems shitty to use the women as pawns in a bet.”

“They’re hired escorts. They know what they’ve signed up for.”

I can’t exactly argue with that. The Network is one way I get women for my ForFans videos, so there are those ready and willing for almost anything. And Eric’s so-called game could be easy money.

Which I will need if my plans take off.

“Fine. I’m in.”

5

--

CASINO NIGHT

-Kelsey-



Client: Confidential

Date: Saturday, February 1

Time: 5 hours

Payment: \$500

Directions: Cocktail attire for Casino Night Fundraiser; arrive at Sunset Cafe on Haling Ave by 5:30 and wait; I'll find you.

ACCEPT DECLINE

I stared at the screen for at least an hour this morning before pushing accept, sealing my fate. Summer warned me I might not see my date until I meet them, but The Network rigorously

vets every client, putting them through background checks and a company-distributed psych evaluation.

Plus, making a hundred dollars an hour is nothing to scoff at. I need the money. My bookshop dreams hang in the balance.

Now I'm sitting at a small table inside Sunset Cafe with a steaming cup of tea wrapped in my palms, waiting for my mystery client. Summer brought over her arsenal of dresses and heels, and she sexed me up with a gorgeous champagne-colored, beaded cocktail dress. Long sleeves. Boat neckline. Short hemline. Matching sparkly stilettos.

All giving the illusion of nudity.

It's racy and risque. And fits like a glove, which is why I haven't taken off my knee-length coat in the cafe. Summer insisted it is perfect for the Casino Night Fundraiser. I'm not sure about that. I don't even know what the fundraiser is supporting.

But I feel like a sex kitten in this dress. And I like that.

The screen on my phone lights up with a ping.

I'll be seeing you tonight! Just got a request on TN. Love ya, chicky!

Summer's text eases the anxiety slithering through me. At least I'll know one person there. I take a sip of my now lukewarm cinnamon tea and glance at the time on my phone: 5:57.

I tap Summer's message.

How long am I supposed to wait for a client?

Just as I push send, the door to the cafe jingles open. In walks a tall, lean, muscular man with styled ash blond hair and a well-groomed beard. He looks at me, smirks, and walks over.

“Kelsey Hart.” He unlatches a few bottom buttons on his camel-colored top coat and sits across from me. Relaxed, his arm reaches across the back of the chair next to his. Copper eyes study me. My cheeks warm, and I stir in my seat. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

My brows pinch together as my brain digs through all the dusty folders and files from past interactions with anyone who resembles the man in front of me. Nothing. Not even the possibility of knowing his distant cousin.

“I’m sorry, I don’t. Should I?” I ask.

His grin grows, and he leans forward, latching his hands together.

“I was at the bakery the other day.”

“A lot of people come by the bakery.” I only remember the faces of regulars, so he’s obviously not one.

“My name is Eric Dawson.” He tilts his head and gives me a pointed look. “I was with Beau Valentine.”

That would explain why I don’t recognize him. I might have known other guys were with Beau, but I could only look at him. Beau’s presence has always been imposing and conspicuous, but it’s his eyes that trap me. I grind to a breathless stop every time I see them, their presence like the

fin of a shark glistening in the ocean sun as it emerges from the water.

Words float in the air, but I don't hear them immediately.

"Hm?" I blink away the haze and lift my mug.

"You and Beau. How do you know each other?" Eric asks.

My hand pauses for a heartbeat before I touch the mug to my lips and take a sip. "Oh, um, we went to high school together."

"There's got to be more to that story, the way you reacted to him, the way he looked at you."

How exactly did he look at me? Like a predator stalking its prey?

"Nope. We didn't exactly run in the same circles." At least not after freshman year, but he doesn't need to know the details of my torment. Unless he already does. "Did he set you up to take me out or something?"

Eric laughs. "No. I was actually pleasantly surprised to see you on The Network after Beau refused to give me your number. Whatever history is between the two of you, he seems protective of it."

Protective? Ha. Joke of the day.

I shake my head. "I doubt that's it."

"Perhaps," he remarks. "Anyway, shall we? Casino night awaits."

He stands and smooths his coat, rebuttoning the few buttons he undid moments ago. I stand, wrap my scarf around my shoulders, and wait. Eric's eyes peruse down my frame. The dress I'm wearing stops short of the hem of my coat, hidden underneath. His attention continues down my bare legs to the three-inch stilettos. When his gaze returns to mine, he flashes a brow and a flirtatious grin.

"I have to admit; I'm looking forward to our date tonight, Kelsey." Eric reaches an arm out and sets his hand on my lower back. He leads me outside to a sleek, expensive-looking burnt orange car. "It's a Bentley Continental."

"Oh," I utter. I have no idea what that is, but he seems proud of it, so I smile. "Nice."

Eric opens the door, and I take the seat. He rounds the car and gets in the driver's seat. Snow has started its slow, nomadic journey to the ground. The engine starts with a purr, soon smothered by blasting heavy metal from the speakers.

I'm sure I've lost all hearing by the time we arrive at the hotel hosting the fundraiser. The valet opens my door and gives me his hand.

Eric slides up next to me and offers me his arm. I take it. Stilettos and snow are a guaranteed death trap.

"Tell me a little bit about yourself," he says as we step inside. The entrance is decorated in black and gold with bright Hollywood-style vanity lights around a square archway. Flowing black curtains conceal the mystery beyond. One misstep and the design could have looked gaudy, but whoever

was in charge made the place classy, elegant, and quite exclusive.

“What’s to know?” I ask. Eric helps me out of my coat, relinquishing it to the attendants at coat check.

“Well, for one, why is a girl like you on The Network?” He turns back, his ravenous gaze eating me up. Heat ripples through me as I silently praise Summer for her help in making me look good tonight. Eric grins. “No judgment. Clearly, I support their services.”

“I’m guessing it’s for the same reason most women are part of it.” I leave it at that. Eric lifts his head a fraction, staring at me with contemplation.

“Have I mentioned how much I’m looking forward to our date?” he asks, again placing his hand on my lower back and leading me toward the archway. Men in black tuxedos guard the entrance, collecting invitations from attendees. Eric flips ours up, letting one of the attendants take it from his hand. We step through the archway into a ballroom, adorned top to bottom with the same colors as the entryway. To the right, dozens of black velvet tables are swarmed by guests dressed in sleek tuxes and sumptuous dresses. To the left, dinner tables are arranged with black tablecloths and gold decor.

“There’s our table near the front.” Eric points to the far end of the room. Six people stand near the table, chatting animatedly. One of the guys shakes his head, laughs, and then nods in our direction, dragging the others’ attention toward us.

That's when I see him. His sharkfin eyes are fixed directly on me. I've seen that look before, the one that comes before the torment. The entire walk to the table, Beau Valentine, dressed in a perfectly tailored tux that makes him as ostentatious as he is lethal, stares at me like I'm his next meal.

6

PAY ATTENTION

-Beau-



Casino Night is always a popular event. This is the fifth year it's been held. There's got to be three times as many people as last year.

Trixie is at my side. Of all my Casanova girls, Trixie's video has gotten the most attention. The only explanation is her classic beauty. Wide-eyed baby blues. Legs for days. She could easily be her generation's Marilyn Monroe or a platinum Jacqueline Bisset. She's a stunner and guaranteed to win me tonight's bet.

Whatever it is, she's why I agreed to the bet—easy money and maybe another video for ForFans.

“And then—” Ryan goes silent in the middle of talking, peering at something behind me. He shakes his head and gives me an exasperated look. “You're not going to like this.”

Jordan looks past me. “That fucker.”

With a furrowed brow, I glance over my shoulder. My teeth snap together, and my jaw becomes a vise.

I will murder him in cold blood. Because he's fucking touching Kelsey Hart.

Eric's hand rests low on her back, guiding her through the dinner area, occasionally stopping to introduce her to others. Her wide, hickory brown eyes watch me from across the room the whole time.

Kelsey is stunning. Sex personified. She might not be a classic beauty, but she blows everyone out of the water tonight. Her blonde hair flows past her shoulder to mid-back. Stilettos accentuate the perfect shape of her legs.

Damn, I want those wrapped around me later.

Every so often, Eric flashes a glance toward me, a smug and satisfied smile on his pompous-ass face. And his hand never leaves the small of her back.

I growl. Literally growl, drawing the attention of those around me.

Jordan looks toward me. “What's gotten into you, man?”

“Nothing,” I snap. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Reel it in, man.” Ryan puts a hand on my shoulder. “You're just supplying him with ammunition.”

Trixie studies me. Her head turns back and forth between me and the beautiful blonde across the room. Then a light

switch goes off inside her, eyes widening and mouth gaping open a sliver. Her eyes narrow and her back straightens. As Kelsey and Eric near the table, Trixie leans in closer. Her arm entangles around mine, her French manicure clawing possessively into my suit.

“Looks like we’re a little late to the party,” Eric remarks as he and Kelsey reach the table. “Your tie cutting off circulation, Valentine? You’re looking a little red.”

Before I respond, Ryan steps in front of Trixie with his arm stretched out, offering to shake Kelsey’s hand. “Hey, Kelsey. I’m not sure you remember me. I’m—.”

“Ryan Beckett. I remember.” She tentatively takes his hand. Skepticism filters across her expression.

“I’ve matured since high school. I promise.” Kelsey stares at him a moment before cracking a smile. She nods as she drops his hand.

“I sure as hell hope so,” she quips.

“This is Jackie, my date.” The redhead Ryan brought gives a cute little wave. “That’s Jordan and Harper.”

“Don’t forget about me, Ry.” Trixie’s valley girl uptalk cuts through the space, making her sound like she’s questioning everything. She holds out her free hand—the one not constricting my arm like an anaconda—palm down, fingers partially limp like she wants Kelsey to kiss it.

Kelsey stares at it, tilting her head to the side and arching a brow. The corner of my mouth lifts. Hartless kept her

backbone.

Not that I made it easy for her.

Trixie snatches back her hand, resting it with the other on my suit. “I’m Patricia Ann Marie Clearwater of the Clearwater family, but everyone calls me Trixie. Mommy and Daddy own the Clearwater Hotels, including this one.” She points toward the ceiling and then at me. “And I’m Beau’s date for the night.”

Her final words are more punctuated, staking a claim on something far from hers.

Kelsey turns her singular laugh into a fake cough. Trixie’s eyes narrow. “Sorry, something caught in my—nice to meet you, Trixie.”

Kelsey holds her hand out like a normal person, but Trixie waves hers through the air, wafting away the apology. A waitress passes by with a tray of champagne. Eric grabs two from the tray and gives one to Kelsey. His free hand slides from Kelsey’s lower back and around her waist, pulling her a little closer to him. She glances up at him with a smile, taking a sip of the drink.

What the fuck?

Hartless is eating his shit up like it’s caviar on the fucking Titanic. I take a step forward. Trixie stumbles in her heels with my movement.

“Same ol’ Hartless falling for tool bags just like you fell for that douche Flynn Hannigan in high school.”

Ryan pinches the bridge of his nose. “You remember Beau, I’m sure.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t Mrs. Hannigan by now with how you worshiped the ground he walked on.” I take a step forward just to be closer to her. “Whatever happened to that asshole?”

Her eyes narrow with the feistiness I have never forgotten. It’s seared into my brain.

“Can’t say I fall for all the tool bags. I never fell for you.” Her smile turns mockingly sweet. I don’t know what it is about fighting with this woman that gets me hard, but the back-and-forth game between us has me itching to lift her up and slam her against the nearest wall. “As for Flynn, he started dating my sister. They’re getting married in July.”

No shit.

Hanna always tried to outshine Kelsey, but to be marrying her sister’s ex? That seems like a new low.

Kelsey’s smile falters. She downs the rest of her drink.

“Your sister’s going to be Hanna Hannigan? God, that’s awful.” Ryan laughs, bringing ease and satisfaction back to Kelsey’s expression.

“Mrs. Hanna Anna Hannigan, to be exact,” Kelsey says.

“Your parents didn’t do her any justice when they named her.” Ryan shakes his head, letting his laughter die out.

Kelsey shrugs. “They think it’s cute or something.”

Eric takes her flute from her as another waitress passes with a tray half full of champagne. He places Kelsey's empty glass and his half-full glass on the tray and grabs two more full flutes. He lifts an eyebrow at me as he gives Kelsey one of them.

Fucker.

“As lovely as all this catching up is, can we play some games?” Trixie asks. “Let's have some fun before the night is washed away in boring conversation.”

Ryan, Jordan, and I pick up our trays of chips from the table. The higher the donation at the cashier station, the more chips you get. At the end of the night, the person with the most chips wins a prize, and all the money from donations goes toward building a state-of-the-art facility for the hospital.

The second the chip tray is in my hands, Trixie tugs me away from the group. Trixie's great as a Casanova girl, but she's pretty tedious as a date. Thankfully everyone follows. We stroll past several tables, each nixed by Trixie because she doesn't know how to play poker, blackjack, or baccarat.

“How about roulette?” Kelsey suggests as we near the game. Her champagne flute is nearly empty again. She looks at Trixie. “No skill needed for that. Completely based on luck.”

Without waiting for Trixie's response, Kelsey takes her place next to the table, Eric still at her side. The others follow suit.

“Ooh, well, I feel lucky tonight, don’t you, Beau?” Trixie winks. She scrapes her talons down my chest before clamping onto my wrist with both hands and pulling me to the opposite side of the table. Directly across from Kelsey. Eric massages Kelsey’s shoulder and neck with one hand. Her eyes catch mine. She remains politely passive but rolls her shoulder away from his touch. He doesn’t get the hint and keeps rubbing. I attempt to squeeze the life out of the chip in my hand. She rolls again, and his hand drops down to her back.

Kelsey and Eric watch as the rest of us begin placing bets. Five minutes into the game, Eric has yet to get chips. Kelsey tiptoes and stretches her neck to see around the room. Then she glances up at Eric.

“Did you want to play?” she asks.

Eric shakes his head and takes a sip of his drink. He peers over the room, avoiding eye contact with Kelsey. “My family has to spread our many donations out throughout the course of the year. Since we already made a sizable contribution to the hospital last month, our tax guy recommends we don’t donate to this event beyond the cost of the tickets.”

“I see.” Kelsey presses her lips together and nods.

“Let me go get us something else to drink other than champagne.” Eric’s hand drops to Kelsey’s ass and gives her a little tap because he walks away from the table. Kelsey takes a breath, and her shoulders lower.

“I need to use the restroom. You ladies want to come?” Jackie asks. She glances around at each of the women. Kelsey

shakes her head and smiles.

“I could freshen up a bit,” Trixie says. She picks her clutch off the table and taps me with it. “Gotta look good for the cameras, right babe?”

“There’s no photography permitted in the betting hall, Trixie.” I glance around the room, making sure no one caught on, before pinning Trixie with a pointed glare.

“I should go, too.” Harper sets her chips back in the tray. The three of them turn and snake through the crowd.

I look at Ryan and nod toward the bar. He takes the hint, smacking the back of his hand against Jordan’s arm and pointing across the room.

“Let’s get drinks while they’re gone.” Ryan drags Jordan away with him. Kelsey stands, both hands gently resting on the rim of the table. She peers around the space, tiptoeing again.

I slide around the table and situate myself next to her. She breathes in deeply, letting out an audible sigh.

“What do you want?”

“You’re looking good tonight, Hartless.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

“I don’t know what your angle is, but complimenting me only makes me more suspicious.”

I’m sure that’s true. Since tenth grade, I’ve never complimented her without it becoming a tease. And then there

were the pranks. I still can't explain those. The teasing was separate from that, though. But her anger accentuated her already vibrant personality, which she wasted on douche-boy Hannigan.

I grin, knowing I'm about to throw her for a loop.

"Just coming to offer you some chips." I set a stack of purple chips in front of her, then place a couple on the board before the next spin. Kelsey's eyes pop open, and she turns to me.

"Living off that trust fund?" she asks, not missing a beat. That's my Hartless.

"Not exactly." Though I have a sizable trust, I have no desire to touch it. That's my father's money, not mine. I spend what I earn.

"I don't need your charity, Beau."

"Never said you did. All the money goes toward a good cause, and I just thought you might like to have some real fun tonight since your date's more interested in getting you drunk than showing you a good time."

"I'm having fun." Kelsey picks up a chip and places it on black. "And he's not trying to get me drunk."

"Still playing it safe, Hartless?" I ask. She huffs and places another chip on number fifteen. The roulette wheel spins, and the croupier tosses in the ball. "And he *is* trying to get you drunk."

“He is not,” she snaps. The tic-tic-tic of the tiny ball slows and stops.

“Black thirty-five,” the croupier calls. He stacks another purple chip on top of Kelsey’s first bet and swipes all others away. She beams at her winnings, heightening her natural beauty. She tucks a loose strand behind her ear, revealing the feminine angle of her jaw and a perfectly petite rounded nose. Her singular dimple notches into her right cheek.

Kelsey keeps the two chips on black and places another on fifteen. The other chips I gave her remain protectively cupped in her palm.

“Lucky number?” I ask.

“Not exactly.” The corner of her mouth lifts a fraction. “I guess I just have a connection to that time in my life.”

I shift a little closer to her. “Being fifteen?”

She nods. “What makes you think that, anyway?”

“It’s the second time you made a bet on fifteen.”

“Not that. What makes you say Eric’s trying to get me drunk?”

“You haven’t gone more than two minutes without an empty glass in your hand.”

“He’s just being accommodating.”

“He’s trying to win a fuckin’ bet.”

She swings her body around to face me, one palm resting on her hip, the other clamped around the curve of the table edge.

“What bet?” Kelsey’s face scrunches up. The suspicion in her eyes mimics the past, and I feel a little guilty for having instilled that in her.

“A bet to see who could bring the hottest date and fuck her at the fundraiser.”

Kelsey scoffs, but unease creeps into her expression. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

She shakes her head and turns away. Her eyes glisten for a few glossy seconds, but when her jaw tenses, the threat of tears is gone.

“Leave me alone, Beau. We’re too old for you to keep tormenting me.”

Torment her? I sigh, rubbing the stubble on the edge of my jaw. “You’re an escort... for The Network.” Her head snaps toward me, brown eyes like molten copper. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“How did you...” Her wide gaze darts around the room before landing back on me. Her fearful expression from high school is back. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

My hand aches with the urge to reach out and comfort her.

“I would never do that, not that you need to be ashamed, Hartless.” I shake my head and rub a hand down my face. “Look, the bet was to find a date off the app. Whoever brought the hottest chick would win a thousand dollars. If he’s able to

make another guy jealous, an extra thousand. Fucking her would get him five thousand.”

She looks back to the croupier and nods, signaling she’s done with her bet. “I don’t buy it. People don’t do that, not even primo douchebags like you.”

I look across the room. Eric’s flagging down the bartender, no doubt ordering something much stronger than champagne. I have to get through to her.

“No? Pay attention, Hartless.” This time she cringes at her nickname. “The moment you finish the drink he’s bringing you now, he’ll put a new one in your hand. He wants you drunk and compliant.”

I move back to the opposite side of the table. Eric comes up, hands Kelsey a large blue drink, and places his hand on the small of her back. They both turn their attention to the roulette table just as Kelsey’s bet wins again. He leans into her and hugs her, lifting her off the ground. She no longer pushes him away.

The rest of the gang returns. Trixie’s arm slithers around me.

“Hey, babe. This table’s a bit crowded,” she coos. “Let’s find a different game.”

She begins pulling me away. I follow, but my eyes keep drifting back to the roulette table and the blonde pressing her luck.

7

PUNCHLINE

-Kelsey-



He's such an immature ass .

Why would he tell me that? Did he not get enough joy out of tormenting me in high school that he has to continue now that we're adults? Nobody makes bets like that.

Nobody.

I place another bet on black fifteen. And another. And another. No, it's not a lucky number, Beau. It's just my way of tormenting myself, I guess.

Each time my chips are wiped away, and the stack Beau gave me dwindles. Why did he even give me these fucking chips? I'm not a charity case. I'm not his date.

Condensation wets my hand when I lift the cold glass and shove the straw in my mouth. I slurp more of the disgustingly

sweet blue liquid that Eric brought me. Right before Beau walked away with Valley Girl Princess Barbie on his arm.

Why does that make me even angrier?

I wanted to stop him from walking away. Tell him to wait a minute. Ask him more about the so-called bet, but he's lying, so who cares?

He is lying, right?

I shoot an unsteady glance toward Beau and then Eric. My head sloshes. I'm not much of a drinker; when I am, I stick to cheap wine with a bite. The kind that makes me sleepy and ensures I'll wake up with a dry mouth and headache in the morning. Fruity cocktails are a whole different ball game.

"Want another one?" Eric asks. *Asks*. Take that, Beau Valentine. If Eric were trying to get me drunk, he wouldn't ask if I wanted a drink first.

"No, thank you. Fruity drinks aren't really my thing."

"You could've fooled me with how you downed it." Eric laughs and grazes a hand up and down my back. "Tell you what. Let me remedy my error and get you some..." He turns my hand over and runs a finger along my palm, pretending to read it. "Wine? Red? I'll be right back."

He winks, smacks my ass again, and disappears into the growing crowd.

He's just being accommodating. Apologetic even. Remediating his mistake. The excuses aren't sitting right in my stomach. Or maybe it's the drink.

“You having fun, Kelsey?” Ryan stands opposite me where Beau had once been. As attractive as Ryan is, I miss the previous view, and I hate myself for it. Beau might be a complete asshole, but he’s a gorgeous complete asshole.

“Sure. I enjoy gambling.” I shake my head. The champagne and blue liquid slosh around in it like a rolling sea. A haze threatens to overtake my brain. Focus, Kelse. “I mean, casinos are fun. I don’t have a problem with it. Gambling. But it’s fun.”

Just stop talking, Kelse.

Ryan laughs. “I get you.”

I look at my dwindling stack of chips and wonder if I could exchange them for lower denominations and make it last longer.

“Roulette’s getting a little stagnant, though. I might try one of the other games.” One where I can sit. “Maybe blackjack.”

“Ohh, that sounds like fun!” Jackie says. “I’ll join you if you don’t mind. We can grab the other girls and escape these buttheads for a bit.”

Buttheads?

I smile. “Sure, that sounds like fun.”

“Great! I’ll grab Trixie and Harper and meet you in the blackjack area. Find us a table.” Jackie kisses Ryan on the cheek, waves at me, and skips off.

“I guess that’s my cue to find a table.” I turn carefully, making sure I still have my balance. When my head doesn’t swish, I grin. Easy peasy.

Ryan calls out a ‘have fun’ as I walk away. The room has become busier. Men and women dressed in expensive cocktail attire laugh, chat, and gamble. The entire scene is a cocktail of luxury, generosity, and fun.

I worm through the throng of people, avoiding the direction Beau and Trixie skipped off, and reach the blackjack section.

Delicate tan arms engulf me in a sideways hug. Everything becomes a little less steady for a second.

“Kelse! I was beginning to think you didn’t come.” Summer laughs as she spins me to face her. When she stills me, the world keeps spinning. She holds me out like she’s inspecting a piece of priceless art. Waves ebb and flow in my head. I grip her forearms to steady myself. “You look stunning. Striking! Whoever your date is must need a bib for all the drool dripping from their mouth.”

“Summer, I found you!” I wrap my arms around her neck and pull her close.

“Technically, I found you.” She motions to a man standing behind her. “This is my date for the night, Elijah Weaver.”

A handsome man with a dusty streak of gray in his black hair towers over Summer. He reminds me of a serene lake at midnight, the full moon shimmering in the waters. Elijah places a hand on Summer’s lower back, guiding her closer to

him. He gives off an air of refined dignity, though the lift of his lips suggests he's amused. His free arm stretches out. I shake his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Kelsey." The deep, resonant voice sends shivers through my body. I could listen to him say my name all day long.

"Likewise." A tiny hiccup escapes my lips. I lean in toward Summer and whisper, "He's gorgeous!"

A giggle emanates from Summer, and amusement morphs Elijah's face. Was I too loud?

"Are you drunk?" Summer asks.

"Not drunk." Definitely not drunk, but... "fluid. I'm fluid right now."

"Fluid." Summer's smile grows as she looks between Elijah and me. "Well, I've never seen you this fluid before. Perhaps we should get you a little more solid before you end up a puddle on the floor."

Elijah slides away from Summer. She peers up at him.

"If you excuse me, I'm going to get us something to drink," he says. He looks at me. "Can I bring you back anything?"

"No, thank you," I say at the same time Summer suggests, "How about a small plate of hor d'oeuvres."

Elijah's knowing grin widens, giving Summer a wink before disappearing into the crowd.

"Holy shit, Summer, he's a god."

“He’s a regular.” She hooks her arm with mine. “Let’s find a seat.”

We find the least occupied blackjack table available and sit. Within a minute, Jackie, Harper, and Trixie join us. Their dates take seats at the next table over.

“Isn’t that the sexy guy from the bakery the other day?” Summer asks.

“Yeah. I’m here with his friend.”

Beau eyes me stoically before his gaze shifts behind me and turns menacing. A hand rubs my shoulder, and a glass of red wine hovers in front of my face. I follow the outstretched arm to find Eric’s grinning face. He nudges the glass through the air a fraction, encouraging me to take it. I glance back to Beau, who lifts an I-told-you-so brow. Screw him. Clasp the stem of the glass, I take a sip, holding eye contact with my nemesis. Beau’s jaw ticks, and he scowls at the man standing behind me.

“Are you sure you should be drinking more, Kelse?” Summer leans in, her whisper tickling my ear and dragging my attention away from my beautiful monster. “At least wait until Elijah gets back with his d’oeuvres.”

“I take it I’m excluded from this table?” Eric asks. He points to the table with the other guys. “I’ll be over there if you need anything.”

“He’s yummy, but…” Summer starts.

“He’s definitely pretty to look at,” I say before taking another sip of wine.

“So, how do you know Beau?” Trixie’s valley girl inflection cut across the table.

“I went to high school with him and Ryan,” I explain, looking over at the gorgeous blonde. She’s the epitome of perfection. No wonder Beau brought her as his date. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re dating. Though she didn’t introduce herself as his girlfriend, just as his date. The strain aching between my shoulder blades tightens another notch. Trixie’s curiosity wrinkles her forehead, but she keeps a cheeky smile plastered to her lips. “I’ve known him a long time. How about you?”

“I’m one of Beau’s girls. His favorite.”

My stomach knots. I probably should get some food in me.

“Favorite, hm?”

“Favorite.”

“What does that even mean?” I ask.

“She means she’s his favorite escort.” Jackie rolls her eyes. “Whenever there’s an important event, Beau brings Trixie.”

“Wait, you two are escorts?”

“Yep, so is Harper.”

Harper nods.

The bet was to find a date off the app.

I glance over to Beau. He lifts the corner of a card in front of him, shielding it with his other hand, then sets them back down and taps the table. He looks at me when a new card is flipped onto the table.

The energy in the room sears to life. My chest rises and falls in quick, short spurts. I lick my parched lips. It's almost imperceptible, and I could be imagining it, but there's a hint of a smile in Beau's expression. Right before his lower lip finds its way between his teeth. My fingers graze over my neck. I swallow.

I close my eyes and turn away.

Pay attention, Hartless.

My gaze roams to my almost empty glass of wine, then the girls.

"Is everyone's date here an escort?" I wave a finger, indicating the entire event.

The women laugh like I'm the punchline to an inside joke. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if that's true, just not theirs. Something far crueler. My eyes flick toward the table with the guys. They're laughing.

At me?

I swallow down the fear lumping in my throat and simmer the anxiety ready to boil inside my chest. This feels just like high school. I hate it.

Summer levels the girls with a glare and turns to me.

“Not all. Not even most. But there are a good number of men in this city who want a pretty date without the hassle of being tied down.” Summer waves to someone behind me. “Speaking of, it looks like Elijah needs me.” Summer places a hand on my shoulder. “If you need me, find me.”

I nod. She stands and leaves. The dealer tosses two cards to each person at the table, one face up, one face down. I go to lift the corner. Another glass of red wine is placed in front of me.

“I noticed you were out and thought you might like some more,” Eric says with a wink.

The moment you finish the drink he’s bringing you now, he’ll put a new one in your hand.

“Thank you,” I whisper. I take the glass and set it on the table before me. Drunk and compliant.

Eric’s hands cup my shoulders, thumbs grazing like a feather across my skin, making me want to crawl out of it and leave it like discarded clothing on the floor.

I dart up, placing a hand on the table to balance myself and my sloshing brain.

“Would you mind sitting in my place for a moment?” I say. “I need to freshen up.”

I don’t wait for an answer. I don’t even see the look on Eric’s face.

I walk away.

I need to get out of here.

8

--

SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT

-Beau-



She stands, steadies herself with a hand to the table, says something to douchebag Dawson, and walks away.

That's my cue.

I get up and leave the table to a chorus of the guys asking where I'm going. They don't need to know. Kelsey's swaying through the crowd, and I want to make sure I get to her before Eric realizes how drunk she is already. The fucker was going to keep plying her with alcohol until she couldn't stand on her own. That's the only cue he's been looking for. All the subtle signs are ignored because they don't matter to him. Then again, nothing matters to him except himself, and the behavior his father not only encourages but helps shield.

None of that matters right now. What matters is Kelsey and making sure she's ok. She wriggles between people, beelining toward the front of the room. Every so often, she reaches a

hand to the back of a chair or a person's arm to regain her balance. When the person she's grabbed gives her a confused glance, she apologizes and lets go.

I'm maybe a yard away, about to call her name when a hand comes down on my shoulder. Hard.

I roll my eyes before turning to see the graying version of myself. His artificial smile is plastered on his face. He puts on a show for everyone, even his son.

"Glad to see you could make it." My father's bass voice resonates in the room like music. He's practiced for years to get the right cadence down. It's all part of the facade to make him likable and garner votes. The general public might fall for it, but I don't.

"I said I'd be here." I turn back, not wanting to lose Kelsey, but his hand clamps down on my shoulder again. This time, his fingers dig into the muscle.

"There are a couple of people I want you to meet, son." He gestures toward a man and woman standing nearby. They eye me with an air of superiority. Potential investors to my father's campaign, most likely. Walking away from him now could hurt his reelection, landing me in even deeper shit with him.

"I don't have time right now." I go to leave, but he increases the pressure of his fingers again. I look behind me. Kelsey stumbles through the door to a restroom.

"You'll make time." I look at his hand. Does he think he's causing pain? My father's a large, strong man, but I could lay

him flat on the floor with one punch. “Your trust depends on it.”

I sigh. I don’t give a shit about my trust fund, and I certainly don’t need it. But with Kelsey in the ladies’ room, I can spare a moment to keep the facade of peace alive. Besides, I can’t be the creep who stands outside the bathroom waiting for a woman to come out.

“Fine.” I punctuate the word as I shrug forcefully out of his grip.

“Good, boy. Now put on a smile and be charming. These people are worth a lot of money.”

I knew it.

“Colleen, Pres, I’d like you to meet my son, Beauregard Valentine.” My father is the only person that uses my full first name. According to him, Beau is childish. “Beauregard, meet Mr. and Mrs. Chambers.”

“Nice to meet you, Beauregard.” Mr. Chambers holds out a hand that I take. Mrs. Chambers smiles politely and takes a sip of her champagne, her gaze narrowed with scrutiny.

“Beau is fine,” I correct. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I step back and wait a few seconds. If my father wants me around, he or the Chambers can initiate conversation. Besides, my thoughts keep wandering back to Kelsey.

“You look familiar, Beau,” Mrs. Chambers hums. “Have we met before?”

I take a closer look at the woman. Brunette, thin. Fake breasts. Probably lip injections. At least fifty, though trying her hardest to look twenty-nine.

And completely unfamiliar.

“I’m sorry, I can’t say we have.”

“Hm, you must have one of those... faces.” Her gaze enjoys a trip down my body and back up as she takes another sip of her drink.

“Your father tells me you’re looking for a job,” Mr. Chambers says. “And that you are trying to get involved more in the community.”

“Did he?”

“Are you following in his footsteps? Your father has done wonderful things for our community and the schools in the area.”

“My father’s always been generous when it comes to the community.” The words sound far nicer than I mean them. “Exactly where do you come in in my father’s endeavors?”

“Colleen and Pres own Chambers Heritage Academy, the newest private school in the city.” Of course, they do. My father’s grin has yet to falter. “We’re hoping to bring attention to the importance of education while developing various community programs curated by the Academy.”

“Free programs?” I ask, already knowing the answer. My eyes scan the area near the restrooms, checking for Kelsey.

The moment I see her is the moment my father can go fuck himself.

“Well, no.” Mr. Chambers scoffs. “Nothing of value comes for free in today’s world. We want to build a community with class and standards, Beau. Free doesn’t equate to either of those.”

His wife lets out a fluttery laugh. “Free is simply not a possibility these days, dear.”

I turn toward my father. “How would that benefit our community? A private school hardly seems inclusive. Wouldn’t the best way to serve the community, the families, be to provide free education and community programs for all children rather than isolate those less affluent or financially fortunate?”

“We want to build a better community, son. One that is both inclusive and exclusive. To do that, we want to provide the best opportunities for the children, which would include the Chamber’s community programs at CHA.”

Wanting to shake some sense in my father, I shake my head instead. As I glance across the space, I catch a glimpse of Kelsey moving through the crowd toward the front of the room and through the archway into the entry area.

“If you’ll excuse me, I must be going.” I stare directly at my father, patting him twice on the shoulder. The gesture is familiar to both of us, though I’m not usually the one delivering it. “Something more important just popped up.”

His head twitches, the corner of his lip rising. Those are the exact words he's used my entire life to get out of family events. Family wedding on my mother's side? Something more important just popped up, darling. A Friday night little league game? Something more important just popped up, son. My tenth birthday? Something more important...

Without a second glance back, I hustle toward the opening Kelsey just went through. She's leaning on the counter at the coat check, arguing with its attendant. I hurry over.

"You ready to leave, my heart?" I ask. Kelsey looks up at me like I've lost my mind. "Did you get our coats?" Before she can say anything to me, I turn to the attendant and hold a hand out. "Beau Valentine."

The twenty-something attendant peers up at me. Her mouth gapes open. She swallows.

Kelsey rolls her eyes.

"Wow, you're gor... did you say Valentine? As in Mayor Valentine's son?" the attendant asks.

"The one and only." I smile at the girl and pat my suit. "We seem to have lost our tickets. Is there a way you could..."

"Sure! Of course!"

It's too easy sometimes.

Kelsey and I point out our coats. The attendant skips over and grabs them. She smiles up at me when she hands them to us. I help Kelsey into hers, quickly throw mine on, and wrap an arm around Kelsey when she lists to the side.

“Why?” Kelsey asks.

I lean in to whisper in her ear. Her hair brushes against my face, and the air around me turns to eucalyptus and mint. “Because you can barely stand, and I’m going to give you a ride home.”

We turn toward the exit.

“What’s the catch, Beau?” She leans into me, probably without realizing it. My arm tightens around her tiny waist just above her hips. Being this close to her and not devouring her takes more self-control than I’ve ever had to use. My lips itch to skim over the delicate line of her collarbone, lick the creamy skin on her neck. My fingers ache to touch every inch of her.

I clear my throat.

“No catch. Just want to make sure you get home safe.”

We step into the crisp winter chill. Flurries dust the sky, a subtle warning to the storm that’s supposed to roll through later tonight. I give the valet my ticket, and he hurries to get the car.

“You realize I don’t believe you.” Guilt washes through me, my chest constricting around my lungs. And why would she? After one year of being nice to her in high school, I became a total prick for the next three.

“Yes.”

“There’s always a catch.”

“I promise, no catch, Hartless.” The chill emphasizes the distance between us when she pushes out of my grasp.

“Why do you call me that?”

I sigh. “It’s a long story that doesn’t need to be explained while you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.” She teeters on her heels. Her fingers clasp around my arm for balance.

“You’re drunk.” When I pull her closer, she snuggles into my hold. A smile tugs at my mouth. “You’re definitely drunk.”

“Kelsey!” Eric’s voice grates my skin. Kelsey tenses. “Babe! Where you going?”

He grabs her arm and spins her toward him and out of my hold. She stumbles. Her free hand clasps onto my forearm.

“What the fuck, man?” I snarl as I steady Kelsey once more.

“I should be saying that to you. Why are you leaving with my date?”

Kelsey tugs at her arm. Eric doesn’t pay attention.

“Let go of me,” she demands, pulling her arm again. Even drunk, Kelsey’s spark burns fiercely.

“Let go of her. She needs a ride home.”

“Then I’ll give her one,” he suggests. Kelsey sways, trying to step back.

“I don’t think so.” I put myself between Kelsey and Eric. “Let her go.”

The valet pulls up with my Camaro SS, gets out, and hands me the keys. I open the passenger side door for Kelsey. The moment she's in, I close the door and lock it with the fob. I don't trust Eric wouldn't open it and pull her out. I round to the driver's side, unlock it with the key, and open the door.

“What do you think you're doing, Valentine?” An agitated growl replaces Eric's typically jovial voice.

“Just making sure your father doesn't need to bail you out of anything.” I get in the car and close the door. Kelsey's staring at me with confusion. Her irises remind me of wood with the dozen shades of brown streaking through them. “What?”

She shakes her head before leaning back against the headrest and closing her eyes.

“You're confusing me,” she admits. “I don't like it, and it's giving me a headache.”

I laugh. “I don't think it's me giving you the headache, Hartless.”

“Shhh.”

I pull the car around the hotel and down the long, winding main drive.

“Where do you live?” I ask, pulling up to the red light. Kelsey doesn't say anything. “Kelsey?”

I glance over. Her eyes are closed, and her breasts rise and fall with steady breaths. Part of me thinks I should wake her. My goal was to get her home.

No, my goal is to get her safe.

The light turns green. After one more moment of hesitation,
I take a deep breath and exhale.

I turn toward the city and my condo.

What are you doing, Beau?

9

TOO LONG IN THE MAKING

-Kelsey-



Headache?

Check.

Dry mouth?

Check.

Queasy stomach?

Check. Check. Check.

The sun's rays blaze across the room as I try to open my eyes. I squeeze them back shut from the unwelcome assault and flop my arm over my eyes to darken the room. Fuck the sun. It's like the asshole who thinks it's funny to shine a flashlight directly in people's eyes. No one likes that guy.

Squinting, I know I'm not in my room. First of all, it's not the size of a closet. Second, a delicious mix of dark chocolate, sandalwood, and citrus floats in the air. Hell, from the comfort

of the bed alone, I know I'm not home. Soft cotton meets my fingers as my hand moves aimlessly beneath the covers making sure I'm clothed.

Dressed, but not in my dress.

Panic sets in, and I open my eyes further, ignoring the pounding behind them. Maybe Summer brought me home to her place. The desperate hope that she dragged my ass home whisks away as I peer through slitted eyes.

Black sheets. Dark gray walls with white trim. Random, enlarged black and white photographs of nature. And a chair that looks comfortable enough to sleep in. Nothing vibrant enough that screams, "Summer lives here!"

Whoever lives here is a minimalist. Bed. Nightstand. Dresser. Chair.

Oh, god. Did I go home with Eric?

I'd never admit it to him, but Beau was right. Eric's a toolbag.

My dry mouth tastes like death. Cobwebs and dust would flutter out if I opened it, followed by mummified decay.

Time to find a bathroom and some toothpaste. Or mouthwash. Or water. Anything to save my mouth from this necrosis.

I roll onto my stomach and instantaneously regret it. The contents of my stomach swish around like a crewless ship at sea in the middle of a hurricane. With a few deep breaths to ease the sloshing, and keeping the entire upper half of my

body on the bed, I allow my legs to drop over the side and thud against the floor.

Ugh. Get your shit together, Kelse.

After another deep breath to ensure I won't spew anything over the sheets, I brace my hands against the bed, push up and groan.

This is why I stick with cheap wine.

Any other kind of alcohol does me dirty. Always.

Another push, and I'm standing.

Kind of.

Standing enough.

I glance around the room. Light breaks through the window glass to create a brilliant haloed glow. I'm sure my hangover is adding to the effect.

Three doors to choose from. Obviously, one leads out. The others must be a closet and an en suite.

Right now, the goal is to brush my teeth and get the heck out of here. That's it. Maybe figure out whose place this is, but even that is tertiary on the To-Do list. A plush rug cushions my feet from the hardwood beneath it as I move toward the closest door.

It opens in silence to a large walk-in closet about the size of my bedroom that looks like it was organized for a magazine spread. Envy inducing, but not what I'm looking for. I close

the door and move to the next one, which opens into a gorgeous bathroom decorated in earth tones.

It's a mini sanctuary. Skylights deluge the room in natural light. A freestanding white tub shaped like half an egg teases me from the right. My body aches to crawl inside and soak the hours away. Beyond that stands a tiled shower with impeccably clean glass walls. To my left, a double vanity with a dozen drawers beckons. A wide mirror hangs over the countertop, and I catch a glimpse of my current state.

Ouch. I definitely look like I had a rough night.

Tangled hair. Smudged eyeliner and mascara. Bloodshot eyes. As soon as I get out of here, I'll run to the cafe to buy some coffee.

Maybe two coffees.

And an espresso.

I stagger over to the vanity and open the top corner drawer.

Condoms. And several tubes of lube?

Well, I can see where this guy's priority lies.

I pick up one of the tubes to inspect it, and my gag reflex kicks in.

"Frosted cupcake," I read aloud. "Who wants frosted cupcake-flavored lube?"

"Do you always rummage through people's drawers when they're not around?"

The lube drops from my hand into the sink, and I peer into the mirror. Staring back at me with his trademark asshole smirk is Beau fuckin' Valentine. He leans against the door jamb and holds two cups of coffee in front of his chest.

His very bare, muscular chest.

My eyes drop down his torso to a six-pack of delicious abs and back up to his formed pecs.

Suddenly, I want to lick cupcake frosting off each and every ridge. Why does he have to be so beautiful?

“You’re staring, Hartless.” He bounces his pecs, releasing me from the haze. My gaze fastens on his dangerous shark fin stare. I blink to escape drowning in it.

“I was, uh, looking for toothpaste.” I pick up the lube tube and wave it back and forth in the air.

He laughs. “That’s not toothpaste.”

Oh, god.

“No shit,” I say before my cheeks can betray me by staining pink. “Just out of curiosity, do you ask women if they want sprinkles on top when you whip this baby out?”

I let out a small snort. He laughs again. This time excitement bounds around my stomach. I can’t remember the last time he laughed with me instead of at me. Probably freshman year. Probably around the lunch table. Back when we would flirt and joke. When his hand would land on my knee or when he’d pick me up and twirl me around in a hug. Back when I wanted him to be my first everything.

Then we became sophomores, and without warning, that Beau Valentine was gone, replaced by a torturous and insufferable jerk.

The conflicting feelings war in my heart.

He shoves off the frame of the door and takes a step toward me. My pulse dashes through my veins and down between my thighs.

Get a hold of yourself, Kelse. He's the enemy.

He takes another step. I move back, my ass pressing into the vanity's countertop. By the third step, his expression molds with hunger and lust. Beau crowds my space, and if I reach my hands up, my fingers could roam over those muscular ridges. I shove my arms behind me, trapping them between ass and granite.

Beau must see the movement. A smug smile draws one side of his mouth. He reaches around me, his skin brushing against mine. When he leans forward, his lips linger by my ear. He tilts his head a fraction, but the movement can't be missed. I close my eyes, licking my dry lips, trying to remember how to breathe normally instead of this rattling my lungs have succumbed to.

His scent wraps around me, dark chocolate and sandalwood. A hint of citrus awakens a craving inside me.

Beau sets one mug down on the counter. With his free hand, he reaches between me and the vanity. His fingers skim over

my ass right before he pulls open a drawer, bumping me forward and into him. But I don't move.

Why don't I move?

I should shove him away. Instead, I breathe him in again. My fingers twitch to touch him.

Shuffling sounds behind me, the drawer closes, and Beau steps back. A chill floats between us, dousing me like a cold shower. He holds out a tube of toothpaste and a new, packaged toothbrush and takes a sip from his mug. When I take the toothpaste and toothbrush from him, he nods toward the mug behind me.

"I hope you like your coffee black." He smiles, and my heart fucking flutters, the traitorous beast. I rip open the package and remove the toothbrush, squeezing a dab of paste on the bristles. Spinning around, I turn on the faucet, shove the brush under the water and start ridding my mouth of its mummified state. Beau watches, drinking his coffee.

"Why am I here?" I ask his reflection in the mirror, removing the brush from my mouth.

"I saved you from douchebag Dawson after you got drunk." He takes another sip, and I go back to brushing, letting his words sink in. Though I'll never say it out loud, I can at least agree he helped get me away from the terrible date.

I spit and rinse my mouth. Then I look back at our reflections, his flawless, mine not so much. Beau being helpful and generous doesn't make sense.

“But why not take me home?”

“You passed out in the car.” He has all the damn answers, doesn’t he?

I twist back around, so I’m looking at him face-to-face. The hem of the oversized, black t-shirt I’m wearing skims across my thighs. I glance down and then at him.

“You changed my clothes?” I quirk a brow. Let’s see him explain that one.

“No, you did that.” He takes another gulp of coffee and smiles. “Technically, you stripped off your dress and tossed it on the floor the second you got in my room.”

I shield my face with my hands. Maybe if he doesn’t see how red I’m getting, he won’t notice the extent of my embarrassment. And then I remember...

Oh, god. “I wasn’t wearing a bra.”

“I know.” Beau smirks as his gaze travels down my body. My skin heats at his attention, and the pulse between my thighs roars back to life. “That’s why I gave you a t-shirt. I figured you’d be pissed enough waking up in my bed without having to wake up mostly naked in it.”

“I want to know more about the bet.”

“And I want to know why you’re working for The Network. But first, breakfast. What will it be? Waffles? Bacon? Eggs Benedict? Nothing’s off the table.”

“You can cook all of that?”

“Not at all.” He holds up his phone and winks. “We’re ordering in.”

My lips tug up in a genuine smile while my brain warns me to be wary. “Why are you being nice?”

“Consider it an apology too long in the making.”

10

--

HERE GOES NOTHING

-Beau-



Kelsey eyes me with caution as she takes another bite of her Belgian waffle covered in whipped cream and blackberry compote. She chews slowly before swallowing.

“So he was trying to get me drunk, so he could sleep with me and win five thousand extra dollars.”

I nod. The flutter in my jaw increases at the thought of what could’ve happened.

“You know that’s called rape, right?”

Guilt rips through me. I’m well aware of what he was planning.

“And you were in on this?” Kelsey asks. Her arms cross over her chest, pushing up her breasts under my tee. She’s waiting for an answer.

Tread carefully.

“In the sense that I accepted the bet, sure, but I don’t ply women with alcohol to get them to fuck me.” I should’ve known Eric would do that.

“Well, aren’t you just a stand-up guy?” She narrows her eyes and tilts her head to the side.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Tell me how I should be looking at you.”

“Not like a parent trying to figure out how to scold a child.”

Then again, being punished by Hartless might be hot.

Kelsey remains quiet. I shift in my seat.

“Obviously, I didn’t want him to hurt you or anyone else for that matter. The fact that it was you just made that easier to realize. And I warned you about what he was doing. My entire night was spent watching you to make sure you stayed safe. It’s why I brought you home.”

Kelsey doesn’t respond. She sits in agonizing silence and pushes a piece of her waffle around her plate, shaking her head occasionally. I think she might say something when she pokes the piece with her fork, but she stays mute. She repeats this entire process for four more pieces until she lets her fork clang against the plate with a huff.

My cell rings as she gulps her coffee. I let it go to voicemail. It immediately starts chiming again, meaning it can only be one person.

“Are you going to answer that?”

Voicemail again.

“No.”

The phone rings a third time, sounding angrier than the past two.

“I’m not ready to continue this conversation.” Kelsey waggles a finger in the air between us. “So, you might as well take the call.”

I sigh, pick up the phone, and stand while answering.

“What is it?” I ask, walking out of the kitchenette, through the dining room, and into the living room.

“Is that any way to greet your father?” Silence blankets us while he waits for a response. My father’s stubborn and uses it as a power move, but I learned early on that I can wait him out. He called me; he can guide the conversation. His throat clears with a harsh scratchiness. “You know I have reelection coming up.”

“Everyone in the city knows you’re trying to get reelected.”

“So you know it’s important.”

“I know it’s important to you.” I couldn’t care less.

“And you know one wrong move could destroy the entire campaign.”

“Sure.”

“Then why—” I pull the receiver away from my ear and can still hear the ending of his sentence as clearly as if he were

standing right next to me. “—are you fucking around online with random women?

Impossible. I've covered my tracks. Pseudonym, separate bank account, disguise, NDAs... how the hell did he find out?

“What are you talking about?” I play dumb.

“I know about your damn ForFans account, Beauregard.” Fury seeps into his tone and oozes through the phone.

“Who told you?” I scan through my memory. Do any of my casanova girls work for his campaign? Did I piss one off? Still, they'd be stupid to say anything. The NDA is ironclad. I'd make a lot of money off their asses if they spill.

“That doesn't matter. But if I know about it, others can find out. If my opponent or, god forbid, the press gets wind that the mayor's son screws a slew of women in videos on a social media site for money, they will rip me a new one, and don't think I wouldn't take you down with me.”

“Father of the year, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Don't sass me, boy.” I flinch. Those words used to be followed by a bloody nose or split lip. Maybe the occasional black eye. When my mother would intervene, he'd make the next punishment worse. Those always came with the promise of hurting my mother. I don't think he ever did, but I can't be sure he doesn't take his anger out on her with me out of the house. I've never seen any physical signs that he does, but he's a smart man, and my mother's a timid woman. Bruises can be hidden as easily as emotional scars.

“Exactly how will you take me down?”

“I know you’re saving money for Haven Hideout.” I’m pretty sure my heart stops. I’ve told no one about Haven Hideout. “It’s a stupid name, by the way. You should reconsider that part.”

It’s going to be the refuge I wish I had back then.

My father snorts out a puff of air in amusement. “But imagine what the community would say if they knew where that money comes from. If they found out the man trying to set up after-school programs for minors had fucked women online for the money.”

My teeth grit as my jaw becomes a vise. “What do you want?”

“I expect you to attend all functions related to the campaign through the rest of the month,” he demands. “The image of our family is more important now than ever. Have a suitable date for each event, preferably the same girl. Your one and only job is to make the public believe you are a quality son.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You will.” The line goes dead. My fist clamps around my cell, the urge to fling it into a wall straining my muscles. I pocket it instead.

He’s an asshole, Beau. One you can’t wipe clean.

I take a steadying breath before stepping back into the kitchen. Kelsey is still at the table. I take a seat across from her. My body already feels calmer, more relaxed.

She furrows her brows. “You ok?”

“Yeah,” I say with a weak smile. “I just shouldn’t have taken the call. How are you feeling?”

“Less angry.” She stares into her mug. “At least with you.”

“I’ll take the win. In fact, it’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“I know about your damn ForFans account.”

How the hell did he find out? I will have to run through every woman I’ve had in those videos and cross-check it with a list of people working on his campaign.

Kelsey sighs.

“So, who won the bet?” she asks. Kelsey glances up at me through her long, thick lashes and takes a sip of her coffee. She swallows and licks her lips. My cock twitches at the movement. I’ve wanted her mouth around me since high school.

Stay focused, man. Now is not the time.

My father’s voice creeps back in.

“Imagine what the community would say if they knew where that money comes from. If they found out the man trying to set up after-school programs for minors had fucked women online for the money.”

I whisk it away with a shake of my head.

“Who won the bet?” I ask, trying to concentrate on this conversation rather than the one I just had with my asshole

father.

Kelsey nods.

“Eric would say he did.”

“What would you say?”

I meet her gaze and nod back. “I’d say he won.”

Skepticism narrows her eyes, but she doesn’t question me. She takes another bite of her waffle. Her forehead smooths with lowered, contemplative brows.

“So he gets a thousand dollars?”

“Two thousand.”

“Why more?”

“He gets an extra thousand from the guy he made jealous.”

“Who’d he make jealous?” she asks.

I lift a brow.

“You?” Kelsey’s eyes widen with surprise. “You were jealous? Did you see your date? She’s drop-dead gorgeous. The epitome of sex kitten and pin-up girl.”

Interesting.

“Are you saying you were jealous, Hartless?”

She shakes her head back and forth as her cheeks stain pink.

“What? No!”

“Come on, admit it. You were jealous of my date.”

“At best, I felt bad for her.”

I laugh. “You’re not good at lying.”

“Shut up.” Her focus falls to her almost empty plate, but the hint of a smile tugs at her lips, and her cheeks tinge a deeper pink. She looks incredible. Edible, even. I could devour her this second if she’d let me.

She’d look gorgeous tangled in sheets. Flushed. Blonde hair wild across disheveled pillows. Breathing erratically. Moaning as I slid into her again and again until she cried out my name in uncontrolled ecstasy.

“Is there more coffee?” And just like that, I’m pulled from my fantasy. I begin to push the chair out but stop myself. The last thing that needs to happen right now is for Kelsey to ask why my cock suddenly sprang to life.

I point at the French press on the counter. “Help yourself. There are a few different flavors to choose from in that cupboard. Kettle’s on the stove.”

Kelsey stands, still wearing my t-shirt. I had offered her a pair of sweats, but nothing fit without falling down. Being a leg guy, I wasn’t going to force the idea of her covering up. Seeing my shirt draped over her curves, teasing me with a thigh-high hemline, makes me even hungrier for a taste of Kelsey Hart.

She opens the cupboard and pulls out each bag of grounds.

“I’m a little disappointed you don’t have frosted cupcake-flavored coffee if I’m honest.” She spins around with a playful

smile and holds up two bags of grounds. “French vanilla or roasted pecan and caramel?”

“Pecan and caramel.”

Kelsey sets the bag of pecan and caramel grounds on the counter, putting the French vanilla back in the cupboard. She grabs the kettle, runs it under the faucet, and puts it on the gas burner. Then she dumps some grounds into the French press without measuring and sighs.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I guess I don’t understand why you’re being nice. The Beau Valentine I went to school with was committed to making my life hell.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t say I was committed to that, but that guy was an immature ass.”

“But why? We had been friends once. And then we weren’t. What changed?”

Flynn Hannigan happened, and suddenly you were no longer my Kelsey.

I shake my head with a shrug. “Couldn’t say. Maybe it was just part of being a teenage boy.”

Kelsey opens her mouth as the whistle sirens from the kettle. She turns off the flame and pours water into the French press. It’s enough of a distraction for us to get off this topic.

“Tell me why you’re working for The Network.”

“What do you mean? Why does anyone work anywhere? I need the money.”

“But you’re better than that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Before I answer, she continues, “What gives you the right to judge women for working there when you use the service? That’s a bit hypocritical.”

She has no idea. If she knew about ForFans and Casanova, she’d have even more ammo to use.

“You’re right. It is. I didn’t think that one through.”

“The Network pays better than any job I’ve had.” She tamps down the coffee and brings it to the table, pouring it into our mugs. “It’s not something I plan on sticking with long term, but the faster I earn the cash I need, the sooner I can stop being an escort.”

“What do you need the money for?”

“I used to own a used bookstore. It got closed down when the landlord evicted me.” Kelsey seems to deflate in her seat. “I want to reopen, but I need to make sure I have enough money in place, so I don’t end up broke, jobless, and on the streets.”

She needs money. I need a suitable date on my arm for the next month.

“How much do you need?”

“Ten grand to open and stock it. Plus extra for backup savings until I can make an income from the store.”

“So, say twenty-five thousand?” Easy money. I’ve got more than that wasting away in my savings trying to earn what little interest it can.

“In theory, sure.” She shrugs. “Anyway, that’s why I’m working for The Network. Quick money.”

I pause, contemplating whether or not this is a good idea. I must be deliberating too long because Kelsey’s brows pinch together.

“What?” she asks.

Here goes nothing.

“What if there was a way you could make the money faster and without having to date a bunch of sleazy assholes looking to get in your pants?”

She perks up. “I’m listening.”

“I want you to be my girlfriend.”

11

--

THAT'S JUST STUPID

-Kelsey-



Wait, did he? He didn't... there's no way I heard him right.

“Did you put something in the coffee? Because I think I’m hallucinating.” Because Beau Valentine would never want me to be his girlfriend.

“You made the coffee.”

“Not the first time.” I mean it as a joke, but it doesn’t quite land that way.

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t put anything in the coffee, Kelsey.”

We sit in loaded silence. I glance out the window to the world several flights below.

For a Sunday morning, the streets are busy with cars and pedestrians. The brightness of the day heightens the pounding in my head. Snow piles against curbs and buildings, but

sidewalks and roads are clear. Even without stepping outside, and despite the sun shining brightly in the cloudless sky, I know the day is crisp and cold. It's the kind of day that chills your bones as your body begs you for hot coffee or cocoa. I appreciate what Beau did last night. He made sure I got somewhere safe. Gave me a place to sleep. Made me coffee first thing in the morning.

I turn my scattered attention back to my... what is he now? Five days ago, I'd have easily called him my nemesis, my bully, but nothing he has done since then indicates that's the case. He's nicer. Protective. Flirtatious.

Gray eyes stalk my every subtle move. My brain fights the reality of the situation because this can't be real. Beau Valentine spent years intentionally making my life miserable. Secretly putting blue dye in my drink at prom. The fake love letter that ended with me being doused in flour and milk.

Beau 2.0 can't be that different from the past version, could he?

"Then I must be having an out-of-body experience. One of those crazy things where the brain haywires and makes you think you're in another dimension." I smile to let him know I'm being facetious. I might be stunned, but I'm not crazy. Although, for whatever reason, I think he's sincere.

He smiles back, and my stomach flutters. "Same dimension we've been in all morning."

I swallow, trying and failing to settle the butterflies.

“Beau Valentine, the guy who made it his mission to make sophomore through senior year a living hell for me, wants me to be his girlfriend.”

“Fake girlfriend, technically. And I didn’t want to make it a living hell.”

“You dumped flour and milk on my head in the basement hallway at school after sending me a fake love letter.”

“That did happen, but— ”

“And what about my blue teeth at prom? Everyone called me ‘Smurf Muncher’ for the rest of the school year.”

He shakes his head. “That wasn’t— ”

“And let’s not forget the time you put moths in my locker.”

Beau leans his elbows on the table and runs his hands through his hair. “I apologize for that. I didn’t realize that was your locker.”

“Give me a break, Beau.”

“I’m serious.” His gaze darts up to mine. “I thought it was Flynn’s locker. Knowing how afraid of butterflies you are, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“How did you know that? Not even my family knows how petrified I am of butterflies. Even Flynn didn’t know.”

“Let’s just say I paid attention.”

“Just not to my locker.”

“I thought it was Flynn’s.”

I take it back. I might be crazy after all because right now, I believe him. Flynn and I switched lockers a few days before. Mine was closer to his classes, and his was closer to mine. It made sense at the time.

“Why do you need a fake girlfriend? I can’t imagine you have trouble getting women.”

“I don’t, but the kind of woman I need is not in line with the kind of women I normally get.” I blink once and cross my arms. Beau rubs the stubble shadowing his jaw. “My father expects me to attend all events related to his reelection for the next month and to have a woman by my side.”

“Why?”

“To make him look better.”

“I’m still missing something.”

“If he has the quintessential family, the public trusts him more. If the public trusts him more, he gets reelected.”

“So what do you get out of this?”

He hesitates. “Just my father off my back.”

“And I would get...” I bring my mug to my lips and blow gently across the surface of the coffee. I like hot coffee, but scorching my tongue and throat is less than ideal.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.” Coffee splatters across the table, thankfully not reaching Beau.

“I’m sorry. Did you say twenty-five thousand?”

He nods, laughing and wiping up the mess.

“You want to pay me twenty-five thousand dollars to be your fake girlfriend. You could probably get someone far better to play the role for that amount of money.”

“I don’t want anyone else, Hart. You’re exactly the woman I need. Besides, I want to help you with your store, and I doubt you’d accept the money straight out, so consider this another apology to go with the one from earlier.”

Another apology.

“You didn’t call me Hartless.”

“You didn’t seem to appreciate it.”

“That’s... I don’t know, Beau. That’s a lot of money, and it would help me get my bookstore up and running, but I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? Dating me can’t be worse than dating several guys you don’t know.”

“That’s just it! I don’t know you. I used to know you, but then you changed, and now you’ve changed again, and...”

“And what?”

“It’s confusing. And you’re very distracting.” I focus on his eyes despite my own gaze wanting to glide over every muscle on his bare torso.

“Distracting?” He bounces his pecs as a smirk lifts his lips.

“Don’t do that. And yes, distracting.” I sip my coffee. “I have to think about it.”

“That’s not a ‘no,’ so I’ll take it as a good sign.”

I glance at the clock on the wall. “I should be heading home. I work in an hour and a half, and I doubt last night’s dress would be considered proper bakery attire.”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“No, no, that’s ok. I need space. Time to think away from you.”

“Because I’m distracting?”

“Yes, because you’re distracting.” I stand, setting the mug on the table. “Can I use your phone to call a cab? Mine is dead.”

“I’ll get you an Uber. You can grab a pair of sweats to throw on if you want. I know they’re big, but that way, you don’t have to wear the dress home.”

It does seem far more comfortable to wear than the dress and screams far less “walk of shame.”

“Thanks, I think I might do that.”



The prospect of having to see Beau again to return his clothes has my skin tingling and my pulse thumping with excitement as I walk up the three flights to my door.

I jiggle the key four times before twisting the knob as I tug it toward me before the key slips into place and I push the door open. It took eight months before I mastered the art of entering my crappy ancient apartment.

Compared to Beau's state-of-the-art, whatever-floor condo that could easily be featured in Best Homes and Lawns or Abode Gorgeous or any other magazine that showcases incredible, desirable homes, my tiny place might get a spread in Dumps for Dirt Cheap.

But it's my home, and while small might be an overstatement, the woodwork is amazing, the floors are mostly even, and I can paint the walls any color I want because the landlord doesn't meddle.

And yet, there's an urge in my chest tugging me back to the condo.

Beau's offer is tempting, but can I trust it? I want to. Trust it. And him. If Beau's changed, if he's back to being the friend I had in ninth grade, that would be... wonderful. But what if this is one big setup to screw me over? There's too much hope on the line between getting my bookstore back and finding a long-lost friend.

Friend.

The word doesn't sit quite right in my brain. Beau was never just a friend. He was either my crush or my bully. Friendship has been nonexistent from the first time I met him at freshman orientation when he helped me shove the ridiculous plastic shelves into my locker after seeing me struggle like I was trying to get the circle peg in the square hole.

Literally, everything tumbled down on me. Books, binders, a pack of number 2 pencils. Smacked me right in the head.

Hushed laughter floated through the air, but I couldn't bring myself to turn around and see the sources. Next thing I know, a tall, dark-haired boy is bending down and piling everything into a neat stack.

"Let me help you with that, yeah?" he asked. His eyes sparkled in the overhead fluorescents. Shimmer. A rare silver gray. There were a few awkward seconds of silence while he waited for my response, but I couldn't stop gawking. He smiled. My heart skipped a beat. "The shelves. I just fought with mine, but I finally got it to behave, so you could say I'm an expert at it."

I giggled and nodded. He set to work and, like the pro, he claimed to be, got the shelves set up after minimal resistance.

"Thanks! I'm Kelsey." I said, finally finding my voice.

"Beau." He holds out his hand. I take it. In that moment, he became my safety net.

I drag my ass to the bedroom, shove the charger into the phone, and head to the bathroom for some much-needed ibuprofen and whatever beauty regimen I can apply to save me from having the "I have a hangover" look.

As I brush through my rats' nest of hair, my phone pings on and immediately starts buzzing. I toss the brush into the sink, rush over, and answer without looking at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Oh my god, KelsBells, where have you been?" My sister's voice pierces through the phone, grating me almost as much as

the nickname Flynn gave me while we were dating. The fact that Hanna picked it up is an extra knife in the back that keeps on stabbing. “I’ve tried calling a dozen times. Don’t you keep your phone on like a normal person?”

“I was out, and it died.” Not that I needed to give her an excuse, but the sooner I can end this conversation, the better, which means having her get to the reason she’s calling. “What do you need?”

“I need my maid of honor to answer her phone at all times of the day.”

“I’m not your—”

“I’ve got a wedding to plan, and I need your help, silly!” She giggles like a schoolgirl. I return to the bathroom to finish getting ready, setting the phone on speaker. “Flynn and I will be in town this weekend scouting venues. We plan on getting married this summer, so everything needs to be in place.”

“In town as in...”

“We’re coming to see you! We want to get married where we grew up. California’s fabulous, but nothing beats a hometown wedding.”

I don’t care where you have your wedding, Hanna. I don’t care what venue you pick, or cake, or fucking flowers.

A sledgehammer in the form of my sister’s blabbering continues to throb in my head. “So that means I need you ready on Thursday to help. We’ve got limited time to find a

venue, a bakery, flowers, dresses... I'm so overwhelmed already!"

"I have to work, Hanna. I can't just drop my job."

"Of course, you can. This wedding is important and—"

"I have to work." I sigh. "And I never agreed to be your maid of honor. I'm just not comfortable—"

"Don't be like that, KelsBells."

"Stop calling me that."

"You love that nickname." No, I don't. I never really liked it. I definitely haven't since you stole my boyfriend from me in high school, and I certainly don't now. "Flynn and I want you to be part of this wedding."

"Can't you understand why I might not be thrilled about this whole thing?"

"As my sister, you're supposed to be happy for me, Kelse. I can't help that Flynn and I fell in love. Anyway, Mommy and Daddy are coming, too, and they're treating us all to a fancy dinner on Friday night."

Great.

"I gotta go, Hanna." I hang up without waiting for another response. She's already taken up enough of my time this morning, and I have to work.

My phone pings again, and I'm fully expecting it to be a text from Hanna complaining I hung up on her. I lift my cell and look at the screen.

Unknown number.

Swiping open the screen, the text message pops up.

Here's my number if you need it. No pressure. - Beau

How did he get my number?

Without a second thought, I save him as a contact. An ache creeps into my neck. I close my eyes and drop my ear toward my shoulder, allowing the pull to ease the building strain. When the tension subsides a fraction, I repeat with the other side, glancing at the clock.

Shit, I'm super late.

I throw on some work clothes and rush out the door. There's enough going on right now that I could lose my mind and be buried under the avalanche, but being late, and everything with Hanna and Flynn, and dinner with my parents... none of it's registering.

Because right now, I miss Beau Valentine.

And that's just stupid, Kelse.

12

I'M NOT FRAZZLED

-Kelsey-



“What’s got you so frazzled?” Marley wipes down the counter now that service has slowed a bit. Besides a man on his laptop by the window, there’s no one else here.

“I’m not frazzled.” I dump the old coffee and start making a new pot. I need more caffeine if I’m making it through the rest of the day and surviving the thoughts bouncing around my head.

“I want you to be my girlfriend.”

I’m not frazzled. I’m distracted. Probably the sexiest man I’ve ever known wants to give me a lot of money to pretend to date him. Why?

“You came rushing in hours ago, repeatedly apologizing for being late and throwing your coat into the kitchen. It’s still on the floor, by the way,” Marley says, turning toward me. “Then

you threw on your apron, which still isn't tied, and you have had to ask most customers to repeat their orders.”

I sigh and tie my apron behind me. “I'm not frazzled. See?”

“You still look frazzled.”

“Is that your polite way of telling me I look like shit?”

Marley laughs. “I would never say you look like shit.”

“I know... you'd tell me I look frazzled instead.” I lean against the counter and cross my arms.

She laughs some more. “Is this about the date last night?”

“How'd you know?”

“Summer.” Marley moves seamlessly to the glass case and pulls out all the empty trays, stacking them one on top of the other. She lifts them and walks through the swinging door that leads to the kitchen. When she returns, she leans against the counter across from me. “She mentioned you were going to a fundraiser with some sexy man meat—her words.”

“Yeah, well, sexy man meat ended up being a dick...” I shrink away and dig my toe into the ground like a child who has been caught being naughty. “And... I kind of sort of went home with different sexy man meat.”

Marley's eyes widen with interest. A smirk slowly appears on her face.

“Also a dick,” I add. “I think.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Ugh, I don’t even know.” I drape myself over the counter, cradling my head in my arms. “He used to be a dick, and now he seems less dickish, but he could still be a dick.”

“You’re going to have to explain a lot more if you want me to know what you’re talking about .”

I lift off the counter and face Marley, diving into my and Beau’s past without hesitation. I explain our short-lived friendship, the bullying, and never seeing him again... until he came into the bakery the other day.

“And so you went home with him?”

“I was drunk. Man meat number one was just trying to get in my pants, so Beau swooped in to make sure that didn’t happen and then took me home... his home.”

“And...?”

“Nothing happened. I slept alone, he made us coffee in the morning, ordered us food, we talked, and I went home.”

“So what’s the problem?”

I don’t know.

“He’s being... nice?” I respond. Marley’s cocked eyebrow questions my sanity. I throw my arms in the air, exhausted from the back and forth in my head. “I know! I sound crazy, but it’s just not like him. I can’t figure out his angle.”

“Maybe there isn’t one.” She shrugs.

“There’s got to be.”

“Maybe he feels guilty for what he did in high school and is trying to make it up to you. He saved you from an asshole, got you to a safe place, and didn’t make a move on you. Then he made you coffee and bought you breakfast.”

“Yeah... I just, I don’t know, I want to trust it, but I don’t know if I should.”

“Maybe he’s just looking for a second chance, Kelse.” She stands and places her hands on my shoulders. “Anyway, your shift is over. Scoot your cute butt home, pour some wine, throw on a cheesy movie, and give yourself a break.”

“Thanks,” I say with a smile. I untie my apron, grab my coat from the kitchen floor, and head out. By the time I get home, I’m more confused than ever. Maybe Marley’s right. What if he wants to make up for the past? I mean, he was shitty, even if he wasn’t always shitty, and maybe he’s trying to repair whatever friendship we lost. Or just feels bad. Or...

My phone pings as I toss my coat on the hook on the door. A notification from The Network pops up on the screen.

Client: Eric Dawson

Date: Sunday, February 2

Time: 1 hour

Payment: \$1000

Directions: Meet at the Sunset Cafe at 6:00.

ACCEPT DECLINE

I quickly blacken the screen and toss my phone on the table. Then I do as Marley said, pouring wine into a glass until it's just below the rim. What I'm about to do requires some liquid courage. I sit at my tiny, two-seater table and pick up my cell.

I really hope this is the right choice.

Scrolling through my contacts, I find the name I want. Stupid butterflies flutter around my stomach. I take a swig of wine, trying to kill each one off. Beau Valentine does not get my butterflies, but that doesn't mean I can't take him up on his offer.

13

STRICTLY BUSINESS

-Beau-



The moaning subsides. The girl falls against the sheets with a satisfied sigh.

And... cut to black.

I make the final edits on the video before saving the file, backing it up on an external hard drive, and finally uploading it to ForFans. My fanbase likes the firecrackers the best. Women who don't hold back a scream. The redhead from a few weeks ago should be a hit.

Leaning back in my chair, I rub my aching eyes. I need a break from staring at a computer monitor.

Who told Dad about my profile?

My hands wring in my hair, pulling tightly to relieve at least a small amount of stress. It hardly makes a dent. If word gets

out about who I am, garnering support for my nonprofit will become tedious at best and impossible at worst.

I have a meeting with a potential investor tomorrow. Maybe I should take the profile down. Err with caution from here on out. I have plenty of money to start the company. But I can't. I need padding to make sure every expense will be covered without a problem. Too many parts go into a startup like this. The more I have to invest from the beginning, the longer I can make this work.

My phone vibrates against the desk. I'm tempted to let it go to voicemail but glance at the ID, immediately swiping my thumb across the screen.

“Hello?”

There's a second of silence on the other end.

“Hey, um, it's Kelsey.” Her voice sings through the phone.

I clear my throat. “Uh, hey, what's up?”

The image of her in my shirt flashes through my mind. Long, smooth legs tease my memory. How was I not a walking hard-on this morning?

Because she would've kicked my ass at the first indication that I couldn't control myself.

“Yeah, uh... I was thinking...” Another pause. The sound of a sip reaches my ear. “I'll be your girlfriend... or fake girlfriend... whatever, but I have some stipulations.”

I swallow down any building excitement. I can't believe she's agreeing.

"Yeah, sure, you name it."

"Well, it's more like a list of stipulations. Can I come over? I think we need to get some stuff in writing before anything's official. I can grab a ride and be there in like a half-hour."

"Yeah, you want me to pick you up?" I reach for my keys on the desk.

"No," she hurries out. "No, that's ok. I'll grab a ride."

"Ok, I guess I'll see you in thirty, Hart."

"Yeah. Ok, bye." She hangs up before I can reciprocate the sentiment.

I glance at the computer to ensure the video is fully uploaded before turning everything off, leaving the room, and locking the door.

Twenty minutes later, I'm setting the kettle on the stove, hair damp, dressed in a black tee and gray sweats.

Maybe I should've dressed up a little more.

Right after the whistle from the kettle screeches through the air, the buzzer sounds. I remove the kettle from the stove and go to the intercom, pressing the button.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Valentine, there's a Miss Hart here to see you," Hal, the nighttime doorman, says. One reason I chose this place was the level of security that came with it.

“Thank you, Hal. Send her up.”

I head back to the kitchen, dump some grounds in the French press, and pour boiling water over them before there’s a tentative knock on the door. When I open it, Kelsey stands there, hair pulled back in a messy bun that flops on top of her head. Her cheeks are rosy from the cold, brown eyes glistening. Full lips perk up in the slightest smile before falling back to neutral.

She’s happy to see me. And god, if that doesn’t make my cock twitch.

“Come in.” I move out of the doorway and let her step into the condo. She sheds her coat and drapes it over her arm. “Here, I’ll take that.”

She hands me her coat. I put it on the coat rack and then turn back to her. Black leggings and an oversized gray knit sweater hide most of her curves. She looks great in casual. She looks great in cocktail attire, too. But my favorite thing to see her in is my fuckin’ t-shirt.

“So, um, we need to set some ground rules,” she says. She plays with the hem of her sweater, twisting it around her finger.

“I made some coffee. Let’s sit at the table. We can hash things out.”

“That sounds good.” Kelsey nods and leads the way to the kitchen. She goes to the cupboard, grabs two mugs, presses

down the coffee, and pours us each a cup like she owns the place. I love it. Kelsey Hart taking charge.

We sit. She sips her coffee, watching me over the rim of her mug. Silence stewes as we wait for the other to speak first. I take a gulp from my mug, lean back, and smile.

“Is this where you tell me the first stipulation is ‘no falling in love’?” I ask. She laughs and goes to take another sip. “Because I can’t guarantee that.”

She chokes on her coffee, cheeks even pinker than when she first arrived. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I grin.

“That. Don’t be charming or cute or funny.”

“So don’t be me, got it.” I wink. She sighs and huffs out a laugh. Her eyes brighten when she smiles.

“We need ground rules if we are going to do this. I’ve been burned by you too many times not to be wary, and I’d like to find a way to, I don’t know—”

“Protect yourself?”

“Yeah.” She nods. “That.”

Guilt worms through me. I never intended for Kelsey to be hurt by any of those pranks. But she was, and I can’t change that now. I can only make it up to her. Prove I never meant it to get to her.

“I get it. And I’m sorry for the parts of our past that make you feel you need to do that.”

She shrugs. “Anyway, we need a timeline. An end date.”

“Do we?”

“Yes, we do. I was thinking 30 days.”

I rub the stubble on my face. “That should be fine.”

“And we have to be exclusive to each other during that time.” She points a finger at me. “No flirting with other women. Not even exchanged numbers.”

“And no taking on clients from The Network,” I add. “In fact, it might be best to suspend your account. Delete it if possible. I doubt anyone will look into it, but just in case...”

“No problem.” She takes out her phone and pushes on the app. “Oh, right, I got another request today. From Eric.”

I grit my teeth, allowing the ache in my jaw to ease the desire to punch that asshole in the face. Kelsey rolls her eyes and pushes DECLINE. After a few more taps, she puts her phone away.

“There. Account suspended.”

My jaw relaxes. “What else?”

“You have to go to dinner with my family and me this weekend.”

I quirk a brow. “I thought your family moved to Cali.”

“They did, but apparently, they want the wedding here, where Hanna and Flynn met.” An eye roll emphasizes her lack of excitement. “But if I have to face them, I’d rather have a buffer.”

I haven't seen the douchebag since high school graduation, but my opinion of him hasn't changed. He deserves far worse than he ever got. Seeing his face while walking into a restaurant with my arm around Kelsey's waist will be satisfying.

"I'm in. One incredibly sexy boyfriend at your service."

"You're not that sexy."

"Oh, please. I saw you eating up the eye candy this morning."

She tries to hide her growing smile. "I mean... I'm not dead. I can appreciate good abs when I see them."

"Good abs.' Psh." I lift my shirt and rub my hand up and down the ridges. Kelsey's gaze follows my movement. "These babies are gold. You know you want to touch them."

"I don't want to touch them." Kelsey's eyes snap back to mine. Her cheeks tinge pink again. "Can we move on?"

"Just admit you want to touch them, and we can talk about anything else you want."

"I don't want to touch them." She shakes her head. "So dinner will be Friday. Anything else we should add?"

"Not until you admit you want to touch my abs." I rest my forearms on the table. "C'mon, Kelsey. Just admit it, and I'll let you touch them."

"Is that some sort of prize?" She smirks as she stands, moving to the kitchen sink and placing her cup in it. I follow

suit, moving in behind her. My arms cage her in as I reach around to set my mug down next to hers. She spins around, keeping her hands fisted at her sides.

“Just admit it, Hart.” I lean in closer. She smells like baked goods and coffee. I want to lick the lingering taste off of her, devour every delicious inch.

“God, you’re so annoying.” An exasperated sigh leaves her mouth, and she rolls her eyes. “Fine. I guess it wouldn’t be... terrible... to touch your abs.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.” I reach down, wrapping my hands gently around her thin, soft wrists.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes widen as she looks up at me. I could kiss her. I want to kiss her.

“Giving you your reward for telling the truth.” Her hands unravel from the vices they had been. I move them closer, dipping them under my shirt. Kelsey’s small gasp fills the room. Her fingers graze over me, scorching a trail across my skin. When I let go, her hands continue their path over each muscle. She moves them up, her thumb skimming over my nipple. My hand is pulled to her face like the tide to the moon. I sweep my thumb across her lips, urging them apart. Her eyes close as I lean in.

“No sex,” Kelsey whispers. Her hands stop moving and push me away, dumping the metaphorical cold bucket on us without hesitation.

“What?” My brain tries to make sense of what just happened.

She clears her throat.

“That should be another stipulation. No sex.” She squirms past me back to the table. Her head falls in her hands, and then she drops them. “And none of...” She waves a finger back and forth between the two of us. “... whatever this just was. That can’t happen. Polite PDA only when necessary.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“This isn’t about fun, Beau. This is a business transaction. One, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why you want. But I won’t get dragged in by your... your...”

“Sexiness? Sheer beauty? Charm?”

“Setups and pranks.”

“You think I was going to prank you there?” I slump into the seat across from her. How can I explain my past actions to her without her thinking I’m lying?

“I don’t know what to think when it comes to you.” She collapses against the back of her seat. “You have a way of twisting me all up until I don’t know which way I am. I appreciate your offer. I want my bookstore back. This is strictly business, Beau.”

Nothing between us has ever been simple.

“I’ll respect the boundary. Nothing will happen until you want it to happen.”

“Nothing will hap—” A knock on the door draws our silence and attention. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Only you.” I shake my head, brows furrows. Few people would be let up without an announcement from Hal first.

The knock pounds again. “Come on, man. Let me in.”

“Is that...”

“Dawson? Yeah. That’s fuckin’ Dawson.”

“What’s he doing here?”

I shrug. “I have no clue.”

But it can’t be good.

14

IT'S JUST ONE NIGHT

-Kelsey-



“Stay here,” Beau growls as he stalks to the door. I follow him anyway.

The pounding continues, increasing in volume with each step we take toward the door. “Open up, Valentine!”

“He sounds angry,” I whisper.

“He sounds like a douchebag,” Beau replies, his jaw set. He stops and looks at me. “I thought I told you to stay there.”

I stand a little taller and tip my chin up a fraction. “I’m not going to let you boss me around.”

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It isn’t for control, Hart. It’s for safety.”

I quirk a brow at him. Sure, Eric sounds pissed, but I can’t imagine he’d hurt either one of us just because I’m here. Right? Still, Beau seems concerned, which makes me

concerned. I startle when another round of rapid, violent knocks slam through the door. Wanting to relieve the tension knotting in my stomach without admitting Beau might be right, I say, “I’ve felt those abs. I’m sure you can protect me just fine even if I’m here with you.”

Beau’s shoulders relax, and he smiles. “Can’t stop thinkin’ about ’em, can you?”

Nope. Those glorious few seconds touching his perfectly molded body were paradise.

“Just stay behind me, okay?” He stares at me as Eric continues to pound on the door.

“Sure, okay. I’ll stay behind you. I think you’re overreacting a little, though.” Probably. Maybe.

“You don’t know Eric.”

Beau turns the knob and opens the door a third of the way, positioning himself in the gap and blocking the view between Eric and me.

“What the hell took so long?” Eric asks, annoyance saturating his tone.

“Just busy. Can’t come running every time you try to break my door down.”

“I’m here to collect my winnings. Let me in.” The door moves inward, but Beau stops it with a firm hand.

“Can’t do that.”

“What the hell? Let me in, Valentine,” Eric complains. Beau shakes his head. “What the fuck? You got a bitch in there or something?”

“Yeah, or something,” Beau says. A brief pause pervades the air. I can almost hear Eric’s brain putting the puzzle together.

“She’s in there, isn’t she? Are you fuckin’ kidding me? First, you leave with her, and then you fuck her?” A hard slam against the door makes it slip from Beau’s hold and swing wide open. Wild copper eyes narrow as they stare in my direction. His face contorts, jaw pulsates, fists vibrate at his sides. I’ve never seen anger like this. Eric points a finger at me. “The moment you declined my next date request, I knew you’d be here. You’re a fuckin’ whore, aren’t you? Take my fuckin’ money, then turn around and fuck somebody else?”

He moves toward me. I slink back. Beau steps in front of me, one hand pushing against my hip to get behind him, his other forcefully pressed against Eric’s heaving chest.

“I don’t think so.” Menacing and commanding, Beau’s tone leaves little room for argument. I peek around his muscular body, my hands bracing against his tensed back and arm.

Eric looks back and forth between Beau and me. His body has relaxed, but his glare still harbors all the anger he arrived with. “I want my money. You owe me two grand. And the bitch owes me five hundred.”

“You’ll get it. I’ll pay all of it, but not right now.” Beau points to the door. “Leave. Now.”

Eric sucks his teeth and cracks his neck. “Fine, I’ll leave. I expect my money tomorrow, Valentine. This is bullshit.”

He stomps out the door, slamming it behind him.

“What the hell was that?” I ask in the following silence.

“That was Eric Dawson showing his true colors.” Beau locks the door and presses a button on the intercom.

“Can I help you, Mr. Valentine?” The voice of the doorman downstairs echoes through the speaker.

“Yes, Hal. Please make sure Eric Dawson leaves the premises and remove him from the list of people approved for automatic entry.”

“Yes, sir.” The room goes quiet. Beau turns back to me. He breathes in deeply and sighs as he stretches his hands. Then he tips his head at me. “You okay?”

I nod. Besides being a little scared when Eric first came in, I’m good. I knew Beau wouldn’t let him near me.

“Look...” Beau rubs the back of his neck. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go home tonight.”

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Dawson doesn’t let things go that easily. And...”

“And you think he’d wait for me?” I can’t imagine anyone doing that, even if they’re mad.

Beau nods. “I’m worried he might follow you home.”

“That’s... people don’t do that. I know he was pissed off, but... but that seems insane, not to mention immature.”

Beau steps closer to me. The air between us sparks to life, and as much as I tell myself to step back, I can't. He makes me feel safe, and the thought of Eric following me makes me want that safety. Beau's finger lifts my chin, forcing me to focus on his face. Concern washes away his usual carefree and happy expression. "He isn't a good guy, Kelse. The guy doesn't take rejection well. He thinks he's untouchable."

Something is missing in this conversation. "What aren't you telling me, Beau?"

He glances away, sighs, and rubs a hand through his hair. He paces back and forth in his living room like a caged lion.

"If you want me to trust you, you need to be upfront with me."

His gaze shoots back to me, and he stops in his spot. "You're right. Just..."

"Just what?"

He shakes his head. "When we were in college, Eric, Ryan, Jordan, and I had been hanging out with this girl, Laura, and her friend at an apartment Laura rented a few blocks from campus. It was a fun time. We were drinking, talking, just chillin' out. The friend ended up leaving to go see her boyfriend or something, but we'd been pretty wasted by that point. Laura said we could crash at her place, and we did."

I don't like where this is going.

"You didn't..." I can't finish the thought.

“No! No, no. I wouldn’t,” Beau insists. He begins pacing again. “The next morning, we found the girl curled up, partially naked, and crying in her shower. She wouldn’t say anything to us.”

“Did you call the police?”

Beau sits on the couch. I sit next to him, resting my hand on his leg. He looks at it and then up at me. “We were going to, wanted to, but when Ryan grabbed his phone, Eric shoved him against the wall. He said his father was on the way and would take care of it and that if we called the police, he was taking us down with him. Our fingerprints were all over the apartment. We found out later Eric had stolen her cards and put them in our stuff.”

“Wouldn’t the girl be able to tell the cops the truth?”

“Eric had already threatened her to keep her mouth shut. She didn’t even tell us what happened. We put it together for ourselves.” He leans forward, rubbing both hands through his hair and pulling. “Eric took all of our phones as a security measure, so none of us would try calling the cops. Then he had us wait in the living room until his dad got there. At some point, Ryan claimed he had to take a piss and went back to the bathroom. Later he told me he encouraged Laura to get a rape kit done at the hospital. He was pretty torn up about everything, seeing her like that and not being able to help.”

Silence hangs in the air. I don’t know what to say. About what happened. About Eric. Beau falls back against the couch. His angry, worried eyes don’t stray from mine.

“Why do you still hang out with him?”

“We ask ourselves that all the time,” Beau admits. “At least Ryan and I do. There have been a few times, not often, that Eric brings up that night. He says he has ways to pin everything on us. I don’t know how true that is, but after his father cleaned up his mess, we also can’t be sure. Without Laura pressing charges, it’s Eric’s word against ours.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t mean he’d do the same again, does it?” I already know it’s a stupid question, but panic has set in. “I mean, I could just call the police, right? If Eric was following me, I could call the police and...”

“It’s not that simple. I told you, Dawson’s father has everyone in his pockets. Everyone.”

“If you honestly think he’d follow me home tonight, what would stop him from doing it any other day?”

“Nothing, but I’m hoping he won’t bother you once he cools down and gets his money.”

“And if he does?”

Beau doesn’t say anything for a minute. He studies me, eyes roaming over my face. “Let’s start with tonight. I’d feel much better if you stayed.”

I guess it couldn’t hurt. It’s just one night.

“Yeah, okay. If you think it’s safest.” His arms wrap around me, holding me close. He smells of chocolate, sandalwood, and citrus. I breathe him in. The scent calms my fraying nerves. His chin rests on top of my head. Too close, Kelsey.

Needing to bring air into the suffocating room, at least for now, I back away and point my finger at him. “But we aren’t sleeping in the same bed.”

He laughs. The somber weight in his expression lifts a little.

“You love taking away all the fun, Hart.” Beau winks with a smile. He takes my hand in his and moves toward the kitchen. “Let’s order some dinner.”

15

PRACTICE

-Kelsey-



“I don’t think I could eat another bite,” Beau says. He glares at the cartons of Chinese food splayed across the table and pats his rock-hard abs. “Look at this gut.”

“Right. Gut.” I laugh and roll my eyes. “I hate to be the one to tell you, but you can’t end dinner without a fortune.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. It’s tradition.” It’s not really. Most of the time, the cookies end up in the trash because I’m too stuffed to eat them, set them on the counter, and promptly forget they exist for weeks. I toss a cookie at him. He catches it in one hand as I rip open the plastic wrapping of my own.

“Alright, Hart. In the name of tradition.” He tears open his wrapper and crushes the cookie apart. He takes out the tiny

white strip of paper and reads it silently as he dumps the cookie crumbs into his mouth.

“What does it say?” I ask, carefully breaking my cookie in two. I slip the paper out and hide it in my hand, refusing to look at the fortune until the cookie is entirely eaten.

“Can’t tell you. Bad luck.”

“That’s wishes. You can tell people your fortunes.”

“Are you sure? How many of your fortune cookie fortunes have come true?”

“I don’t know. Probably none.”

“Exactly. And that’s probably because you go around blabbing them to the world.” He clears his throat dramatically and flicks the tiny slip of paper. “It says, ‘Women find you sexy and irresistible.’”

“Wow, you should get your money back if the fortune’s gonna lie like that.” Beau quirks a brow at me like he’s calling my bluff. Guilty. That man’s a smoke show, and he knows it. I know it. The world freakin’ knows it. “What does it really say?”

“You can’t change your past, but you can build your future.” He tosses the slip onto the table. “Ever notice fortunes aren’t ever actually fortunes? What does yours say?”

I pop the last bit of cookie in my mouth and unravel the paper.

“You will get what your heart desires.”

He smiles, leaning back and resting his arm on the back of the chair next to him. “And what does Hart’s heart desire?”

I shrug. “My bookstore? A life unassociated with my family?”

“I don’t ever recall you complaining about your family when we were friends.”

“It wasn’t as bad back then. I mean, it wasn’t nonexistent. Hanna’s always been the preferred daughter. Prettier. Less sarcastic and bitter.”

“More ruthless and uncaring,” Beau adds.

“What makes you say that?”

“If Hanna had the opportunity, she’d always make sure you’d get knocked down.”

“That’s rich coming from you.” I cross my arms over my chest. Beau’s gaze drops with my movement before returning to my face. I scoff a laugh. “Really?”

He shrugs, but the smirk on his face tells me he’s happily unapologetic.

“I never wanted to knock you down, but don’t get off topic. We’re talking about your sister.” He waits for me to nod before he continues. “For example, she always had a thing for Flynn. When you two were dating, she’d constantly be around, hugging him, leaning against him, smiling at him. Making fun of you to him.” Beau watches me. Whatever he sees on my face causes his to fall slightly. “You had to have noticed, Kelse.”

Did I notice?

I remember Hanna always being around when Flynn was, but I never thought much about it. Maybe because my focus was split. I liked Flynn, but there'd always been another force stealing my attention, even if I hid it from others. And now that force sits across from me, inserting himself back into my life.

"I guess I never paid attention." I shift in my seat. "I mean, Hanna was always around. Even when we were friends, she'd come hang out with us."

"And she'd do the same thing with me that she did with Flynn. The only difference was I never fell for it. I think she realized pretty quickly she couldn't steal my interest away."

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon, Hart. You can't be that oblivious." He tilts his head, one eye narrowed with speculation. "There was only one girl I wanted, and it wasn't your sister."

"Me?" I point to myself before shaking my head. "I don't buy it. If that were the case, why didn't you say anything? I never would've..." I trail off, not wanting to finish the thought.

"Never would've what?" Beau presses.

I never would've started dating Flynn had I known you wanted me.

"It's not important, and the past is the past. Can't change it, right?" I reach for some cartons, stacking empty ones inside

each other and closing those that still have food.

“Sure, yeah.” Beau stands to take over clearing away the meal. When we finish, I glance at the clock. It’s too early for sleep. I look over at Beau, who is already watching me. Tingles tickle my skin. The air between us sizzles in the silence. My body aches to step closer to him.

Don’t even go there, Kelse.

I clear my throat. “You want to watch a movie or something? Make popcorn?”

“I can’t believe you’re still hungry after all that takeout.”

“Popcorn isn’t really food. It’s an activity. No one eats popcorn to fill their stomachs. They eat popcorn to watch movies. No popcorn? Impossible to watch a movie.” I tilt my head to the side and lift a shoulder. “These are things you need to learn if we’re going to be fake dating.”

He laughs and nods. “Popcorn and a movie it is. The only TV is in the bedroom, though. You okay with that?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” But my heart’s already galloping in my chest. Sharing a bed with Beau feels dangerous, even if it’s just to watch a movie.

“I don’t know. It might be hard for you to keep your hands off these amazing abs if we’re that close together.”

It’ll be great practice for my willpower.

“I’m good. I’m sure I can keep my hands to myself.”

“There you go again, taking away all the fun.” He winks.

We make the popcorn, grab some sodas, and head to his room. When we step in, the wall across from his bed is bare.

“I thought you said there was a TV in here.”

“There is. Have a seat.” He sets the bowl of popcorn in the center of the bed and grabs a remote from the opposite nightstand. “What kind of movie do you want to watch?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I say as I crawl up on the bed. Beau pushes a button on the remote, and the wall across from the bed slides open, revealing an insanely large flatscreen.

He scrolls through a long list of movie titles on the screen. How he can choose at all is a wonder, but I’m more surprised when he lands on a cheesy rom-com. One of those high school romances where the guy doesn’t notice the girl until she takes her glasses off.

“I never would’ve pegged you for a romantic comedy kind of guy.”

“I’m not. Mostly the classics.” He sets the remote down on the nightstand, tossing his pillow to the head of the bed. “I just figured something lighthearted and fun would be better after what happened earlier.”

“Fair enough.” I pick up the large bowl of popcorn and start popping kernels in my mouth one by one. The movie begins playing, and Beau slides onto the bed beside me. I start to lean toward him and stop myself, placing the bowl between us as a barrier. Keeping a foot between us is safe. It’s smart.

An extended montage sequence with peppy music begins to play, showing the actors' names when the character pops on screen. These movies always have the longest starts.

I glance at Beau, who shoves a handful of popcorn in his mouth, and I smile. "*There was only one girl I wanted...*" His words bounce around my brain adding to the confusion that is Beau Valentine.

"What?" he asks, lifting a brow.

"Nothing," I say. "Just... you said... never mind."

"Spit it out, Hart." He turns his head toward me, and I quickly stare at the bowl.

"You said you wanted me in high school," I start, grabbing a handful of popcorn.

"Yeah... and?"

I can't look at him. I pop a couple of pieces in my mouth and shift a few others still in my hand. Why am I even going here?

"Well, why did you torment me so much?" My gaze tentatively meets his. "When we stopped being friends that hurt enough, but then you got mean. If you wanted to be with me, why douse me with milk and flour? Why dye my teeth blue or put moths in my locker or any of the other things you did? It just... it doesn't make sense."

He takes another handful of popcorn. "None of that was meant for you, Kelsey."

“That’s such crap,” I spit out. “If none of it was meant for me, how come I ended up being the victim in all of them?”

“I don’t know, but I swear it wasn’t meant for you.”

I sigh. “Then who was it meant for?”

“Flynn,” he says. “I have no idea why you always ended up the one affected, but I swear all of those pranks were meant for him.”

“Why didn’t you stop when you realized I was the one getting hurt?”

“I was hell-bent on trying to make Flynn’s life a living hell because he didn’t know how good he had it. That asshole deserved it. I was absolutely convinced I could get him.”

I take a deep breath, unsure what to say next, but Beau moves the bowl of popcorn and shifts in my direction, the barrier and the foot of distance broken. His silvery gray eyes entrap me again. My heart stumbles in my chest.

“I’m going to make it up to you.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and rests his palm against my cheek. “I promise.”

I nod. Not because he needed a response or asked a question, but because I believe him. This is a completely different man than the one I knew in high school.

He leans in toward me. My mouth is hungry for his. I feel fifteen all over again. This is not a good idea, Kelsey.

As much as I believe he's changed, and even if I buy his explanation, I can't let my guard down. Because what if I'm wrong about another person?

"We're, um, we're missing the movie," I whisper as I turn back toward the TV. I peek to the side to see Beau's chest fall with a silent sigh, a dejected but understanding smile on his lips. He sits back against his pillow and faces the screen.

A half-hour into the movie and the popcorn gone, the characters on the screen finally kiss for the first time. The one thing cheesy romcoms need to get right is the chemistry between the main characters. When that doesn't happen...

"This is... awkward," I say.

"Bad casting," Beau agrees. "How hard is it to make a kiss look real?"

"I can't imagine very, but then again, I've heard these two actors hated each other. The people in charge of the production refused to recast because," I wave a hand at the screen, "well, big names equal more profit."

"I've kissed hundreds of women, and I can't imagine anything ever looked as uncomfortable as that."

"Good to know, faux boyfriend." I pat his leg. How did I end up close enough to do that? I look at the setup. The empty popcorn bowl is lazily tossed at the end of the bed. Our arms nearly touch. If I tipped my head to the side, I could use his bicep as a pillow.

Don't tease yourself, Kelse.

“Jealous?”

Yes. “No, just make sure you remember stipulation number whatever, and don’t go around kissing random women during our fake relationship. We need this to look real.”

Which means I will have to kiss him at some point. In public. And what if we look just as awkward as the couple on screen?

I clear my throat. “Maybe we should practice.”

Beau’s head whips around. Then a smile forms on his pouty lips.

“You think we should practice making out.”

“Not making out, and don’t get too excited. I want to make sure we don’t look as idiotic as those two.”

“Sure.” He laughs. “Whatever lie you need to tell yourself to make it okay to kiss me.”

“Oh, forget it. Let’s just fini—” My body slides down the bed as muscular arms cage me in. Beau holds his body over mine without touching me. My hands reach under his shirt, and my fingers dance over his abs.

“You want to make sure we look natural, Hart?” Somehow his voice has gotten even deeper, silkier. Sexier. Shivers racket my body even as it burns for his touch. Beau slides a knee between my thighs. Any thought to resist is absent from my mind. “I don’t think we’ll have that problem, but we can practice all you want.”

His hand skims down my waist, over my hip to my thigh. He reaches under my knee and pulls it up, hooking it around his firm body. I pull my leg to drag him down on top of me, but he resists.

“Someone’s eager.” He winks, and the heaviness between my thighs grows. My hands are still against his abs. He leans closer. Lips brush my collarbone. “We’re taking this slow, Hart.” My neck. “Just a kiss.” My jaw. “One innocent practice kiss to reassure you that we’re natural together.”

His stubble scratches my skin, and I want more. Shark fin-colored eyes stare into mine, and I can’t breathe. Everything inside me tingles with anticipation.

His thumb rubs over my lower lip. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

His mouth collides with mine, and my body melds into his. My lips part, wanting to taste more of Beau Valentine. The thrumming in my chest threatens to explode from pleasure. How can it be this good? He deepens the kiss. I purr into his mouth. If I have to let go anytime soon, I might die. No kiss should be this satisfying. I bite his lower lip and scratch his chest, leaving my mark. A growl rumbles through him, turning into a groan.

He pushes away, our ragged breaths the only sound in the room.

“I don’t think we’ll have a problem convincing others, Hart.” He gives me one more peck before lifting off of me and moving from the bed. “I’ll be in the shower if you need me.”

Then he exits the room, leaving me breathless.

16

--

WHEN SHE NEEDS ME

-Beau-



I tap my heel against the carpet in the waiting area. Earthtones color the walls, pictures, and floors. Consummate professionalism even in design. I wouldn't expect anything less from Albrecht Associates or Mr. Albrecht himself. It's not every day that the founder and CEO of the city's most prominent financial group agrees to meet with you.

"Mr. Valentine?" I perk up at the secretary's call. "Mr. Albrecht will see you now."

It's showtime.

The secretary stands as I do and ushers me toward large double doors at the far side of the room. She knocks once and opens the door, motioning for me to enter.

"Thank you." I step through the threshold, and the door clicks shut behind me.

“Mr. Valentine, welcome.” The tall, gray-haired man stands behind his desk. “It’s been a while since we first spoke on the phone.”

“Yes, sir, it has,” I say, stepping toward his desk. I reach out my hand, which he takes. “It’s nice to meet you in person, sir.”

“Please, have a seat and tell me why you’re here.” Mr. Albrecht sits in a brown leather office chair and leans back. As he rests his elbows on the arms, he tents his fingers in front of him.

I follow suit, sitting in one of the simpler leather chairs across from him. I set my portfolio on the desk and open it, taking out several papers. I hand him copies of the business and financial plans and the building design. He puts on a pair of glasses and peruses over them, interest piquing in his eyes.

“Haven Hideout?” he asks.

“Yes, sir. Growing up, I often longed for a place to be after school or on the weekends that wasn’t home.” The reasons behind this don’t need to be revealed to my potential investor. That could create far more problems for me if they learned the truth about my father. Thankfully, what kid doesn’t want somewhere to go that isn’t their house? “A refuge of sorts. My goal as an adult is to create that space for our city’s youth. A place to get school help or make friends. A space for kids to be kids safely.”

He continues skimming over the papers and flips to a very basic blueprint of a warehouse. “Explain the building plans.”

“I’ve already bought the location, sir.” He nods, no longer showing his reaction on his face.

“Which is where?”

“In the old manufacturing district,” I admit. Mr. Abrecht lifts only his eyes as he stares at me over the edge of his glasses. After the city moved its manufacturing farther away on the opposite side of town to create a more aesthetic look while building profit, the old manufacturing district died. Businesses moved, and the buildings were forgotten. “I know the area isn’t used much anymore, but I believe it could grow into something big for the city, starting with Haven Hideout. I hope that starting my nonprofit there will encourage other youth-focused businesses to join.”

He sets the papers down, once again tenting his fingers. “Keep going.”

“The building I bought is an old abandoned warehouse. It needs a lot of work. That’s partly where you come in. Renovations to bring it up to safety standards and make it a place kids will want to be. And then practical matters once the nonprofit is open.”

“Practical matters?”

“I’m planning to speak with the district regarding bussing students to Haven Hideout at the end of the school day, during breaks, and over summer, as well as to get home. A lot of the kids that would benefit from a place like this would need transportation. I’m also looking into catering options to provide snacks and meals for students. Hiring qualified

workers to help. Haven Hideout will offer tutoring services, activities, and more. While I know many people would volunteer to help, I believe having a steady group of people so that the kids have stability is essential. I also believe it's important to pay people for their time. Everything has a price, and while I am willing to put every cent of my own money toward this, I know it won't be enough to sustain the business. That's why I need investors, sir."

"This is a solid business plan, Mr. Valentine. It looks like you've done your research." Mr. Albrecht drops his hands and leans forward, nodding ever so slightly. "How much are we talking?"

I swallow. *Moment of truth.* "I'm asking for \$500,000 over the next five years, sir."

He whistles long and low, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. Then he stares at me.

I'm losing him. But I also don't know what else to say to get him back. I could go into my personal story, pull at some heartstrings, but that also feels like a bad idea. I could make a plea for the kids again, but haven't I already done that? So, I also remain silent, watching him back.

"It's not a no, but I can't commit just yet. I'd like to keep these plans and ruminate over this a while before I make my decision," he finally says.

"Of course, sir. I only ask that you don't share it with others. For various reasons, I'm keeping it close to the chest at this point, so to speak."

“No problems, Mr. Valentine.” He stands and stretches out his hand. I copy the movement. “Thank you for coming in today. I’ll let you know soon, regardless of my decision.”

“Thank you, sir. Have a good day.” I leave the office, exit the building, and return to my car.

It wasn't a no.

I keep repeating the words in my head. There’s still a possibility he’ll invest. I turn on my car and catch a glimpse of the time. Just before noon. My father will be at the office, so there’s no chance of running into him, and it’s been too long since I’ve had a moment of peace with my mother without the asshole around. With the “not no” resting on my shoulders and my dream still temporarily alive to see another day, I have a sudden urge to see her.

— e l e —

I knock on the door. There hasn’t been a day where I’ve simply walked inside this house since I left for college. It hasn’t been my home since then.

The maid opens the door. When she sees me, she tips her head and moves out of the way, letting me in.

“I’ll let Mrs. Valentine know you’re here,” she says.

“That’s okay. I know where to find her.” I smile to reassure her she doesn’t need to go out of her way to accommodate me. I exist somewhere between the plains of guest and familiarity in this mansion.

I walk down the long entry hall, ignoring the rooms on either side. My mother will only be at one place this time of day. It's been her ritual since I was ten. I open one of the double doors and step into the wood-encased room. Filled bookshelves line all the walls, leaving only space for the doors and windows. Mom sits in her oversized chair facing outside. She must have heard me come in because her book is on the side table beside her.

“How you doing, Mom?” I ask, walking up and giving her a kiss on the cheek and then taking a seat in the other oversized chair across from her.

Her soft smile brightens. “Good, especially since you're here.”

“I figured it had been a while since you and I spent time together without...” I trail off, knowing mom has never said a bad thing about my father, and it's better for her if I do the same.

“Your father's at work, as always. The house is quiet without him around. It makes getting reading done a lot easier.” Her words settle like acid in my stomach. *The house is quiet without him around.* Meaning there's no one here bitching and screaming up a storm because something wasn't done to his idea of perfection.

When I was younger and still living at home, I was the recipient of that anger. Nothing I ever did was done right. Nothing I said was right. Eventually, the yelling got louder, and the anger appeared in different ways. Black eyes. Nose

bleeds. Anything that could be easily explained because I was a young and active boy.

“You know boys these days. Always running and falling. Bumps and bruises will happen.”

Worry slithers through my veins. Now that I’m gone, who is that anger directed at?

“I have to know, Mom,” I start. Her gaze slips away from me out the window. “Does he hurt you?”

She shakes her head, but I’m not sure if I believe it. Then she sighs and looks back at me. “Your father is a man set in his ways, Beau.”

The admission is subtle, but it’s there.

“I can get you out. You can stay with me. I have plenty of money, mom. I can take care of you and—”

“Don’t be silly,” she interrupts. “You are young and have an entire life ahead of you. You don’t need your mother over your shoulder.”

I rest my head in my hands, pulling my hair until it feels like it will rip out of the skin. “But—”

“Beau, look at me.” Her stern command takes me by surprise, forcing my attention. “I can handle myself and your father. I’ve chosen this life, and I know exactly where I stand. Don’t spend your hours worrying about me.”

“I just want to know you’re okay.”

“I am okay here.” She smiles and picks up her book. “Your father will be home early today.”

Her meaning is clear. I should leave.

“Let’s have lunch sometime soon, Mom,” I offer. It’s a gesture to let her know I’m here when she needs me.

“That sounds wonderful, dear.” I lean down again, giving her another kiss on the cheek. She opens her book and continues reading where she left off.

And I see myself out.

MY GIRL

-Beau-



Cardio day. I fucking hate cardio day.

The pounding of my feet against the treadmill keeps time with my pulse. Ryan runs next to me, his ass starting to drag as the machine's incline goes up.

"You gotta do better than that, man," I huff out with a smile.

"Fuck off." His belabored laugh is the only indication he's not actually annoyed at me for calling him out. "Not everyone can be you in the fuckin' gym."

"That's because you've got to do better."

Ryan throws a towel at me and misses. He pushes a button on the machine and starts to slow. I could've gone another ten minutes at this pace but follow his lead instead. Soon, we're walking leisurely in a cool-down period.

"So, he just showed up at your door?" Ryan asks.

“Yeah.”

“You think he’ll stop bothering her after he gets his money?”

“I hope so. He was batshit crazy last night. Do you remember how he was with that girl in college? The blonde with the pixie cut?”

“Laura Reddings.” He shakes his head. “I remember. Do we know what happened to her?”

Ryan pushes another button on the treadmill, stopping it, and steps off. He picks up his towel from where it landed and swipes it across his neck. I stop my machine and step off, too. Grabbing my towel, I make my way toward the locker room.

“Last I heard, she transferred to a different college in a different state.”

“And you think he’ll be that bad with Kelsey?” He pushes open the locker room door.

“Not if I can help it.” I sit on the bench across from my locker, open it, and grab my bag. As if on cue, my phone chimes. Kelsey’s name shines on the screen. Speak of the devil.

“Can’t get enough of me, can you, Hart?”

“Beau?” Kelsey whispers through the phone.

“Why are you whispering? I thought you were working.”
Did she sneak away just to call me?

“I am. I’m in the kitchen. Um, I don’t mean to bother you.” There’s a nervousness in her tone. Unsure and a little stilted.

“You’re never a bother.” Something isn’t right. “Are you ok?”

“No. Yes. I mean... I am, but... Eric’s here.”

“That mother—” A knuckle cracks as my fist tightens. I throw everything in my bag. Ryan looks over, catches my eye, and must see the seething anger roiling through me. He copies my lead, throwing his shit in his bag, too. I’m out the door and stalking through the gym with him in tow less than a minute after I answered the call. “He’s been here for over an hour. He won’t leave. Marley’s tempted to call the cops on him, but I figured I’d call you first.”

“I’m coming right now. Stay in the kitchen.” People passing by spin their heads at the bang of the front door as I slam it open.

“Marley won’t let me leave the kitchen, but every time I peer out the window on the door, he’s staring at it.”

I sprint to the car, open the door, and toss my bag in the back seat. Ryan slides in the passenger side.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, Kelse.”

“Thank you.” She hangs up.

I peel out of the parking spot, the screech of the tires punctuating the rage fuming out of me. “That asshole is messing with the wrong person.”

“Don’t do anything stupid, Beau,” Ryan warns. “You know he’s connected.”

“I don’t give a fuck who his father is or isn’t. He’s messing with my girl, and that means he’s messing with me.”

KEEP YOUR HEAD STRAIGHT

-Kelsey-



“You better get out here, Kelse,” Marley’s urgent voice calls out from the front of the shop. When I look up a second later, the kitchen door is already swinging closed, and Marley is nowhere to be seen.

Crap. The bakery must be getting busy. The idea of going back out there with Eric creeping around sends gross slithers over my skin. His eyes stayed on me the whole time I was at the counter. He never looked away once, which is why Marley told me to hide out in the back in the first place. Beau had said to wait in the kitchen until he got there. But Marley’s my boss and friend, and I’m technically at work.

I sigh, resigned to feeling my skin crawl once Eric gets his eyes on me again. Stepping through the door, I freeze in my tracks. Beau and Eric stand face-to-face in the center of the bakery. A couple at a nearby table stare wide-eyed at them.

Money is sprawled across the floor at Eric's feet, but neither he nor Beau bends down to pick it up.

Marley's got a phone in her hand, looking like she's ready to dial the cops. She lifts a brow at me in question.

"Should I call?" she asks. I shake my head. Beau won't let this get out of hand. Right?

"Take the fuckin' money and leave her alone."

"Who do you think you're fighting against, Valentine?"

"I know exactly who you are, Dawson. Don't forget I know your secrets. One word from me, and your entire world will come crumbling down."

Secrets. I swallow, knowing I know his secrets.

Eric scoffs. "If you really believe that, then you don't know shit."

"What do you think, Ryan?" Beau calls back without turning around.

"I think enough people know his secrets that it could be a big problem for him," Ryan answers from the shop doorway.

"Daddy can only save your ass so many times," Beau says.

Eric's cocksure expression falls before contorting into crimson anger. His eyes narrow at Beau. His fist clenches at his side, and he takes a step forward. My pulse races, and I move toward Beau. He catches my eye and shakes his head, and I stop. Eric follows Beau's glance. When he sees me, a smile slithers over his mouth.

“Don’t look at her,” Beau demands, pulling Eric’s attention back. “Don’t talk to her. And don’t you dare fuckin’ go near her.”

“Or what? There’s nothing you can do to me.” Eric pushes his fingers into Beau’s shoulder. Ryan pushes off the wall, arms still crossed over his chest but clearly ready to jump in if needed.

Beau swipes Eric’s hand away. “Touch me again, and you’ll be flat on the floor in less than a second.”

“And then what? I call the cops, tell them you punched me, and you get arrested for assault?”

Beau smiles and shakes his head. He lifts a finger and points behind him toward the table with the onlooking couple. Eric peers around Beau. My eyes follow. The guy holds his phone awkwardly on the table, angled toward Beau and Eric, clearly recording. “I’m fairly certain that video would show it was self-defense.”

My gaze slingshots back to Beau. Eric shakes his head but backs off. Without breaking eye contact with Beau, he bends down, scoops up the hundred dollar bills lying carelessly on the hardwood, and stands.

“I’ll take your money any day, Valentine,” Eric snaps. “But know that you got in my fuckin’ way and made it personal, asshole.” He steps around Beau far enough away to not touch him, shoves past Ryan, and leaves the bakery.

My muscles relax as an audible sigh escapes every mouth in the bakery. Beau's standing in front of me before I can even take another breath. His arms engulf me, pulling me close and surrounding me with his body, which I swear has to be made of titanium. Does he have even an ounce of fat on him? I breathe in his delicious scent. The tension in my muscles fades away, leaving me a pile of goo in his embrace. Why does he feel so safe?

His lips press against my hair, and my head springs back to look up at him.

"You okay, Hart?"

"Yeah... yeah, I'm fine. I was nervous when he wouldn't leave, but I'm okay now."

"When do you get off work?"

The clock on the wall reads 1:43. "The bakery closes in just over an hour."

Beau turns toward Marley. "Is it okay if I stick around until then? I doubt Eric will be back, but I'd rather be here if he does."

Marley stares at him without a word, her eyes narrowing. "I've heard a good amount about you."

Oh, god. My brain shuffles through all the things I've told Marley about Beau. Was there anything embarrassing? Anything too revealing? Fingers crossed she doesn't let any specifics slip.

"I'm sure not all of it was good," Beau admits.

Her features soften, and a smile grows on her lips. “No, not all. But the most recent parts are. Everyone deserves a knight in shining armor to have their back.”

“Just trying to keep someone I care about safe.”

“Is it that simple?” she asks. Beau smiles. The tip of his tongue slides over his lower lip, and his eyes find mine for the briefest second. My cheeks burn. “Maybe you don’t have the white horse, but the way you came to help Kelsey... I’m sure you didn’t think twice about it.”

“I didn’t.”

“Because she’s important,” Marley presses. I tilt my head back and look up at the ceiling with a sigh. Why is she doing this to me?

“Because she’s important,” Beau repeats. My head snaps to him. Those words thrill me more than they should. He’s gazing at me with those gorgeous gray eyes looking starved as he closes the space between us. My heart skips a beat when his thumb rubs over my jaw and down my neck, sending flutters of pleasure throughout my body. The movement brings me back to last night, my body yearning for his touch, my lips begging for a taste.

“I don’t think we’ll have a problem convincing others, Hart.”

No, no, we won’t. But what happens if we’re so convincing I start believing it myself?

“I think it’s best if you stay with me a few more nights,” Beau says. “We’ll go back to your place when you get off, and you can pack a bag.”

“Is all of this necessary, Beau?”

“It’s just a precaution to ease my mind, Hart.”

I inhale deeply, his scent infiltrating my brain and making it hard to think. “Okay.”

Beau smiles. Lifting my chin with his finger, he gives me a quick kiss and a wink. When he steps back, I need to restrain myself from leaning in and pulling him against me again.

Keep your head on straight, Kelse.

I swallow and moisten my lips. “I’ll get you and Ryan some coffee if you want to take a seat. On me.”

A MATTER OF DAYS

-Kelsey-



I spit into the sink and place my toothbrush back on the vanity. It sits next to my brush, my blow dryer, and my lotion. My shampoo and conditioner have a spot of their own in the shower. And Beau cleared out a drawer for some of my clothes.

How is it I've moved into Beau's in a matter of days?

Unease settles in my stomach. This feels way too comfortable for a fake relationship with my former bully. I snatch up my toothbrush and lotion. Then my blow dryer. Shampoo and conditioner, and by the time I stomp out of the bathroom into Beau's bedroom, my arms are overflowing with items that belong in my apartment, not his condo.

Beau smiles when he sees me, and he pats the bed.

“Ready for the movie?” he asks.

“I need to go home,” I say with finality.

His forehead scrunches, and the smile disappears. “Why?”

Why?

“Because I have my own place and don’t belong here. Because this...” I readjust my arms and wiggle my finger back and forth between us the best I can without losing my grip on my belongings. I doubt he sees it. “This isn’t real. Because I’m still not sure why you’re worried about Eric now that he’s got his money.”

Beau swipes his hand up the side of his face, rubs his forefinger and thumb across his closed eyelids, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Sit,” he says. With my belongings threatening to fall out of my arms, I move to the bed, drop them at the end, and sit across from Beau. He sighs. “I’ve known Eric a while. He’s enough of an asshole to do whatever it takes to get whatever he wants.”

“He got his money.” But even I know now that’s not how Eric works.

“Right, but I don’t know if that is enough at this point. Taking you home from the casino night made him look foolish. At least in his eyes. Now that we’re together—”

“In a fake relationship,” I remind him.

“Sure.” Beau straightens his shoulders. I mirror his posture the best I can, defying him to tell me this isn’t fake because this isn’t real. “Now that we look and act like we’re together in

front of the world, he'll take that as even more of a challenge. I've known him to do some shitty things. I don't want shitty things happening to you."

Sure. Is that why he spent three years making my life miserable?

Except, he already told me that wasn't his intention. And I believe him. I don't think he meant for me to be miserable back then. At least, it feels like he's telling the truth. And everything he's done for me since we met up again has been... nice. More than nice. Protective and ...

I shake my head and huff. "Do you have a hero complex or something?"

Deep, resonating laughter booms from Beau. The butterflies that seem to now reside in my stomach on a permanent basis flutter around as his laugh vibrates straight through my body to my core. The aching need roars its traitorous self to life. How does he freakin' do that?

"No," he says through his laughter. "Well, not that I'm aware of, at least. It's just that something is off with that guy, and I've managed to put you in his line of sight. Until I can be positive he's given up on whatever bullshit quest he's on, I'd rather be around to keep you safe."

I twist, recollecting the items I plopped on the bed one by one.

"Look," he continues. "I can't force you to stay, but I want you to and hope you do."

“To keep me safe.”

“And because I like having you here. You’re fun. We get along. You’re not picky about movies, you do your dishes, and you make some incredible coffee in the mornings before I even wake up. Why would I want to lose any of that?” He winks and tugs at my arm, pulling me into his hard, muscular body. I stretch out with him, my leg finding its way to rest on his. “Besides, we’re in this together. Political events, daily schedules, family dinners... we need to be able to lean on each other at a moment’s notice.”

I groan. “Ugh.. thanks for reminding me about dinner tomorrow.”

“Slip your mind?”

I shake my head. “More like forcefully expelled from my brain at sonic speeds to protect my mentality.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“It will be. It will be bad, and then it will be worse. Passive aggressive parents, entitled sister, and douchebag ex. I almost feel guilty for bringing you into the disaster that awaits.”

20

--

TAKE ME HOME

-Beau-



Kelsey pauses when we reach the door of Le Cirque and looks up at me.

“You ok?” I ask. She bites at her lower lip. Snow falls through the air, catching in her hair. Her cheeks are rosy from the chill biting them. She’s stunning.

“They’re going to say things,” Kelsey starts. “But don’t let them drag you in and piss you off. It’s best to ignore it all and brush it away with a smile.”

That doesn’t sound like Kelsey at all. She always has a comeback or quip. She’s rarely one to back down. Then again, the picture Kelsey portrays of her family is not of the Harts I remember. Her parents had always been kind. Her sister, well, conniving at the very least, but not outwardly nasty. Whatever happened after I wasn’t around anymore did a number on Kelse.

“It won’t be that bad. And I’m here with you one hundred percent.” I take her hand in mine and give it a reassuring squeeze.

“It won’t be great, Beau. And I know you’ve been oddly protective of me recently, so just don’t respond to their comments.”

I nod, but it isn’t a promise. Someone’s got to have her back, and I’m more than up for that job. After our past and Kelsey unintentionally falling into the traps intended for the piece of shit she’d been dating, I have a lot of making up to do. And part of that includes sticking up for her when others bring her down.

“Tell you what. I can’t promise I won’t say anything.” She huffs and rolls her eyes, opening her mouth to say something. Before she can, I sneak a quick kiss on her cheek. “Hear me out. I will try my best not to say anything, but more importantly, if you get upset and can’t handle being here anymore, say the word, and we leave, Hart. At any point. No questions asked. You got it?”

She smiles at me like I’ve thrown her a lifeline to save her from drowning in a sea of hurt. “Got it.”

When we walk into the swanky French restaurant, Kelsey stands in front of the maître-d’, letting him know we are meeting others here.

“What’s the name on the reservation?”

“Hart,” she replies.

“Ah, yes. They’re already seated. Coats?” We hand him our coats, and he gives them to another staff member. “This way, please.”

He turns and walks toward the far end of the restaurant. It’s then that we spot her family. Kelsey breathes in deeply.

“Here we go,” she whispers. “I’m sorry for this.”

I take her hand again, locking our fingers together with a squeeze. “Everything will be ok, Kelse. Besides,” I look down at her, and she catches my glance, “what could go wrong with me by your side?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “And that’s what I’m afraid of.”

My brows pinch, but she doesn’t say more. She leans in closer as the *maître-d’* escorts us to the table. One hand clenches mine while her other wraps across her body, holding onto my forearm.

When we reach the table, the *maître-d’* begins pulling out Kelsey’s chair. I stop him with a hand on the shoulder and then a handshake, slipping him a twenty. He nods and leaves quickly without a word.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” her mother says. Sherri Hart turns to her husband. “Richard, get the waiter so we can finally order.”

Richard snaps his fingers in the air without looking away from the table. This might be a swanky restaurant, but it’s not that kind of swanky. Being rude to service workers gets you nowhere fast. I look around to see if anyone noticed Richard’s

faux pas. Sherri turns back to Kelsey. “We ordered your drinks and appetizers since you weren’t on time.”

“Being prompt is being successful, Kelsey,” her father adds.

“What took so long, anyway?” Hanna asks. “I told you exactly 6:30.” She rolls her eyes, peers back at her open menu, and huffs. “I knew I should’ve told you earlier.”

Peeking at my watch, I see it’s 6:36. When I look back up, Flynn is staring at Kelsey, a slimy smirk plastered on his face. All these years haven’t lessened my desire to punch the asshole in the nose. He stretches his arm around Hanna’s shoulder and leans back in his chair. Kelsey must catch the movement because her head jerks toward it. The douchebag winks at her.

“Sorry about that.” Kelsey swallows. I finish pulling out her chair, and she sits slowly, as though making sure each movement is exact.

Both Sherri and Hanna scan their eyes over Kelsey’s outfit, their mouths thinning into slits.

“Is it laundry day, dear?” Sherri asks.

“It must be, mother. Why else would she come to a place like this dressed like that?” Hanna adds.

I glance over Kelsey’s dress and cardigan. Nothing looks unkempt or out of place. Her clothes fit within the dress code for the restaurant. Kelsey looks down at what she’s wearing and then up at her mother with a smile plastered on her face.

“I think you look incredible,” I whisper, leaning close to her ear.

Sherri’s gaze darts toward me just as Hanna’s head snaps up, eyes wide-eyed and shocked. Hanna’s cheeks flush with pink before a smile grows on her face.

“Beau Valentine?” Hanna coos.

Flynn, who hasn’t stopped staring at Kelsey since we got to the table, finally looks away. His glare pins on me.

Hanna stands, smoothes her dress, and sashays over, arms outstretched as though going for a hug. I reach out my hand, halting her before she can make contact. She falters, looks between my hand and face, and tentatively shakes it. When I drop the shake, her hand shoots up to rub down my arm. Same ol’ Hanna, always throwing herself at what her sister has.

“Gosh, you’ve only gotten better with age. What are you doing out with my sister? I’m sure you have better things to do with your time.” She inches closer.

I pull out my chair, sit, and move toward Kelsey. “I can’t think of a better way to spend my Friday night than with Kelsey.”

Hanna’s mouth drops in a gawk before she snaps it shut, swallows, and glances back at Flynn and her parents.

“Interesting choice, Kelsbells,” Flynn says. Kelsey flinches at the old nickname.

“Yes, well, it’s nice that you were able to bring a friend, dear. I was worried you’d feel like a fifth wheel tonight,”

Sherri says.

“Oh, well, actually, um, Beau’s kind of…”

“I’m the boyfriend.” I smile at Kelsey’s mother before turning my head and giving her asshole ex a wink. Flynn chokes on his sparkling water.

That’s right. Be careful, asshole.

“What?” Hanna’s smile wipes right off her face.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Flynn mutters under his breath.

“You didn’t tell us you were seeing anyone,” Richard chimes in. “But it’s good to see you picked someone from a reputable family. Mayor Valentine has been good to this city. What do you do, Beau?”

I always hate this question.

“I work with technology, media creation and enhancement, programming.” Kelsey’s head swings toward me, a soft smile on her lips. I resist the urge to lean in.

“That sounds very important,” Sherri says. “I keep hoping Kelsey will figure out what she wants to do with her life instead of working in that silly bakery. At least before she had that shop with the books, but a bakery?”

“It’s really too bad the little bookstore was so hard for you to manage.” Hanna chimes in. A smirk slithers over her features as she takes a sip of water. Flynn huffs a laugh.

Kelsey straightens her back. “It wasn’t hard to manage. The landlord had other plans for the building.”

Kelsey wasn't wrong. Her family is taking shot after shot. I can feel my blood pressure rise, but I keep my mouth shut and shift in my seat.

"Probably something with a bit more potential for success," Hanna adds.

"Why don't you go back to school, dear? You know, Flynn went for business and has made a lot of connections. I'm sure once you move to California and finish your degree, he could help you out, get you back on your feet."

Flynn preens under Sherri's compliment and nods, giving Kelsey a pitying look.

"We're all friends here," he says.

"I'm not moving to California, mom," Kelsey says. "And, though the offer is... kind... I don't need Flynn's help."

"Then what do you plan to do with your life?" Sherri asks. "You're not getting any younger. You should already be in a career."

"I, um, hope to reopen the bookshop soon."

"Don't be so stubborn. It already failed once. You'll need something stable. For goodness sake." Sherri laughs, flinging her hand lazily through the air. She then pats her husband on the arm. "Richard, where is the waiter? We've been waiting too long as it is."

Richard lifts his arm in the air again and snaps. It gets the same attention as it did the first time. Nothing.

At this rate, Kelsey will have to endure an entire night of passive aggression and snottiness. I glance around the restaurant and catch the eye of a passing server who nods in my direction and scurries off toward what I assume is the kitchen. Then I turn back toward Sherri.

“Actually, Mrs. Hart, I’m investing in Kelsey’s store. She has an incredible business plan.” I’m sure that’s true, even if I haven’t seen it. And even if she doesn’t, that’s not the point. I look at Hanna. “I believe her store has a lot of potential.”

“Yes, well, that’s nice,” Sherri says, topping off her glass of wine.

“We’ve been so focused on Kelsey, but I’m curious. What do you do, Hanna?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

I lift my water glass. “For a job, a career. What’s your line of work?”

“Oh, I don’t need to work. Flynn is successful enough to provide for the two of us.”

“And what is it you do, Flynn?” I ask. Kelsey elbows me in my side and stares at me with wide eyes and a tilted head. I place my hand on her thigh and give it a quick squeeze, mouthing the words “trust me” to her.

“Something akin to working on Wall Street, analyzing trends, funding trades, managing stocks.” He clears his throat. “In the day-to-day, I make a lot of important financial decisions for my clients and myself. If you’re interested in

investing or need help managing your finances, let me know. Happy to help an old friend.”

“I don’t trust just anyone with my money. I’ve got a financial advisor, one of the best,” I say, wrapping my arm on the back of Kelsey’s chair and against her shoulders. “And once I have the best, I stick around.”

I glance at Kelsey, who hasn’t looked away from me, and wink.

“Yes, well,” Sherri chimes in, “Hanna’s never been one to need a job. She’s better suited in the home,” Sherri says. “We’re quite thrilled to be planning a wedding, aren’t we, Richard?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure, sure,” Richard replies. He glances around the restaurant.

Kelsey leans in and whispers, “That’s code for she’s spoiled and a brat.”

There’s my Hart. I hide my smile behind my glass of water before taking a sip.

Sherri clears her throat, “Hanna and Kelsey couldn’t be more different. While Hanna focused on her health and body, taking pilates and morning runs, Kelsey always had her nose in a book.”

“They are different. I couldn’t agree more, Mrs. Hart.”

Sherri’s smile grows to Cheshire cat proportions. “So, did your sister tell you, Kelsey?”

“Tell me what?” Kelsey asks. She leans a little closer to me.

“We’re going dress shopping tomorrow!” Sherri squeals. If I didn’t know better, I might think she was planning her own wedding.

“I’m sure you two will have fun,” Kelsey responds with an exhausted grin on her face.

“No, no, dear. The three of us are going.”

“I told you that already,” Hanna says.

“I have to work. I can’t go.”

Sherri huffs. “Nonsense. I’m sure the bakery will be fine for a day without you. As the maid of honor, you need to be there.”

“I’m not the—”

“I told you she wouldn’t be supportive,” Flynn says to Hanna, who pouts. “Jealousy is an ugly thing.”

“Why can’t you be happy for me? Just because you dated him first.”

“It’s not...” Kelsey starts. “I’m not jealous, far from it. But I have a job. I can’t just call in and expect someone to cover for —”

“I thought I raised you to respect your family more than this, Kelsey Rose,” Sherri shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest. “Your sister is getting married to the love of her life, and you can’t be the littlest bit supportive?”

Kelsey opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. She snaps it closed again and sits straighter. Her eyes don't glisten. There's no hint of them overflowing. If anything, they smolder with silent anger.

“Forget it, mom. Kelsey's never going to get anything right. She's too self-focused to care about others.”

Kelsey looks at me. “I'm ready to leave.”

“You can't just run from the problems you create,” Sherri says.

I stand, offering Kelsey a hand out of her seat. Then I turn my focus on the table.

“Mrs. Hart,” I begin. “I think your perspective on your children is a bit off. I've never met a more generous, determined, and capable person than Kelsey. She has far more potential in her than you give her credit for. If she wants to build her shop back up, she will. Nothing will get in her way, no matter how much you might want it to.” I lock my fingers with Kelsey's before turning to Hanna and Flynn. “And no one gives a shit about your wedding, least of all Kelsey. Now, if you excuse us, we have better things to do on our Friday night.”

I gently tug on Kelsey's arm, pulling her away from her idiotic family. We maneuver through the restaurant, grab our coats, and step outside. When we get to the car, she stares at me in stunned silence.

“I’m sorry,” I say, reaching for the car door. “I know you said not—”

Kelsey grabs onto my coat and pulls me against her. Her mouth crashes against mine, hands reaching up and fingers roaming in my hair. I step forward, pressing her against the door, my hands on either side of her caging her in. She deepens the kiss. A moan resonates from her throat.

She pulls away. Our breaths mist in the cold air. My brain tries to catch up, but before it can, Kelsey smiles, wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Take me home, Beau.”

21

LOVER BOY

-Kelsey-



Sparks sizzle as we pull into a parking space at Beau's condo. The anticipation of what's hanging in the air between us has me heady and eager. I'd climb on top of him in his driver's seat this second, except he's already out and rounded to my door. He pulls me from the car, throws me over his shoulder, and hustles us inside. I can hardly draw a breath. The security guy smirks as we pass by and head for the elevators.

I pat his back twice. "You can put me down."

"Not a chance, Hart." He smacks my ass, his hand managing to sneak under my dress. The sting on my skin lingers, and the heaviness between my thighs deepens.

With the ding of the elevator, Beau blasts down the hallway, opens his door, and kicks it shut behind us.

“Now will you put me down?” I giggle like a damn schoolgirl.

“Nope.” I can hear the smile in his voice. He smacks my ass again. I moan at his touch. “Ask that one more time,” he dares.

It’s tempting, but I don’t, thwacking his gorgeous butt instead. “Two can play this game, Lover Boy.”

Beau carries me through the condo to the bedroom. Without warning, he tosses me on the bed, crawls on top of me, and continues the kiss we stopped in the parking lot of Le Cirque. When he pulls away, he quirks a brow. “Lover Boy?”

“Beau, boy. Valentine, love... Lover Boy.” I wink. “Let’s get that sweater off of you.”

I tug up at the bottom hem of his shirt. My fingers massage his skin, traveling over each delicious muscle.

“Someone’s eager.” Beau stands, whipping his sweater off and tossing it somewhere behind him. I lift up on my elbows to get a better view and gaze shamelessly at his chest, licking my lips. A smirk graces his lips when he catches me staring. “See what you’ve been missing out on all these years, Hart?”

The man is perfection. Beau unbuckles his belt and slides it off, taking a commanding step toward me.

“Stop,” I say. Confusion and disappointment flutter over his brow, but he stops. *Good boy.* “Now, on your knees.”

His smirk lifts more on one side. “You think you’re in control, babe?”

Sexy. Charming. Protective. I have to assume Beau Valentine is used to other women following each and every whim of his in bed.

But I'm not them.

“I said, on your knees, Lover Boy.” I skirt forward, so my legs drape over the edge of the mattress. Spreading them apart, I inch my dress up, exposing my thighs. He swipes his thumb over his bottom lip and tilts his head. Then he catches my gaze and lowers himself slowly to the floor. I feel like a fucking queen with him kneeling before me. My skin tingles, and my thumping pulse threatens to beat out of my veins.

I lift my leg, placing my stiletto against his chest. His fingers graze over my ankle before he presses a kiss against it. His sharkfin eyes, hungrier than I've ever seen them, never leave mine. Anything I've been hiding feels exposed, but I can't look away.

“What do you want, Hart?” His low voice is gruff and sexy.

Everything.

“You look like a starved man.”

His gaze darts to the apex of my thighs before returning to my eyes. “You have no idea.”

I'm sure I have some idea.

I spread my legs a little farther. “I'm offering you a meal.”

Without another word, Beau slides his hand up my calf, my knee, his mouth not far behind on the same path. Lightning

zips through my skin straight to my core as his five o'clock shadow rubs my inner thigh.

My fingers lace through his hair as I drag him closer. His fingertips dig into my hips, squeezing my ass.

"I knew you wanted me," he teases.

"Shut up, Beau."

His tongue darts out, licking over my pussy. A moan slips from my lips, and I tug his head closer. "Fuck, that's good."

His scruff chafes the skin on the inside of my leg, only adding to the pleasure. He swipes over me again before the tip of his tongue lands on my clit, flicking over it in quick waves. My hips buck toward him. One leg falls to the side; the other lounges over his shoulder.

"Suck on it," I demand. "Add a finger and suck on it."

He slips a finger into my pussy, pulsing it in and out as he continues the hedonistic assault on my clit. Heaviness builds in my core. When he nips at my clit, teeth gently scraping, a tsunami of need awakens in me.

No one's ever done that before.

"Don't stop," I pant. God, don't ever stop.

Beau lets out a light laugh. "Wasn't planning on it, Hart. I've been waiting to get you in this position for a long time. We're only just beginning."

Just beginning. My heart skips a beat. Somehow I don't think he means just the sex.

His tongue strokes against me again and hooks his fingers up. My breathing quickens. I grab his hair with both hands holding him in place.

Almost... just a little...

Beau adds another finger, coating it in my juices. He pulls it out and presses it against my other hole, dipping the tip in. The fullness from his fingers and the flitting of his tongue shove me over the edge.

“Come for me, Hart. Come all over my fucking tongue like a good girl.” Flashes of white flicker behind my eyelids. My head falls back as I cry out in ecstasy. He rides out my orgasm a little longer before slowing his movements. I miss his fingers when he pulls them out, his tongue when it’s no longer against me. My breathing steadies and slows.

How the hell did he do that?

He climbs over me and crashes his mouth against mine. His tongue dips between my lips, and I follow his lead, tasting myself on his lips. Beau pulls away, holding himself above me. I smile lazily, too sated to make the next move.

“You better know I’m not done with you yet.”

“Good.”

Don’t ever be done.

BETTER BE READY

-Beau-



“Don’t get too comfy, Hart. I told you we’re not done yet.”

She lies under me as I roll the condom down my shaft. Her hands leisurely skim over my torso, and a smile is etched on her face. Long blonde hair sprawls above her head against the dark comforter. A satisfied sigh hums from her lips and makes my cock twitch. The masochist in me is prolonging the inevitable, building up the anticipation until neither of us can take it anymore.

“You better believe it, Lover Boy.”

Her smile grows. Fuck, she’s beautiful. Feisty Kelsey has been more fun in bed than I’ve had in ages, and we’ve barely started.

Bold. Self-assured. Assertive.

Kelsey didn't hold back. I love our back-and-forth. The commands and orders. I love all of it. I need more of it. Seeing her so confident and not questioning a single move proves she's the woman for me. I want to bury myself inside her, but she needs a moment to recoup.

I lower myself to her and nuzzle into her neck, using my tongue to draw a path from her collarbone to her breast. I clamp my mouth over her nipple, circling my tongue and sucking. She squirms beneath me and moans.

“So good.” She purrs.

I nip at her teasingly before taking it between my teeth and pulling back, flicking it with the tip of my tongue. With my other hand, I reach down, coating my finger in her juices and making her squirm. Her legs spread, knees bent. I lift up to kneel between her thighs, lining myself up and teasing her with the tip of my cock. I pull away, anchoring my hands on her waist.

“What are you waiting for?” She smiles. “Getting cold feet?”

I flip her around, lift her hips, and smack that perfectly round ass. The sexiest moan leaves her lips. If I could only hear one sound for the rest of my life, it would be that satisfied, indulgent moan.

“Don't sass me, Hart.”

“Or what?” She glances over her shoulder at me. “I'll get punished?”

I spank her again. Her moans are music to my cock. With her, nothing's faked. Nothing's forced. Rubbing my hand over her red skin turns those moans into hums, and I can't wait any longer. I slide into her to the hilt. She tightens around me.

Fuck, she feels good.

"Fuck, you feel good," Kelsey says. She wriggles her ass.

"Just wait, babe." My hand glides from the base of her spine toward her neck, pressing her shoulders closer to the bed. Her back arches like a stretching cat. I pull out and slam back into her. Her cries of pleasure echo off the walls. Her body is intoxicating, crumbling my will to hold back.

I stifle a groan. I've wanted Kelsey Hart for too long. And now that I have her, I never want to let her go.

Her moans and screams fill the air around us. Sweat slicks our bodies. She clenches around me as she cries out to some god that isn't here. I pound into her, prolonging her ecstasy until she is breathless and collapsing onto the bed.

A smirk lifts one side of my mouth. "We're still not done, Hart."

I mimic her position, lying on top of her and turning us to our sides as I glide back into her dripping pussy. She presses against me, rolling her hips in slow, steady waves. I follow her lead. Her arm reaches behind her, grabbing onto my waist. I trek my fingers up and down her body in soft paths. Up her thigh. Across her waist. Over her breasts. And back down until I find her clit, circling it over and over. Kelsey's breaths

quicken. She tilts and turns her head. Her mouth finds mine, muffling the moan fleeing them. Her pussy tightens around me, and I can't hold back anymore. Falling over the edge with Kelsey solidifies the curse I've spent years suspecting. No one has compared to her. No one will. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Our muscles loosen, and we melt into the sheets. Neither of us says a word. Kelsey turns toward me, our faces close. Her brown eyes study mine, seemingly searching for something. She shakes her head and smiles before kissing me.

"I'm starving," she says as she pulls away. "Don't you know it's impolite not to feed a girl before getting her into bed?"

A rumble of a laugh vibrates through my body.

"Must have slipped my mind. What are you in the mood for?"

"Pizza and wings."

"Perfect," I say, kissing her on the cheek. No question. No saying whatever I want. Kelsey doesn't play those games. The woman wants pizza and wings—end of discussion.

I roll off the bed, smacking her ass again just to see her gorgeous round behind red with my handprint. She squeaks and squirms off the bed, too.

"I'll get that ordered and feed you," I say. "And then you better be ready for round two."

23

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

-Kelsey-



Beau's arm drapes over me, the even rise and fall of his chest against my back. I can't unpack how that makes me feel yet. Not because I'm not aware or in denial. No, it's because I have a dozen missed messages from Mom and Hanna on my phone, first reminding me about the dress shopping this afternoon, then coercing me to go and suggesting it's my duty as the big sister to be supportive and finally, insulting me for not responding to the texts. The last one came in fifteen minutes ago at 7:13 am.

"Are you going to tell them to fuck off, or should I?" The rough, husky rumble of Beau's sleepy voice tickles the nape of my neck right before his lips nibble at the sensitive skin.

God, he feels good.

I roll over to face him, letting his mouth travel along my neck, to my collarbone, then up to my jaw.

“You taste good in the morning.”

“That’s one I’ve never heard.” I giggle. Inner Kelsey rolls her eyes at me, but I can’t help it. This man makes my body tingle in scrumptious ways. I want him to devour me day in and day out.

His hand sneaks between my thighs, thumb rubbing gentle circles over the skin. Everything in me loosens. I am putty. I am mush.

Just remember this is a business deal.

Stupid inner Kelsey is always ruining my fun. But she’s not wrong. Still, that doesn’t mean I can’t mix a little pleasure with business, right?

My phone pings again. I should silence their messages.

“Give it to me,” Beau orders between kisses along my jawline. His lips and touch frazzle my mind, and I obey.

He pulls away, types a quick reply, and then tosses my cell on the nightstand behind him before he continues his exploration of my body.

“Aren’t you going to tell me what you wrote?”

“Does it matter?” His tongue trails over the curves of my breasts, deciding my answer for me. I moan, letting my fingers frolic over his biceps and pecs. Hard, contoured muscles beg to be licked. I push him back into the bed and crawl on top of him.

Before I can start my own exploration, he smacks my ass, rolls me off, and gets out of bed.

“Seriously?”

My pout has him smirking. “As much as I’d love for whatever you had planned to happen, I have other things in mind for our day. What time do you work?”

“Noon.”

“Perfect. Get your sexy ass out of bed and get dressed. Maybe make a pot of coffee if you’re so inclined.” He turns, moving toward the bathroom.

“What are you going to do?”

“Take a cold shower.”

“Can’t I join?” I ask, lifting myself up on my elbows and giving what I hope is a sultry gaze in his direction.

He groans, comes back to the bed, and leans over me. His lips press intensely against mine before he pulls away.

“That would defeat the purpose of the cold.” He gives me one more peck before lifting off and turning to the bathroom. When he reaches the door, he peeks back. “But save that horniness for later tonight, Hart. I’ve got plans for us then, too.”

He closes the door behind him, and I fall against the bed. The growing ache between my legs is begging for a little attention. My hand slips below the sheets.

“Don’t even think about touching yourself!” Beau calls from the bathroom. “My plans for later require you wanting and ready.”

How the hell did he know?

“That’s called torture, you know!” I shout back. His muffled laugh is soon drowned out by distant pattering water from the shower. With a sigh, I pick myself off the bed, throw on a pair of leggings and a cozy sweater, and prance to the kitchen to make some coffee.



Fifty-five minutes later, Beau’s got me in the passenger seat of his car parked in front of a grungy diner on the outskirts of the city. Sun glistens off the blanket of snow on the ground. The promise of warmth from the rays is a charade. The air is numbingly icy, and every so often, an arctic-cold wind whips over the world.

“What are we doing here?”

“Getting breakfast.”

“And food poisoning?” I ask.

Beau laughs and shakes his head. “Don’t be that girl. You’re better than that. Haven’t you ever heard that you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover? The same thing goes for restaurants. Don’t judge a diner by its outer walls. This is the best greasy spoon in a hundred-mile radius.”

“But at hundred-one miles, there’s a better diner?”

“No clue because I only ever come to this one.”

I smile. “Alright, alright. I won’t be that girl. Let’s eat.”

As we walk toward the diner, aptly named Diner according to the standing neon sign out front, Beau takes my hand. It’s reminiscent of last night, except the dread of interacting with my family has vanished, and excitement takes over.

This feels like a date. A breakfast date.

Is that even a thing?

Beau opens the door, and we step in. The air could easily be made up of bacon and syrup. Chatter and clanging reverberate through the room. A dozen people sit along the counter across from the grills. Every booth is full of people stuffing themselves with eggs, toast, and sausage while in the midst of conversation. Waitresses bustle back and forth, delivering plates overflowing with food or taking orders.

“Find a seat, sug,” a brunette waitress says as she passes us. “You know the drill.”

“I take it you come here a lot.”

Beau smiles and places a hand against my back, leading me through the narrow aisle toward the far end of the counter. We sit on backless stools between a bearded man reading a paper and the wall. Within seconds of sitting, someone sets two mugs in front of us, fills them with piping-hot coffee, and walks away.

“Now that’s excellent service.” I take a sip of the steaming brew.

Beau follows suit. “Not the coffee you make, but it’s still damn good.”

The same brunette waitress who told us to find a seat leans her elbow on the counter directly across from us, a pad and pen in her hands. “You wantin’ your reg’lar, sug?”

“You know it, Patty.”

“And what about you, doll?”

“Oh!” One good thing about diners is the menus are typically similar. “I’ll have a bacon and cheese omelet with hash browns. Wheat toast, unbuttered, please.”

“I like a girl who knows what she wants,” Patty says. She reaches behind her and tops off each of our mugs. After placing the pot back on its burner, she turns to Beau. “You ain’t ever brought a date to breakfast, sug.”

“No one’s ever been worthy enough to share this place with.”

“I’ll let Hank know you said that.” She smiles and saunters away, sticking the sheet of paper with our order on it over the grill.

“Hank?” I ask

“The owner.”

“You must come here a lot.”

“Ever since I was a kid. Well, ever since I could drive.”

Before I can ask anything more about the diner, my phone vibrates against the counter. The group chat with my mom and

Hanna comes back to life. Another series of buzzes follows.

“They really don’t give up, do they?”

“Not when it’s something they want.” I bring my mug to my mouth and pause, glancing over at Beau. He watches me expectantly, like he knows I have more to say. I kind of like having someone know me that well. “More accurately, when it’s something Hanna wants. Then again, whatever Hanna wants, my mom magically wants, too. I think it’s because she can live vicariously through her youngest. I never let Mom do that. Hanna uses it to her advantage.”

The phone lights up and vibrates again. Keeping eye contact with Beau, I lift my phone and power it off without a second thought.

“I knew you were smart.” Beau smirks and nudges my arm with his elbow.

Patty returns and sets two plates of steaming food in front of us. She again tops off our coffees and walks away.

“I have to admit, I was a little unsure at first about this place, but it’s definitely a diamond in the rough.”

“You should never doubt me, Hart.” Beau digs into his chicken-fried steak and eggs.

I should never doubt him. Is that true? Two weeks ago, I would’ve laughed in his face at that comment, but today everything is different. With him and with me. And it’s not just that we had sex, though that was exhilarating and satisfying in every way possible. He’s kind and supportive. Protective. Out

of everyone in the world, I think I can confidently say Beau's got my back. My heart skips in fucking circles when he's around. My skin becomes tingly, and I'm pretty sure I've inched closer to him in the past few minutes. It's like I'm fifteen all over again.

But what does that mean? We have an agreement, a fake relationship. I'm getting paid to date him. Just because I've got to keep reminding myself of that doesn't mean he does.

And what about my bookshop? The moment it became possible again, I felt lighter, like whatever weight my old landlord Weston Ferrar anchored onto my back had been lifted away. If I can get my bookshop up and running...

“When did you decide you wanted to own a bookshop?”

I stare at him, mouth agape. How does he keep doing that? “Probably when I was eight,” I joke as I take a bite of omelet. I moan and roll my eyes. The eggs are to die for—creamy, peppery heaven.

Beau smirks, “And that's why you should never doubt me. But bookshop, keep talking.”

“I don't know. I've always loved reading and collecting books. There's a comfort that comes from just owning them. Even if the TBR pile is endless, they're there waiting for you.”

“TBR?”

“To be read,” I say, taking another bite of food. “Ever since I was little, I loved getting lost in stories. Living the lives of each character. Owning a bookshop and helping others feed

into that joy just made sense. I know my parents expected more from me—”

“Screw them. They don’t know you well enough to have an opinion on what you should or shouldn’t be doing with your life.”

I smile at his addition to the conversation. “—but I want my bookshop back. I was so hurt and angry when I lost it. I worked hard for my shop. It brought me enough income to survive and save a little. It’s not like it was a failed venture. If Weston Ferrar hadn’t ripped out the rug from under me, it would still be up and running and going strong.”

“And it will be again. We’ll make sure of it.”

We. Not you, *we.* I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to express how much I appreciate his support and contribution. The fact that he’s single-handedly trying to resurrect a dead dream of mine makes me want to kiss him and never stop.

And just like that, I realize I don’t want ‘us’ to end. Would pursuing an actual relationship with him mean the deal is null and void? What would that mean for the shop? And what if he doesn’t feel the same way?

Those questions are too much at eight-something on a Saturday morning.

“There’s a lot I need to do to get it going. Find a location. Find used books. I’d given all of what I had left to Marley and the bakery for her Icelandic Christmas event back in

December. At the time, I didn't think opening the shop again would be a possibility."

"We'll find the perfect spot, free of shit landlords and with all the books you could ever dream. Your bookshop will open back up. I promise."

My stomach flips. Does tiny little somersaults over and over. He's too perfect. That should be terrifying, and yet I trust everything he's saying.

I watch him for a second. The man is pure beauty. But what else do I know about him? Not much. He works with programming or media creation and lives in a condo. He's generous with his money, and... and what?

"What about you?" I ask.

"What about me?"

"What are your big goals in life?"

Beau's fork slows as it nears his mouth. He stares at me in silence. Contemplation flits over his expression, and his eyes narrow with consideration. Then he sets his fork down and lifts a hand toward Patty, giving her a nod.

"Are you finished with breakfast?" he asks, pointing at my plate. I look down. It's empty.

"I guess I am."

"Then let's get out of here." He places some money on the table and takes my hand. "I want to show you something."

24

BY MY SIDE

-Beau-



I park and glance over at Kelsey, nerves quickening my heart rate to a gallop. Confusion pinches her brows as she stares out the windshield at the derelict structure before us. Boarded windows and graffiti hide the potential of the building. I know it's not much now, but it will be once I put my vision to work.

“I don't understand.” She shakes her head and turns to look at me. “Are you going to kill me and hide my body?”

The joke brings a smile to my face. It's like she can hear my racing pulse, read the anxious thoughts in my head, and know she needs to help me relax. This is the exact reason I need her around.

“Nah. I have too much fun with you to get rid of you this quickly.”

“Then what are we doing here? What is this place?”

I tilt my head toward the outside. “Let me show you.”

Before I can even get unbuckled, Kelsey’s stepping out of the car. I get out and approach her, taking her hand in mine. Without a word, I lead her toward the old warehouse housing my future.

“The lot will be split.” I point behind us. “That part will stay a parking lot.”

“And this?” Kelsey motions toward the barren property, confusion and uncertainty plain on her face. I get it. It’s hard to imagine a finished project when nothing visual has started. Everything is still behind the scenes, and this place is a mess. Weeds grow through the sidewalk cracks in thick, wild clumps, and a bent, rusted chain-link fence invites more trouble than it keeps out.

But I see it—the potential this place has.

“Use your imagination a little bit for me, Hart. Picture some turf laid over there and a jungle gym and some swings there,” I say, sweeping my arm toward the far side of the building before pulling Kelsey’s attention to the opposite side. “And over here, a basketball court and tennis court.”

A smile rises on her lips as her eyes brighten. She nods, lifting away my remaining anxiety about showing her this location. In its place comes excitement and certainty.

“What about the building itself?” she asks.

I continue pulling her toward the front doors, my nerves transitioning into excitement. We can’t go far into the structure

due to safety hazards, but we can step inside the main room for a better look. I push open one of the double doors. A rush of promise and potential courses through me. As we enter, Kelsey's eyes skate over the cobwebs and dusty walls, the crumbling stone archways, and the broken steps leading upstairs.

“This place is huge.” Her quiet voice echoes off the empty walls.

“It seems huge now, but once everything's in place and every inch of square footage used, it'll be the perfect size.”

“Tell me more.”

The grin on my face grows. I turn to face Kelsey, walking backward with my arms spread out. “Part of this room will be used for a cafeteria. There will also be a game area, a study space, and a relaxation station. The back offices will be turned into classrooms where kids can learn different crafts or skills. The upstairs,” I nod toward the back staircase, “will be offices, a nurse, a daycare, and other business-centric requirements.”

“You're building a school?”

I laugh. “Not exactly. I'm developing a space for kids in our city where they can come and know they won't be in trouble. A refuge of sorts.” I run a hand through my hair. “Anyone under 18 can come. They can participate however they need: find friends, get homework help, and feel safe. I want kids to be able to be kids. To forget, even just for a moment, that they're afraid.”

Kelsey steps forward and gazes around the room. I can only hope she sees what I see when I look at this place. She's the first person I've shared this vision with outside of inspectors and contractors, my financial advisor, and potential investors. And it was only shared with them to get the ball rolling. Not even Ryan knows about my plans. He might be my best friend, but this dream, this goal, is too sacred to tell the world until it's finished.

"Maybe you can have a library for the kids. I can help with that. Maybe we can do a book loan program through my shop once it's up and running again. Or field trips to the store." She lights up. Giddiness bounces through her as she turns back toward me. This is why I told her. The support. The help.

Mostly because I want her by my side as this becomes a reality.

Kelsey's eyes pan over the space again. She shakes her head, a wide smile on her face. "This is amazing, Beau. Incredible, even. But why? And how?"

I had a feeling these questions would be coming. It's precisely the reason I haven't told anyone else in my personal life. I sigh, trying to reduce the tension building in my back. "The why... is complicated."

"I'm sure I can keep up." She smiles softly and steps back toward me. Her hand trails up my arm, and instantaneously my muscles relax knowing she wants to learn more about me and isn't afraid to get close.

“I’m developing this because it’s something I wish I had when I was younger,” I admit. Kelsey eyes me with contemplation. “Somewhere safe to be that kept me away from home as long as possible.” I pause. “Away from my father.”

She nods but says nothing. Her smile is fallen, sadder, but the understanding is there. I don’t know how she does it, but Kelsey always seems to know what I need, whether it’s a joke, an idea, or silence.

The Jaws attack ringtone I’ve designated for the devil himself rebounds through the empty space. Why wouldn’t he interrupt now of all times? I swear he knows where I am and wants to ruin everything special in my life. I pull out my phone and step away from Kelsey.

“Hi, dad,” I answer, annoyance threading through my voice. Kelsey quirks a questioning brow. I shake my head, mouthing the words to my dad.

“It’s amazing you answered my first call,” my father quips, his voice painfully wry. “I was sure I’d be trying a dozen more times.”

I sigh and look up toward the ceiling. “Consider it your lucky day. What is it you need?”

“The Governor’s Gala is this week on Wednesday. Governor Jones and his wife will be there, as will Jeffrey Trent.”

“Who’s that?”

“A state senator. Pay attention, boy.” His voice becomes harsh and threatening with the word. A distant yet familiar fear

creeps over the back of my neck. Some things don't disappear easily. "The point is important people will be there."

"Yeah, well, I'd wish you luck schmoozing, but you're already a master of your art."

"Don't get smart with me, Beauregard." *Never Beau to him.* Always Beauregard or 'boy.' "You know how important this reelection is, and you must attend. On time. With a date. And not one of your fans. Someone with class who can make us look good."

Like he knows anything about having class.

"Why is it when you call me about these things, it's always such short notice? I'm sure you've had this on your calendar for months. Don't you have an assistant who can help keep track of these important phone calls? Some intermediary to save you from having to do the legwork of calling your son yourself?"

"It's not like you're busy with a real job. Laying in bed all day could hardly be considered a career." I glance at Kelsey, hoping she can't hear my father's subtle attacks. Or if she does, not putting two and two together. I'll tell her about ForFans soon, when the time is right. "Whether I tell you months in advance or minutes, you're expected to show up. Remember: Wednesday. 7:00 PM. Black tie mandatory." He hangs up.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I pocket my cell.

“Everything ok?” Kelsey asks, eyeing me from a few feet away.

“Technically, yes,” I say. “I have an event to attend on Wednesday. A gala.”

Her brows pinch together as she tilts her head. “Who holds a gala on a Wednesday?”

“Politicians who think the world revolves around them. Anyway, I’m hoping you’ll come with me.”

Kelsey cringes before giving me an apologetic look. “I’m supposed to work that night.”

“Oh, right.” I can’t ask her to call in. That’s what her family had demanded of her today. Kelsey deserves so much more than that from me. Then again, I also don’t want to attend the event without her. I don’t want to do much of anything without her. “That’s ok.”

“But part of this arrangement between us was to attend events with you. I’ll talk with Marley when I get to work.” She smiles and nudges her head toward the door. “It’s about time we get going. Maybe she can rearrange the schedule for Wednesday.”

“That would be amazing if it’s possible.” I tug her into me. Our arms wrap around each other. “If she can’t, she can’t, but I’d love for you to go.”

Hopefully, Marley can figure something out. Kelsey will be the only thing about the event I’ll actually enjoy. And, not that

I'd ever get my hopes up, but having her there might even make the gala fun.

Besides, I want to have more moments with her while I still can before it's time to tell her about ForFans. I know I need to do that soon, but then what? I've already waited too long to say something at this point. The trust I've been regaining will slip away, and so will she. I'm not ready to lose her.

Right now, I want to soak up all the Kelsey I can get.

25

READY WHEN YOU ARE

-Kelsey-



After Beau dropped me off at work, the Saturday afternoon rush made it impossible to pull Marley aside and ask her about Wednesday. Now that it's calmed down with the setting of the sun, guilt imprisons the words in my throat. I shouldn't feel bad about asking for time off, but I do. I know how much work Marley put into this place, and I want to be as supportive as possible. And she gave me a job when I needed one.

Marley steps out from the kitchen to the front of the bakery, freshly dusted in flour and buttercream.

"Try these," she says, handing Summer and me each a cupcake topped with a perfect blob of frosting, three pieces of caramel popcorn, and a drizzle of caramel sauce. We each peel back part of the wrappers and take a bite.

"Holy shit, Mar, this is fantastic," Summer says, stuffing another bite into her mouth. I take another bite, too. Who cares

how many calories it is when it tastes this good?

“I’m trying out new flavors. This is Caramel Popcorn, in case you missed it.” Marley smiles. “Tomorrow’s flavor is cotton candy. John’s at the store picking up a mini cotton candy machine so I can spin the sugar right here in the shop. I’ve got a flavor planned for each day next week. Sunday, cotton candy. Monday, creme brulee. Tuesday, cookie dough with cookie dough frosting, naturally...”

“That all sounds delicious,” I say, finishing the cupcake, tossing the wrapper, and grabbing a to-go cup. A coffee chaser will be perfect right now.

Marley continues to rattle off flavors. “Wednesday...”

Shoot, Wednesday.

It’s now or never. Beau really wants me to go with him to the gala, and to be honest, I want to go, too. The more time I spend with him, the more I want to spend. On top of that, he seems to have a contentious relationship with his father. He’ll need support, and who better to give it to him than his fake girlfriend? “Speaking of this coming week, Mar. I know I’m on the schedule for Wednesday evening, but is there a chance we could rearrange something? There’s an event that Beau’s invited me to...”

“The Governor’s Gala?” Summer asks, swiping her finger over her lip and bringing the remaining frosting to her mouth. She moans. “So good, Mar.”

Marley winks at Summer and steps into the kitchen.

I lift a brow toward Summer. “How’d you know about the gala?”

“I’ve already got a date for it.” She says, not explicitly mentioning The Network. “It’s supposed to be the biggest event of the season.”

The bakery bell jingles as a man in a navy blue and red uniform opens the door, bringing in a gust of icy air and a swirl of snow flurries. He strides up to the counter with a large bouquet of the reddest roses balanced in one hand and a clipboard tucked under his opposite arm.

He pulls out the clipboard and glances over it. “Is there a Kelsey Hart here?”

I swallow and raise my hand as heat swipes over my cheeks. Summer’s eyes are as wide as mine as we take in the enormous bouquet. It’s gorgeous, and even though I’m still feet from the deliverer, I can smell the sweet aroma.

“That’s me,” I say.

“These are for you.” The man sets the bouquet on the counter, gives a single nod of his head, and retreats back into the snowy outside. Once the door closes behind him, Summer turns to me with a pointed look and sly grin. “Should I ask who they’re from?”

I roll my eyes but tiptoe to grab the small card from the top. I flip the card back and forth, looking for confirmation of what we both already assume. “Hm, it doesn’t say.”

But who else could it be? The simple white card reads, “Wednesday.”

They’re obviously from Beau.

Marley pushes through the kitchen door and returns with the schedule for the week. She twists her lips, nodding before her gaze land on the bundle of roses. “Oh, wow! Those are incredible. I suppose I don’t need to ask who they’re from.” Her smile matches Summer’s from moments ago. “Anyway, I’m sure I can figure something out. If no one else is available, I’ll bribe Mikey to come in. Go have fun.”

“Thanks, Mar, you’re the best!” Giddiness tingles through me. This fake boyfriend of mine sure knows how to win women over. None of us can stop admiring the delicate blooms. Ribbons of joy and anticipation weave through my soul as I imagine a night by Beau’s side, both of us dressed to the nines while we simultaneously ignore the bureaucratic pageantry around us.

While Marley and Summer talk about cupcake flavors, I sneak my phone out of my pocket to thank Beau for the flowers. He didn’t need to send them; I’d already agreed to ask Mar for the night off. Unfortunately, unanswered texts from Hanna and Mom distract me as soon as I swipe my thumb over the screen. The messages stopped rolling in about an hour ago, thankfully. Perhaps I’ve gotten lucky, and they’ve given up. Maybe the rest of my shift and weekend will be peaceful and radio-silent from the fam.

The bell over the door jingles again. With a hopeful smile, my eyes flick up, and I pocket my cell. “Hi there. Welcome to The Sweet Spot...”



Despite the biting temps and falling snow, the shop stayed relatively busy the remainder of the evening. Waving the spray bottle above the counter, I mist the cleaner, wiping the dew with a damp rag. A knock on the window of the locked door pulls my attention, and a grin steals over my face. There's Beau, illuminated by the soft streetlights, hands in pockets and bouncing in place with a panty-dropping smile. Instinct tells me to warm him up immediately. Reality reminds me I'm at work.

I hurry to the door, unlock it, and step back to let him in. He looks around the place as he removes his coat and places it on a table.

“You alone here?” he asks playfully, nuzzling a kiss into my neck and making me melt with his touch.

I clear my throat. “Marley's in the kitchen cleaning up. Summer's around somewhere, too.”

“Well, I guess I'll be good then,” he teases.

“Thank you for the flowers, by the way. They weren't necessary, but they're beautiful. Gorgeous.” I turn away, grabbing a mug and pouring him a cup of coffee. “Marley was able to switch around Wednesday so I can go to the gala, but...” I bite my lower lip. Insecurity and unease simmer low

in my stomach. I spin back to hand him the mug, and Beau's panty-dropping grin has turned into stone-cold agitation as he eyes the roses.

"Everything okay?" I ask, my gaze bouncing back and forth between him and the bouquet. And then it clicks. A lump forms in my throat. My body sags with disappointment. "You didn't send those, did you?"

He shakes his head before looking behind him through the windows and into the night. He moves toward the door, his head moving back and forth as though scanning the outside world, and locks it.

Instantaneously I know who they're from. "Eric?"

Beau nods. Even with the new revelation, my mind is focused on Wednesday. I worry my lip. Beau notices, walks over, and dumps the roses in the trash can. When he steps over to me, hands cocoon my face, forcing me to look into his entrancing gray eyes. "I promise nothing's going to happen, Hart. Not while I'm around. Eric won't lay a finger on you. I'll make sure of it."

I hesitate. "It's not that. I don't know why Eric sent those, but I trust you." I bite my lip a little harder before releasing it with a sigh. "This seems silly now, what with the new revelation of the roses, but it's just... I don't have anything to wear. It's a gala. Black tie. The nicest thing I own is a dress I save strictly for weddings. It nowhere near meets the dress code. I suppose I could ask Summer if she has something for me to borrow again."

“Don’t worry about it, Hart. I’ve got you covered.” He pulls out a black credit card and hands it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, holding the card up. “I could never accept this, Beau.”

“Sure you can. I invited you to the gala, and you’re doing me a huge favor by going. This is probably the least I can do. Besides, it’s more selfish than anything since I’ll be the one admiring you the entire night. I’m practically buying it for me.” He winks, and I laugh. And just like that, the mood is lifted.

“Okay, then, I guess I’ll see if Summer can go shopping this week. And I’ll be sure to get something that screams ‘Beau Valentine.’”

“Mmm...” He moves into my personal space, forcing me to lean against the counter as his arms wrap around me. “I like that idea.”

Beau tilts my head a fraction to the side, his mouth near my ear. His lips graze the skin just below, trailing to the dip of my neck and back up. My eyes flutter shut, and my cheeks flush.

“And, Hart?” he murmurs. A small squeak slips from my throat as his fingers caress the same path his lips just took. “You’ll be the one screaming my name later that night.”

The promise creates an ache in my core. I lick my parched lips and swallow. Suddenly Wednesday seems too far away.

“I don’t suppose I could spend the night at your place again... what with the roses and weather and...” My eyes dart

to his sultry gaze, letting him know exactly what I want. I feel like both predator and prey in his stare. The hunter and hunted.

The panty-dropping smile returns.

“You know you never need a reason to spend the night.” He peers around the empty front of the bakery. When his gaze returns, it’s smoldering with want. He leans in, mouth against mine. A moan escapes my throat as I savor his touch. When he pulls away, his thumb swipes gently over my lips. “Honestly, Hart, you haven’t left my mind since I dropped you off earlier. I’m hoping it’s time for you to clock out.”

I need no further encouragement. I shove open the kitchen door to Marley and Summer, laughing. “We’re going shopping tomorrow, Summer. Be ready to gala-fy me. Mar, I’m heading out for the night.”

They look past me, smile, and each says her goodnights.

Letting the door close again, I spin back to ward Beau, reach back, untie my apron, and toss it across the counter. “Ready when you are, Lover Boy.”

A MISTAKE

-Beau-



The door snicks shut behind me as we enter the condo.

“You want coffee?” I ask, hanging our coats on the wall hooks as Kelsey steps further into the living room.

“Sit on the couch, Beau.” The sultry undertones of her voice have me spinning in place to face her. She bites her lower lip, eyes smoldering with seductive mischief. Her fingers tease the hem of her shirt before she lifts it over her head. It falls from her hand to the floor. I’m frozen in my spot. She’s stunning. Her cheeks are pink from the winter chill. A lace bra barely holds in her breasts, and the curves of her body have my mouth watering. “What are you waiting for, Lover Boy?”

I tilt my head to the side as my grin grows. What’s not to love? Sass, smarts, and beauty.

“Nothing at all, Hart.”

I take my time stepping through the condo. As I pass her, I trail my fingers over the taut skin of her bare stomach before grabbing her hand and pulling her with me toward the couch. I turn, take her in my arms, and kiss her. I bend to sit and try to pull her with me, but Kelsey remains standing. Her hands press against my chest, pushing me down, and she pins me with a flirty grin.

“You’re not in control this time,” she says. I raise my hands in surrender for now, moving them behind my head. Satisfaction settles on Kelsey’s expression. She lifts her chin a little higher, though her gaze stays firmly on me. Her tongue swipes over her bottom lip as she kneels in front of me between my legs, and my pulse thrums through my veins in anticipation and excitement.

Her gaze follows her movements. Hands slide up my thighs, past my bulging cock restrained by the damn fabric of these pants, to the button holding them closed. She unclasps it, pinching the zipper between her fingers, then stills completely. With a knowing, playful smirk on her face, Kelsey’s eyes flick back to mine.

“Tell me...” Her voice infiltrates my brain like heat from a fire. I swallow, lifting a brow in question. “Have you been a good boy?”

I don’t know how she makes such a ridiculous question sound so sexy, but if she doesn’t unzip me soon, these pants will rip at the seams.

I drop a hand from behind my head and lift her chin with my finger.

“The best,” I say with a wink.

Am I sure about that? If I know anything about Kelsey, it’s her want for honesty. I haven’t been entirely honest with her if I haven’t told her about ForFans. The words are there, but I don’t say them.

As Kelsey slides my zipper down, her tongue skims over her lips. Every move she makes is perfect. Her blonde locks fall over her shoulders. I want to wrap it around my fist and guide her sweet mouth up and down my cock.

I reach to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She leans away, lifting a brow and giving me a smirk.

“Don’t you dare try to take control, Beau. This is my show.” Her delicate hand wraps around my cock, pulling it free. Kneeling before me, Kelsey’s the fucking star of my own personal porn show. She’d look exceptional on camera, but even an inkling of the thought has my muscles tensing and my blood pressure rising. I never want anyone else to see her, to experience her, the way I get to because, as far as I’m concerned, Kelsey Hart is mine.

A ripple of guilt swims through me.

You need to tell her.

The thought elicits a frustrated groan from my throat. Kelsey pauses.

“Something wrong?” she asks, delicate brows furrowing.

“Yes,” I say. Shock and hurt slacken Kelsey’s jaw, tugging the corners of her mouth into a frown. “I mean, no—nothing you did. Everything you’ve been doing has been perfect. So fucking perfect.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“I was just imagining how amazing you’d look on camera.”

“So... you want to record this? I guess we can do that,” she says. “As long as it wouldn’t be shown to the world or anyone but you.”

Fuck me. I rub my hand over my face with a sigh. Kelsey drops my dick and sits back on her legs, putting space between us. Confusion and concern are written on her face. The moment is gone. Whatever was going to happen won’t now. I tuck myself back in and zip up, leaning forward as I prepare to say what I need to and hope she understands.

“I need to tell you something, but before I do, you have to know how much I was enjoying this and how much you mean to me.”

She nods but seems unconvinced. I don’t blame her. Her boyfriend stops what will probably be the best oral he will ever get and says they need to talk. I’d be skeptical, too. I swallow the huge lump of pride in my throat.

“You know how I told you I make my money through media creation and production?”

“Yeah...”

I shift on the couch. Lean forward, then back again before standing. Kelsey's eyes follow every movement I make, but I can't bring myself to look directly at her when I ask, "Have you ever heard of ForFans?"

"Who hasn't? I don't specifically go on there, but it's..." Her words trail off. "What are you telling me, Beau?"

I run my fingers through my hair. "Look. I need to earn enough so I can open the nonprofit."

"Just spit it out." The melodic tones in Kelsey's voice have faded into a harshness.

I sigh. "I make my money by posting content on ForFans."

Kelsey grimaces. "Content, like..."

"I have a lot of subscribers who pay to watch me have sex."

She lifts and tilts her head. "You make your money through porn."

"Technically, yes, but—"

"And you're fucking other women to make these videos?"

"In the videos, yes, but not now, not anymo—"

"And these women... where do you find them?"

Fuck me. I clear my throat. "I was using the escort service. Most knew that when they got an invite from Casanova, they'd be invited to be in a video."

"So, your date from Casino Night?"

"She's a regular in them."

Kelsey shakes her head and swallows. Her lashes flutter rapidly for a moment. “And you want me to be in one of your videos?”

“God, no!” I step toward Kelsey, my hand out to give her a reassuring touch, but she takes a big step back, widening the distance between us. My hand drops to my side. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is this about?” Her voice rises, anger seeping into its tones. Somehow, I don’t think she’s talking about ForFans anymore. “Your life before me isn’t specifically my business, Beau, but it would’ve been nice to know that my boyfriend is a pornstar who’s screwed his way through The Network. That my boy...” She stops speaking and stares at me before a humorless laugh escapes from her lips. A quick shake of her head accompanies her sad smile. “My fake boyfriend. God, for a moment there, I forgot this wasn’t real. And then I remembered and... and thank goodness for that.”

Her words are a dagger to my heart. “None of this was fake, Hart.”

“Was this all a setup? What’s the end goal here? Embarrass Kelsey Hart once again in life? Break her heart just a little more?”

“What? No! I never...” I shake my head. “I have never wanted to hurt you. Never.”

She points a finger at me. “You should have told me from the start of this whole stupid agreement. How can I trust you when you aren’t honest about pretty big things?”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but—”

“But what? You never had the time?” Kelsey shakes her head, looking me up and down like I’m a dog who just ate her favorite shoes. She breathes deeply, turns on her heel, and walks off toward the bedroom.

I follow, desperate to stop this runaway train from crashing. I fucked up. I fucked up bad, but she can’t be serious. This wasn’t fake. Not for me, and I know it wasn’t for her. I have to... fuck, I don’t know. I have to apologize. Make it better. Prove to her how much she means to me. She has to understand.

I can’t lose her again.

Kelsey flicks on the light to the bathroom, scoops her lotion and toothbrush off the counter, and moves to the shower, where she grabs her shampoo and conditioner. Then she spins around, squeezes past me, and heads back to the living room.

“What are you doing?” I ask, following her through the condo. I already know, though every inch of me hopes I’m wrong, that she isn’t walking away.

When she gets to the front door, Kelsey adds her coat to the other items in her arms, opens the door, and turns to look at me once more. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. Hurt and heartache are etched on her face.

“This was a mistake, Beau. This wasn’t a mistake. We aren’t a mistake. “Even with the agreement, I should never have gotten this comfortable. So I’m going to go.”

“I don’t want you to go.” The ache in my chest deepens.
How can something so emotional feel so physical?

“You don’t get a say. You lost that chance when you kept
me in the dark.”

“But—” The door clicks shut behind her. “I love you.”

THAT'S THE EASY PART

-Kelsey-



“Beau Valentine is Casanova?” Summer’s whisper booms in my ear.

“Shhh.” I sigh, peeking behind me to make sure no one is listening. The last thing he needs is for the world to discover his secret. But how could he have kept something so big from me? “How’d you know about Casanova, anyway?”

Summer shrugs, flipping her way through an array of gowns hanging on the shop’s wall. “The girls talk.”

Every dress is a brilliant piece of artwork. Some shimmer. Others flow. Each is intricately designed down to the very last detail.

The girls talk.

Great.

Not only do I feel like a fool, but I'm sure I look like one, too. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know it was Beau specifically until just now. I just knew that one of the regular clients from The Network also had a ForFans page. The girls might talk, but they also all claimed to have signed NDAs."

I fall into a plush seat and glance around. Opulence. Sophistication. Total snotty-boutique-from-Pretty-Woman vibes. I can't afford this place. And I don't even know why I'm here.

My phone feels heavy in my pocket, and Beau's texts from earlier somehow singe my leg. Both are constant reminders of yesterday's heartache. I thought I could trust him. That he was different now. That we were, I don't know... something more than where we left off years ago.

I know you're mad, Hart, but please let me explain.

I didn't respond to that one, so he sent another.

If not now, then at the gala. Please go. I'll pay for the dress. I'll pay for anything you want if you go. I need you by my side. Just put it on the card, wherever you get it from.

Right. I still have his card. I should've returned before storming out of his place.

He'll pay, he says. I roll my eyes. With the money he earned from ForFans. The thing is, I don't even care how he makes his money. I care that he lied. It feels like a dirty secret, and

I'm the butt of some mean joke. It feels like high school all over again.

“Why am I even here?” I ask.

“You know exactly why you're here.” Unease bubbles in my stomach at the prospect of Summer being right. She lifts her hand, grabbing the attention of a worker. The woman nods and holds up a quick finger. “Besides, what better way to get back at a boyfriend—”

“Fake boyfriend,” I interject.

“—then to make yourself all sexy, go on a date with him, and not let him get any... at least not right away.” Summer plops onto the cushion next to me, completely ignoring my interruption. I'd only just told her about the agreement and faux relationship on the drive here, and she still hasn't commented on it. She just smiled while side-eyeing me every so often as she drove.

But maybe she's right. I should try to have fun for the sake of getting through this week. Not that I plan on getting sexy with Beau again soon, or at all, but I have an obligation. I made a deal. If I can get through this week, maybe the rest of the month won't be as hard, and I can still get my bookshop back.

That's what this was all about, right?

The worker hurries over. “How can I help you, ladies?”

“My friend needs a gown for a gala this week. I know it's short notice, but we're hoping you can help us find something

that will work.” Summer stands and returns to the hanging gowns like she owns the place. She pulls down several expensive-looking ones and hands them to the worker, who gives a tight but accommodating smile.

Summer’s comfort in the store must come from her experience as an escort. The girl knows how to shop and shop for expensive items. It’s quite a contrast to her chill and laid-back everyday persona I see at the bakery. When the worker’s arms are visibly weighed down with several dresses, and her smile has strained enough to give her a facelift, Summer spins toward her and grins sweetly.

“Of course. I’d be happy to help.” The worker’s words drown in fake sincerity as she flashes her bright white teeth. “Let me put these in a room for you, and we can get started.”

“Thank you,” Summer says before sitting down again, clearly satisfied with her selection of gowns.

“I’m not trying all of those on. I don’t even know if I’m still going.”

Summer’s smirks and shakes her head. “Don’t you dare try to worm out of this. You’re trying those on. And you need to stop lying to yourself.”

“I’m not lying,” I argue. Not really. “I’m angry.”

The attendant comes out of the room and nods toward us. Standing, Summer drags me to my feet and pushes me toward the fitting room. Part of me wants to pull back and dig in my heels before bolting from the store.

I don't. This should be fun, even if I'm pissed. "How about we try on some dresses while you give me all the delicious dirty details of Mr. Casanova and his major mess up."

The attendant waits in the fitting room as Summer gently shoves me through the door.

"I don't want to do this," I say.

"Yes, you do. Now, go get the first dress on and tell me all about Mr. C." Summer winks like her codeword is the most creative one she could come up with. I roll my eyes but can't help smiling at her excitement.

"Fine." I compose myself and step fully into the room. The worker closes the door behind us. I strip down to my bra and underwear as she takes the first gown off the hanger. I sigh, unsure how to even start this story. "I guess everything began back in high school. How much have I told you about, uh, Mr. C's and my past?"

As the attendant holds it open, I step into the silver, flowing gown. She glides the thin straps over my shoulders, spins me around, and zips me up.

"Enough to know he made your formative years miserable, and you felt the need to hide from him at the bakery that one day." Ugh, I completely forgot about that. Talk about embarrassing.

"Right, ok..." I huff out an aggravated breath. "So, he claims I was never supposed to be the victim of any of his pranks and bullying."

The gown is beautiful, though plain—a simple, straight sheath dress with no embellishments. The attendant opens the door.

“Who was?” Summer asks as I step out, and the worker guides me onto a raised platform in front of the mirror. “It’s pretty, but not the right one. We need something that screams ‘get on your knees and beg for forgiveness.’”

The attendant ushers me back into the fitting room.

“Apparently, they were meant for my boyfriend at the time.”

“Oohhh, Mr. C was jealous! Do you believe him?”

I lift an uncertain shoulder, not that Summer can see it. “Yes. At least, I thought I did. He seemed sincere in his explanation, and everything since that day in the bakery, he’s been nothing but good to me.”

“Ok, so then what?” Summer asks as the attendant helps me into the next dress. The midnight blue mermaid has crystals heavily scattered across the bottom of the skirt, slowly dispersing as they stretch up toward the waistline. I step back out of the room and onto the platform. Summer shakes her head. “You look gorgeous. But it’s still not the one. Keep going with the story.”

I hurry back into the fitting room. “Anyway, we have that agreement and the fake relationship.”

The attendant, who is helping me step into a full red a-line, shoots her gaze up to my face in judgemental curiosity. I give a slight shake of my head, and she looks away.

“Yeah, yeah... keep going,” Summer calls from the sitting area, once again ignoring the fact that this relationship with Beau was made up from the start.

“So we made the deal. We were supposed to be honest with each other. No sex.”

“For you and him, or with others?” Summer asks.

“Both.” The warmth of embarrassment spreads over my cheeks. We definitely broke at least one of our rules. “And then it turns out that Mr. C is Mr. C, and you know the rest from there.”

The attendant circles around me and zips up the back. For as full as the gown is, it weighs far less than I expected.

“What did he say after you found out?”

“That he was meaning to tell me. That he hadn’t had sex with anyone else since our agreement. That he was sorry.”

“But you don’t believe him?” she asks as I step back out of the fitting room facing the mirror from the platform. Summer stands behind me, her reflection in the mirror mimicking my own. The gown hugs my curves with precision before waterfaling to the ground from my hips. A low-cut vee accentuates my breasts. “This is it,” Summer exclaims with finality. “This is the dress. Drop dead perfect. Mr. C will drool at your feet the second he sees you.”

Do I even want that?

I spin to face her. “I don’t know if I believe him.”

“But you want to,” she says.

I give a tiny nod. “I’m just so angry that he’d keep this from me.”

Summer glances away for a fraction of a second. “You know, Kelse, you have every right to be angry,” she says. “But, I also wonder if he wasn’t actually meaning to be malicious.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugs. “Well, if he wanted to be malicious, would he keep trying to apologize? He was probably worried about how you’d react. Fear does strange things to people, you know.”

Fear. That’s how I lived most of my high school career. In fear. “What if it was all just some sick mind game.”

“Do you think it was?”

“No. I just don’t know how to trust him.”

“That’s the easy part, Kelse.” She spins me back around, so we’re both looking in the mirror. “You just do.”

FAR BETTER COMPANY

-Beau-



With fingers tapping rapidly against the steering wheel and a heart slamming against my ribcage, I drive up to the valet, unsure whether Kelsey is here or not. I wanted to pick her up, but she insisted on meeting at the gala. And since I fucked up, she gets what she wants. For a long time.

Hopefully, that's me.

But I get it. Until I can apologize properly, Kelsey has no reason to trust me. And she deserves a genuine apology. A big apology. I never wanted to hurt her.

The valet opens my door, and I step out into the bitter iciness, a fitting punishment for how I treated Kelsey. Winter always seems the harshest in February. Frigid. Callous. It makes having to be here worse. The only upside to tonight will be seeing Kelsey... if she's here.

I hurry into the old Gilded Pages Theatre. Despite preferring to be anywhere else, I have to admit it's the perfect place for such an extravagant event. Not only does the theater have roots in the city's history, but the opulent venue also adds to the romanticism and ideal of what a gala should be: elegant and timeless.

The moment my foot touches the wine-colored marble floor inside, I freeze. Kelsey stands by the elaborate wood columns at the top of the grand staircase, dressed in a red gown that accentuates every perfect inch of her. Her blond hair is pinned up in a low bun, a few loose strands framing her face and wisping on her neck. My slamming heart skips a beat or ten. For the briefest moment, nothing else in the room exists except her. If I didn't know any better, I'd be convinced I died.

Kelsey is effortlessly beautiful. Warmhearted and easygoing. There's nowhere I'd rather be than around her, but she's never felt as far away as she does now. There's no reason this woman has to forgive me for omitting the truth. And my hill to climb to that forgiveness is very clearly a mountain.

I'll start with the stairs in front of me.

Her eyes flick to mine when I take the first step, and a soft smile graces her lips. Hope swells in my gut. I take each step quicker and quicker until I am next to her. I want to reach out, take her hand, hug her, kiss her, but instead, I keep a respectful distance. She was clear about where we stand, and I need to respect that, even if I don't want to.

"You came," I say.

“I said I would.” Her brows pinch, but the smile on her face grows before falling into a more serious expression. “Besides our deal, you didn’t want to be here alone. No one should go through hell by themselves.”

Right...the deal. Then again, at least she hasn’t shut me out completely. I can fix this.

An apology burns on the tip of my tongue, but the timing isn’t right. I can’t keep giving quick sorries to mend the wound I inflicted. What’s that saying? You can’t put a bandaid on a bullet hole.

I motion toward the doors where others are entering the main stage theater. “I’m glad you’re here. Shall we?”

Kelsey nods and hooks her arm in mine as we walk into the theater at balcony level. The lower main floor is cleared of seats, a feat I imagine wasn’t easy. In their place are tables, chairs, and a sprawling dance floor. The stage is set with a mic and instruments.

“It’s been ages since I’ve been here,” Kelsey admits. “Since high school.”

“Twelfth Night?” I ask.

Kelsey smiles and nods.

I rub my hand over the back of my neck, trying to relieve the tension that’s been building since she found out about ForFans. “Yeah, that was probably the last time I was here, too. I was sitting right behind you that day.”

“I was on edge the entire play. I was sure you were going to pull a prank on me,” she admits.

“You hid it well. I can’t recall anything about the performance, but I remember you laughing a lot.” Kelsey glances at me through her peripherals, the soft skin of her cheeks shading pink.

She stares across the theater, but I can’t take my eyes off her. High school feels like a lifetime ago, yet my antics from back then have caught up with me again. Sure, they were never intended for her, instead being born out of jealousy. Of wanting someone who didn’t necessarily want me. But teenaged Kelsey was too good for Flynn. She was too good for me.

She’s still too good for me.

Since we were kids, Kelsey grew more confidence and a stronger backbone. She doesn’t let the world step all over her, and I love that about her. Even if it’s the reason I’m in the doghouse. I didn’t weigh the ramifications of our past when I kept avoiding telling her about ForFans. God, I’m an fucking ass.

We begin our way toward a set of stairs to the lower floor, weaving through the crowd of attendees.

“It’s crowded in here,” Kelsey says, leaning in so I can hear over the music and chatter.

“It’s the political-social event of the season. Everyone who’s anyone makes sure to be seen here. And then some.” My eyes

scan the room as we walk, catching a few faces of my investors for the nonprofit before they disappear into the sea of black tuxes and colorful gowns. An undulation of people appears and disappears. At this rate, I hope not to run into my father anytime soon. If I can't see him, there's no need to seek him out just yet. Besides, it would be easy to get separated from Kelsey with the number of people here, and I'm not willing to leave her side.

I slide my hand to her lower back as we move toward the back end of the theater where the bar is set up. As we step up and order drinks, a hand clamps on my shoulder.

Hard.

“Beau, buddy.” Eric's fake cordiality slithers over my skin as I shake his grip away and instinctively pull Kelsey closer to my side. “Don't be like that, man.”

“Forgive me if I'm a little suspicious. It's not like you haven't stalked my girlfriend and threatened me recently.” I feel Kelsey stiffen at my side, and I squeeze her hip. Nothing's happening to her tonight.

Eric opens his mouth to respond, but Trixie sashays up, wrapping a tentacle around him. His arm falls over her petite shoulders. A scratch of deep red mattes her lips, and her eyes can hardly stay open under the weight of her false eyelashes. She flutters them, and I am sure I feel a breeze.

“Beau, baby, I didn't think you'd make it tonight. I didn't get a request from Casanova.” Trixie reaches out and grazes her acrylic-clad nails over my chest through my vest. She

smiles, and I steal a quick look at Eric, unease racing through my veins at the mention of Casanova.

I thought this night couldn't get worse, but Eric is a lit match and gasoline. As far as I knew, he knew nothing about my ForFans account. Thankfully, he stares off to the side, raising a hand to someone in the theater, ignorant of many things, including Trixie's info spill.

"The last time was too much fun to pass up again." Trixie smiles before she sees Kelsey, who subtly shifts in place next to me. The discomfort of this situation saturates the air, making it hard to breathe. "Oh, I didn't realize this was a charity event."

Kelsey leans into me and slides her fingers through mine. "It's good to see you again, Patricia. Trish? Patty?" She looks up at me with all the innocence of a sneaky little kitten. "Gosh, I'm terrible with names."

"It's Trixie." She glares at Kelsey before turning back to me, her arm still wrapped around Eric. He's refocused on the conversation, and a sleazy grin cuts into his face. "Anyway, Beau, if you're looking for fun later, I'm more than ready to be one of Casanova's girls tonight."

Eric definitely heard it this time. There's no way he couldn't have. But instead of confusion or questioning, he's grinning wider than ever as his eyes bounce back and forth between Kelsey and me. A pit of stone sinks in my stomach.

"Besides not being anywhere near interested, Trix, you've now broken the NDA. You can expect to hear from my lawyer

soon.”

Trixie’s mouth pops open with a tiny squeak, and her eyes widen. From the flabbergasted look on her face, I can only assume she’s never been simultaneously rejected and metaphorically slapped in the face with legal papers at the same time. I grab Kelsey’s hand and guide her away while adrenaline begs me to stay back and fight.

“NDAs,” she says and shakes her head. “At least I’m not the only one you wanted to keep this secret from.”

“I didn’t want to keep the secret from you.”

“But you did.” She sighs, her playful expression from before fully sobered after the interaction with TweedleAsshole and TweedleTart. “I’m sorry. Let’s not talk about this. Let’s get through the night.”

I shift in my skin if that’s even possible. Letting Eric get close to her was already a step in the wrong direction. The fact that Trixie happened to tag along and bring up Casanova was a stab in Kelsey’s back, I’m sure. Her smile has faded. What’s left of it is tight and forced. And I have a sinking feeling that things will only go downhill.

“Drinks would probably be a good start,” I mumble. Kelsey laughs, a genuine one that brings out the sparkle in her eyes. “I’m glad I can still make you laugh, at least.”

“You’ve been pretty good at that these past few weeks. And you’ve been quite...”

“Chivalrous? Giving? Sexy?” I offer with a wink.

Her smile widens, and she rolls her eyes, humor returning to her face. “Not what I was thinking, but we can go with those.”

“I’ll take what I can get. Let’s grab those drinks and find our table.”

By the time we get to our table near the edge of the dancefloor, the conversation between us has stunted. The band has kicked up, and couples are flowing onto the floor. Kelsey sips at her drink. I run a hand through my hair.

“I know you’re not my biggest fan.” We both flinch. “Bad word choice...”

“Terrible.”

“But I want us to have fun tonight, not just get through it. I want you to have a good time, even if it’s not where you want to be right now. And especially if I’m not the person you want to be around. We have a blast together, so let’s focus on that and not my idiocy, at least for the next few hours.”

“You know, even after... everything that came to light... I’m not sure there’s anyone else I’d want to be around tonight.”

I swallow past a lump in my throat. Kelsey’s making it hard to keep my hands to myself. My fingertips itch to touch her. I crumble and reach out, brushing a stray lock of blond from her face.

“Is that you, Beau Valentine?” a sultry voice asks behind me. Kelsey’s eyes shoot in that direction, her posture stiffening. I stupidly look over my shoulder to see Naomi,

another girl from The Network. Her fingers trail across my shoulder as she giggles, and I sit straighter in my seat. *Downhill...* “Not that I’d ever forget a man like you.”

A man walks up next to her, slides his arm around her waist, and whispers something in her ear. She glances up at him with a grin and a nod, and he moves away.

“Looks like duty calls. It was good seeing you, as always. Don’t be shy now. You know where to find me.” She winks and sashays off in the direction of the guy.

“How many are there?” Kelsey’s voice anchors me, drags me to her like the tide to shore. She doesn’t know how much I need her right now. “Don’t answer that. Tonight is supposed to be about having fun. At least, that’s what we keep saying. So, let’s have fun.”

My stomach knots at her words. Why do I feel like I just received a stay of execution at the eleventh hour?

“Do you want to dance?” I ask to break the stilted, tense feeling blanketing our evening.

“Why not? Lead the way.”

I stand and take Kelsey’s hand, leading her onto the dance floor. We slow-dance through the end of the current song and into the next, even though the pace is livelier. Tension melts from her as we tilt and sway. She spins, extending both our arms, and as she returns to me, her eyes catch somewhere over my shoulder, and she freezes.

What now?

“Well, at least you know what to wear to an event like this.” A haughty voice pierces through the gentle music like an arrow through cotton.

Great. Hanna and Riley are here, too. Perfect. Fantastic.

“If you put even half the effort into your sister’s wedding as you did tonight, you would realize her joy is more important than your grudges.” And Sherri, too.

Wonderful.

Kelsey’s shoulders fall as she exhales. The move is small, tiny, and I doubt anyone else noticed, but I did. Her mother’s words got to her.

“I think my big day deserves more than that, Mother. Half the effort? That’s KelsBels’ typical output. Has been since high school.”

“Kelsey. My name is Kelsey.” Hanna’s head snaps back to her sister, a fake smile snaking on her lips. “I’ve never liked that nickname.”

“Don’t be so uptight, Kels,” Flynn says, sliding his arm around Hanna’s waist. “She’s always been uptight.”

“That’s Kels for you. Always acting like she’s better than the world,” Hanna adds. “You’d think all those pranks would’ve chilled her out a degree or two, but I think they only made her worse.”

“Pranks?” Kelsey asks, warning lacing her words.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Hanna shrugs a shoulder. “Sure. Every time your little lover boy here tried to go after Flynn, we were one step ahead. It was easy. It’s amazing what girls will gossip about.” She smiles up at Flynn. “And we couldn’t let Beau have all the fun, could we?”

Kelsey shakes in place. I need to do some damage control, fast. But instead of exploding, Kelsey laughs. A mirthless sound.

“You haven’t changed at all, Hanna, have you?” she asks.

“Don’t act like you weren’t in on it, too, Kels. Or were you really that oblivious? Like Hanna said, half the effort, ever since high school.” Flynn looks at me with a nod. “Your pranks were good, man. We just did it better.” Flynn smiles at his fiance, and I want to beat his face in. Even after all this time, neither of them grew a shred of a conscience.

“Eat shit, Hannigan.” I clench my fist.

“Boys, boys. Let’s be civil,” Sherri interjects, peering around the room. Is she afraid of a crowd or wanting one? Then she turns to Kelsey. Cold, assessing eyes run over her daughter. “You’re certainly on full display tonight. You couldn’t choose a more demure color for a gala?”

I roll my eyes at the cheap dig at Kelsey and tug on her hand. She doesn’t need to deal with this shit. We’re trying to have fun. Kelsey’s family has never been good at that. Instead of moving, my gorgeous, well-dressed, fierce Kelse remains glued to her spot, standing tall and lifting her chin.

“Enough.” One word from Kelsey and the three buffoons all stare, mouths slightly ajar. “I’m done.”

After a few beats, Hanna shifts, looping her arm through Flynn’s. “It’s okay, mom. We all know Kels is just jealous about Flynn. That’s why she’s with him.” Hanna gestures in my direction. “It’s sad and embarrassing, really. Who dates their bully? She’s barely masking the desperation with that dress.”

My teeth clench so hard they might break out of my mouth. Hanna has always ridden the line between uncouth and downright bitchy, but she took it five steps too far. I open my mouth to give her a piece of my mind, but Kelsey steps toward her little sister, poised and brimming with genuine elegance. And just a little ferocity.

“Thank you.” Kelsey accentuates her words. Pinched brows and gaped mouths meet her in response. Her family resembles a bumbling pack of fools. I squeeze her hand, encouraging her to keep going. “Every insult disguised as a compliment. Every wrong assumption. Every damn accusation out of your mouths has only made me stronger. You don’t know me. You obviously don’t like me. And you know what? That’s okay. Now, I’d like to get on with my night. With far better company.”

PROUD OF YOU, HART

-Kelsey-



“I’m proud of you, Hart,” Beau says as he spins me around once before holding me close as we sway to the music.

“Thank you,” I say, leaning into his embrace. “I am, too.”

I can’t stop smiling. Relief washed over me the second we walked away from Mom and Hanna. God, and Flynn. Years of frustration and hurt just evaporated inside me, and a weight was not just lifted but tossed far away from my shoulders.

And I have Beau to thank for that. Without his constant support and unwavering defense, I don’t know when I would’ve told them or done that, if ever.

It’s entirely possible I never would’ve stood up to them if Beau Valentine hadn’t come back into my life.

“You know, maybe this evening wasn’t such a bad idea after all,” I say, leaning back to look into his gorgeous shark fin-

colored eyes. There's still a hunger raging behind them, but I'm no longer afraid of it. If anything, I want to chase it.

And let it chase me.

Beau pulls me closer as the song changes. His hand holds firmly against the small of my back. Our cheeks press against each other.

"You're stunning." The warmth from his breath glides over my skin.

"You're not so bad, yourself." Our heads turn ever so slightly, our gazes catching. Calm, hope, and desire whirl inside me. If I lean in just another fraction, our lips will touch.

And god, I want them to touch.

"Excuse me." A delicate hand slides over Beau's shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?"

Beau and I push apart to find a petite brunette beaming up at him, fluttering her lashes like all the glitter in the world is stuck in her eyes.

Another one?

"Apologies, but I've only got plans to dance with my girlfriend from now on."

"Girlfriend?" The woman's once-fluttering eyes pop wide open. "Since when do you have a girlfriend?"

"It's still new," I say with a smile, desiring to walk out and never look back while simultaneously wanting to stake my claim on the man attached to my arm.

“But... does that mean you’re done with...” The brunette trails off, but based on the tension building in Beau’s muscles, I have no doubt the sentence was going to end with something related to ForFans. Her brows pinch together, and her lips purse.

“Completely.” There’s finality in Beau’s word, like the slamming of a coffin. The final fist of dirt thrown into a grave. My gaze shoots to him. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? The death of Casanova? The slender woman looks between Beau and me, the excitement in her expression completely extinct now that he’s delivered the news.

“I see,” she says. “That’s... I see. Well, if things change, you know where to find me.” She gives Beau a subdued smile and a wink before walking away.

Beau clears his throat. “Sorry that keeps happening.”

I shake my head and shrug. Words don’t come. My eyes scan across the room, landing on each and every woman there as we begin dancing again.

How many were his?

And am I any different than them? They were paid for their services through The Network. And while our agreement was private, Beau’s still paying me for mine.

Why does it matter anyway, Kelse?

I look at Beau. Things with us feel like so much more than an agreement. We have a history, a solid connection. He just said he was done with ForFans. Is that how he truly feels? I

push the thoughts away, not wanting to get ahead of myself. The latest interruption is a good reminder that I can't get swept up in the gala's atmosphere and forget why I'm here.

He quirks a brow and tilts his head an inch. "You okay?"

I could keep trying to relate this back to high school, but even that was different. There was no intention of hurting me or lying to me. Fake relationship? I'm not so sure anymore. The more time passes, the more this thing between us feels real. It feels like we could have more.

I smile. "I am."

"Good," Beau says. "Because my father just waved us over. He's by the first cluster of tables."

Oh, boy.

Beau takes my hand tightly, and I sense it's more for him than me. We weave through the room, taking what seems to be the longest route to his father.

Here we go.

"Mr. Valentine." A voice rings through the air, and Beau stops. An older man with gray hair and piercing blue eyes approaches us. The smile on his face is welcoming and calming.

"Mr. Albrecht, it's good to see you." Beau smiles and drops my hand to shake the man's. His demeanor has done a complete one-eighty from moments ago when he noticed his dad.

“I’m glad I ran into you, boy,” Mr. Albrecht says. “I’ve been thinking about your business model. It’s smart and exactly what this city needs. I’ve decided I’d like to invest the full amount we discussed.”

“Wow. Thank you, sir. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“I expect not.” Mr. Albrecht claps a hand on Beau’s shoulder, his smile never faltering. “I’ll let you get back to your evening.”

He walks away, and Beau breathes in deeply.

“That all sounded good,” I say.

“Albrecht will be my largest investor for the nonprofit. With his contribution, I’ll be able to get it up and running by fall. It’s exactly what I’ve been waiting to hear.”

“So, I guess this gala wasn’t all bad, then.” I wink.

“I guess not. But people like him are exactly why I need to keep a clean image. Most of these investors are family men. Rich by trade and careful in who they give their money to.”

“Okay, but if that’s the case, why take a chance with ForFans to start?”

“I began doing it before the investors started piling in. By the time anyone began offering me money, I’d been making a killing on the videos. I figured having the investments plus a cushion was smart.”

I nod. It makes sense, and I can’t fault him for that.

“Anyway,” Beau trails off, motioning toward his father, who is still standing by the tables and staring us down. We make our way over, Beau’s hand again grasped in mine.

“I see you made it,” Beau’s father says. He tips his head up a fraction to look down on his son. Beau doesn’t react.

“I’m not sure what choice I had,” Beau responds. He rolls his shoulders and shifts, standing taller before his father.

“I’m assuming this is the girlfriend?” Mayor Valentine’s eyes turn to me, scrutinizing every inch of me. Like Beau, I stand taller. “She’s pretty. Acceptable.”

“She’s gorgeous and far better a person than I deserve.”

“Well, at least we can agree on something,” Beau’s father spouts. He holds his hand out to me. “Mayor Valentine.”

I take his hand firmly. “Kelsey Hart.”

Before anyone can say something else, a beautiful, petite, silver-haired woman with Beau’s glinting gray eyes steps up next to Mayor Valentine. His mom. Jane Valentine.

It’s been ages since I’ve seen her, and even then, it was only a handful of times. When Beau and I had been friends, he’d always come to my house. I rarely went to his. But it’s the same woman.

She smiles softly at her son. Demure. Elegant. Reserved. She’s still the “speak only when spoken to” type.

“How are you, Mom?” Beau’s gaze scans over his mother, face to neck to wrists, seemingly searching for something.

She glances at her husband before returning her attention to her son. “I’m doing well.”

Beau swallows and nods as he tugs me closer. “I’d like you to meet Kelsey, my girlfriend. You might remember her from when I was in high school.”

“Oh, girlfriend?” The smile on her face grows more prominent, and she holds out a hand. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“Likewise, Mrs. Valentine,” I say.

“Oh, please call me Jane like you did in the old days. Gosh, how is it possible for that to feel like just yesterday and also a lifetime ago? Beau adored you back then. It’s so wonderful you two reunited.”

“Don’t call him that stupid name,” Mayor Valentine snaps, his careful boom laced with warning. Mrs. Valentine shrinks in her spot. I don’t know how a woman of her stature could get any smaller, but she does.

“Still bullying those you pretend to love?” The tick in Beau’s jaw betrays his otherwise passive outer shell. He turns back to his mother. “Are you okay?”

Jane’s eyes shine with unshed tears. She peeks at her husband from her peripheries before nodding. “I am, Beauregard.”

“Perhaps your mother and Kelsey should go grab some drinks and mingle. That way, you and I can have a chat in private.”

A soft, submissive smile lifts Jane's lips, and she bows her head before scurrying off into the crowd. I don't follow. I can't. Mayor Valentine might be a bully, but I won't let him bully me.

I squeeze Beau's hand, letting him know I won't leave his side. I'm going to be here for him tonight. He squeezes back.

"She's not staying, is she?" Beau's father asks as though I've already left.

"I'm not the kind of man to push away a wonderful woman once she's on my arm," Beau says. "Besides, she has a mind of her own. What kind of man would I be to try and control it?"

"Are you sure you want her to be part of this conversation, son?"

"She already knows everything."

Mayor Valentine stares me up and down. His gaze is calculating and intruding, as though he's trying to figure me out. Just then, Trixie struts up and stands next to him, handing him a glass of champagne. As her hand falls back to her side, her fingers dust over the arm of his suit. Mayor Valentine's eyes dart around, and his body becomes rigid. Trixie's sly smile creeps over her lips like a snake revealing itself to its prey.

Beau shakes his head. "How long have you been having an affair?"

"Long enough to find out your secrets."

Well, shit.

“Trixie’s the whistleblower? I should’ve fuckin’ known.” Beau asks. She must have told Mayor Valentine about Beau’s ForFans. “What about Mom?”

Mayor Valentine ignores Beau’s question, loosening his stance and sipping his new glass of champagne.

“Like father, like son?” Trixie giggles, enjoying this too much. “Except Daddy here knows to stick around when he finds something good.”

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyers soon enough.” Beau snarls. His body vibrates, and he clamps my hand tighter.

His father huffs. “You won’t bring lawyers into this if you know what’s good for you. In fact, you’ll stay quiet if you want your nonprofit to get off the ground.”

Beau’s jaw tremors. “And you, so much for your fuckin’ platform... *Dad*. I can’t wait for the city to learn that Mayor Valentine, Mr. *Family First, Last and Always*, has been fucking an escort twenty-something years younger than him.”

A few people close to us look over.

“Shut your mouth, boy,” his father warns, his voice low and threatening. “You don’t want the attention you’re about to get us. Besides, you have no proof of the affairs. Any claims you make won’t hold water. On the other hand, I have confessions and videos of your antics.” And like a lightbulb just turned on his brain, Mayor Valentine glances around, smiles for the quickest second before furrowing his brows, and raises his voice. “Who do you think you are by showing up here tonight?”

After the shame you've brought to our family." People inch closer like a moving wall about to squash us. "You're looking for investors? Why would anyone support a porn star trying to open a nonprofit for children? No one in their right mind is crazy enough to give you money knowing you have a sex addiction, creating videos for income to fuel your habits."

The crowd around us swells until it feels like half the attendees are watching our soap opera unfold. Dropped jaws and wide-eyed stares surround us. Mr. Albrecht stands just off to our left. His mouth sags with chagrin. I can only imagine the thoughts going through his head about the investment.

"Beau," I whisper, tugging on Beau's hand as he simmers quietly.

"Let's just go."

He rips his hand away from mine and points a finger at his father. "You've never been a father to me."

"You are a disappointment, son."

Except Beau isn't a disappointment.

"Excuse me, Mr. Valentine, but you're wrong. Your son is not a disappointment. He's caring and kind. And he wants to help the community, unlike you. Regardless of what you say about him, he's not a disappointment." And he deserves so much better in a father than he was dealt. "The apple fell much farther from the tree than you think because, unlike his failure of a father, Beau would never betray someone he loves the way you've betrayed your wife. The way you've betrayed

your son. For a man who speaks so highly of family values, you've failed with your own. And that's on you. Your son is a far better man than you'll ever be."

Mayor Valentine's eyes scan over the crowd, but I keep watching him. My heart slams against my ribs, and I try to steady my breathing. Standing up to the city mayor can come with a lot of fallout, but Beau deserves someone sticking up for him. To protect him. The way he did for me. Beau squeezes my hand again. I look over. He smiles and winks, and I have no doubt I did the right thing.

"I'm not sure you should be talking." Both Beau's and my heads turn back to look at his father, the satisfaction wiped from our faces. "Didn't he find you on The Network?" Fuck. I can feel all eyes zero in on me. People I don't know. People I do. A quick glance to my right, and I see the smug expressions of Hanna and Flynn, the disapproval of my parents, and the empathy of Summer. "You're just another one of his escorts. Tell me, how many porn videos have you helped him create?"

"You're a whore?" My mother screeches. I swear she loves the drama. And still, I don't care. What they think of me no longer matters. Standing up to them earlier made me realize I deserve better than a family who doesn't know who I am and who tears me down with every breath. I almost want to laugh at her theatrical shock. Does it really matter to them what I do with my life? If anything, this confirms what they already believed. And I'm done caring.

“None of this is her fault,” Beau says. “Kelsey didn’t know about my work. I offered to help her rebuild her bookstore if she pretended to be my girlfriend. It was my idea—all mine. Don’t blame her for anything. It’s all on me.” He turns to face me. Regret darkens his eyes. He drops my hand. “I’m so sorry, Hart.”

And then he walks away.

30

--

THE DAMAGE IS DONE

-Kelsey-



I don't go after him. Something keeps me rooted to my spot, telling me that's not what he needs right now

.But I don't know what I'm supposed to do. The gala of gazes and glares that bored into me moments ago have dispersed to other points in the room. The show is over for them, even if it isn't for me. My focus is the door Beau just pushed through.

He's gone from sight maybe thirty seconds before a gentle hand tugs my arm. I look at the thief stealing my attention.

“Are you ok, Kelse?” Summer whispers, brows crumpled with concern. When did she get here? She looks back to the door. My eyes wander there, too. “What the fuck just happened?”

I nod and shrug simultaneously, eventually shaking my head no and turning to her. “I have no idea.”

“Do you want to get out of here?” she asks, glancing around the room. I follow her gaze. People stare at me. Some lean toward the person next to them, their mouths moving and eyes judging.

Before I answer, Eric strides up, looking like a guilt-ridden puppy dog who ate his owner’s favorite shoe.

“What do you want?” I snap. I’m tired of his bullshit. I’m tired of everyone’s bullshit.

“I want to make sure you’re ok.” His eyes don’t meet mine. He scrutinizes the floor, occasionally swiping his shoe across the wood.

What a fucking act.

“That’s such crap.” I cross my arms over my chest and pop a hip. Summer does the same. She’s not buying this farce, either. “You’re part of the problem. I’m not dealing with your shit anymore. You come near me again, and I’m calling the cops.”

In a split second, Eric’s puppy-like appearance transforms into a rabid dog. His sneer practically drips uncontrolled saliva as his mouth foams. Not really, but the image is in my head. He’s been caught and caged, and he’s angry.

Summer’s back straightens. She’s not scared. She’s ready to fight beside me.

“You have no clue who I am, do you?” he spits out.

“I know what you did to that girl in college.” Was the fear that just skidded across his face? “I don’t know how you made her stay quiet, but if you try any of that shit with me, if you even think about touching me, I’ll scream until the whole fucking world listens. Your daddy can’t save you forever.”

Eric leans in, his eyes narrowed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Stay away from me, Eric.”

“Women don’t want creeps,” Summer adds. “They don’t want to worry about some sleazebag lurking in the shadows, following them and intimidating them because he can’t take no for an answer.”

“Women don’t tell me no.”

My singular laugh startles him, temporarily breaking his building petulance.

“I told you no. And I’d bet all my money Laura told you no, too.” My body shakes from the adrenaline. He’s right, to a degree. I don’t know who he is or how much his father is willing to cover up for him. And I don’t know if anything I’m saying will keep him away, but I refuse to deal with his shit any longer. “Leave me alone. Leave Beau alone.”

I turn away from him to find Mayor Valentine on the stage, tapping the mic for everyone’s attention. “Excuse me, everyone. I want to make an announcement.” He waits for a few beats while eyes shift to him. “I want to apologize for the unfortunate revelations that unfolded here tonight. I always

imagined my family was free of problems. I was wrong. It only came to light earlier this evening that my son has...”

Everyone is so full of shit. Even after his son is gone, this man is trying to tear him down. Who the hell does he think he is?

I glance at Summer, and she glances back and smiles. “Whatever it is, I am behind you one hundred percent.”

I nod, knowing exactly what I need to do. With a deep breath in, I start my way toward the stage. The crowd parts for me as I move, everyone waiting to see what drama unfolds now. Beau’s father has caught sight of me moving toward him and silences mid-sentence as he tries to kill me with his stare.

That’s not going to work, Mayor.

Everyone watches as I step up the stairs, across the stage, and up to the mic. Mayor Valentine amazingly moves out of my way. The only explanation is shock. How many people have stood up to him, let alone twice in one night?

I refuse to address him and turn toward my audience.

“Good evening, everyone. I, um, tonight wasn’t supposed to go like this. I’m not sure what was supposed to happen, but I know it wasn’t this.” A few people laugh, but for the most part, everyone is quiet. “I don’t know who learned what tonight, but there are two things I need to address before I leave. First, this man,” I point to Mayor Valentine, “is a fraud. He spouts rhetoric about the importance of family and

community but cheats on his wife with escorts, and he manipulates and blackmails his son for his own gain.”

“You can’t prove any of that,” Mayor Valentine says, loud enough for the mic to pick up a word or two.

“No, I can’t. But you also didn’t deny it just now. And I’m sure some people can dig up the proof now that they know to look for it.” The mayor’s head snaps to overlook the crowd. There are some murmurs now. People whisper to those near them. I turn back toward the audience. “I don’t know about you, but that’s not the kind of man I want representing our city.”

“Is it true?” someone shouts from the crowd.

“What about your slogan, Mr. Mayor? ‘Family first, last, and always.’ Is that meaningless to you?” another person calls out.

The damage is done. Mayor Valentine stumbles over a few words before scurrying off the stage and through the back door. A few people follow him, presumably his campaign workers. And Trixie. Trixie follows, too.

The rest of the gala attendees stay, whispering among themselves at the revelation that just took place.

“That isn’t all I need to say,” I start again. “I know a lot of you heard about the mayor’s son. How Beau has been making porn.” Everyone hushes again, whispers so furious I can hear them from the stage. “While not untrue, it’s also not as scandalous as it seems. You see, Beau’s been wanting to build

this nonprofit for a while now, somewhere for the kids in our community to go where they're safe and helped—and even fed. And maybe Beau didn't go about earning money in the most innocent way, but he wanted to earn as much as he could as fast as he could to help our community. And the fact is, there are just some businesses that earn you more than others.”

I peer over the crowd. My sister glares at me from the back. Next to her, my mother whispers to my father, her eyes darting around. Without a doubt, I know she's trying to make sure no one realizes they're related to me. And that's fine by me. I don't need them.

I need Beau.

“I don't think he or the kids in our city should be punished because the money was earned through a less respected avenue. The reason behind it was good. And that's Beau. He's good. And caring. And motivated. He's supportive and protective.” *And I love him.* I love him for everything he is. “He really does want to help, unlike his father. And if anyone can help our community, it's Beau.” I search the crowd, my attention landing on the man Beau spoke with earlier. His chin lifts when he realizes. “If you had invested in his project before tonight, please reconsider before pulling out. The kids deserve at least that.” My eyes scan the room, many people's attention rapt. I tuck some of my now-disheveled hair behind one ear. “Thank you. For listening and for your understanding. I hope you all can enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Then I walk out, leaving down the same path Beau took not long before.

I need to tell him.

MAKING A PLAN

-Kelsey-



I slump over the counter at The Sweet Spot, watching Marley take down the Valentine's Day decorations and put up a slew of green-colored images. As much as I hated the stupid hearts and kiss lips, somehow losing them now is a kick to the shins.

A hand rubs up and down my back.

"Have you heard from him?" Summer's question stings my soul. I know she's being nice, checking in, but it's such a sucky question.

"No. I called after I left the theater on Wednesday. And again on Thursday morning. And Thursday night. And the next day. And the next." Valentine's Day. "And I even stopped by his condo on Tuesday and again yesterday. If he was home, he didn't open up. I've got my answer, Summer."

"Don't give up so quickly, Kelse. The gala was a big blow to Beau. Give him some time."

The bakery door's bell jingles, and in walks Ryan. He nods to Summer and me. I stand up straighter. Maybe he's heard from Beau.

"Have you..." Ryan's already shaking his head before I finish my question. I slump back to the counter.

"I did hear something, though," he says. That perks me up a bit. Any small crumb will feed my soul right now. "He bought a new place."

"He's moving?" And didn't tell anyone?

"It sounds that way." Summer hands him a coffee, and he smiles in thanks. "I tried calling him but haven't gotten through."

"Why would he move and not tell anyone?" I ask. Ryan shrugs, glancing at Summer before looking back at me. "Why ghost all of us?"

Unless he really does want to sever ties. The gala was rough. And if I know Beau, and I'm damn sure I do, he's got a lot of guilt for how everything turned out. But he doesn't need to. If I could explain everything to him. That I stood up for him, and I believe in his cause. How I'm not mad or upset. That I love him...

"Anyway, I wanted to stop in to see how you were holding up. The other night was rough on you, too."

"The other night was more eye-opening for me than anything." I figured out who I wanted in my life and who I

didn't. Now I need to figure out how to make that first part happen.

Ryan nods as though he gets it, and maybe he does. I don't really know him that well, honestly.

"Anyway," he holds up the to-go cup, "thanks for the coffee, Summer. I should get going. I have somewhere I need to be."

"Sure," I mumble. "Um..."

"If I hear anything more, I'll let you know," Ryan says, and then he leaves.

Summer sidles up next to me, placing her elbows on the counter and leaning in. She bumps her hip against mine. "So, what's your plan?"

"I don't have a plan." I rub my fingers over my closed eyelids until I see colorful dots behind them.

"Then we need to make one," Summer states with finality. "Hey, Marley! Will you be ok without us for an hour or so?"

"Absolutely! Mikey will be here soon, anyway."

Summer slides around me, pushes the kitchen door open, grabs our coats, and throws mine at me. "Put it on. We're going to lunch and making a plan."

32

--

THE GIRL LOVES YOU

-Beau-



“How is she doing?” I ask as Ryan walks in.

“Shitty.” He plops onto a couch, spreading his arm across the back of it. He glances around, nodding. “But this looks great.”

“It’s not bad for a few days, huh? Just signed the papers, and now it’s a matter of a few final details.” I sit in a chair across from him, admiring my work. The bookshelves are empty. The freshly-painted walls are bare. Only the furniture is here. But the store has potential for Kelsey to put her mark on it.

“She’s going to love it. What girl doesn’t want her very own bookstore?”

I’m sure there are some, but not Kelsey. This is her dream. And that’s why I’ve been radio silent. If I can give Kelsey her

dream, maybe she'll forgive me for holding back the truth and the disaster at the gala. It's my fault her family knows about The Network. About ForFans. About everything that they shouldn't.

"What did you tell her?" I ask.

"Don't worry, man. I'm telling her all your little white lies since you can't." Ryan smiles, letting me know he's joking, but it still stings. I've got a lot of making up to do.

"Shut up. You know why I'm doing this." At least, he should. I explained it to him already. I glance at my watch. "I just needed to get everything in order."

"You could've answered at least one of her calls, man. The girl loves you."

"She said that?"

"No." He smirks.

"Asshole," I mumble. The past several days have been a whirlwind. There was a lot to do, but now most of it's done, and we're almost at the finish line.

"That friend of hers is pretty cute," Ryan says, relaxing into the couch. "Not my type, though."

"What is your type?"

He shakes his head, the lighthearted smile wiping from his face. "You know my type."

I do. Ryan only had eyes for petite blonde pixie girls with old souls and broken hearts. Unfortunately, we know of only

one. “Did you get in touch with Laura Reddings?”

“I did. I’m glad you insisted I do.” The muscles in his jawline tense. “At first, she wanted nothing to do with me when I said my name, but I explained why I was calling. I think knowing she has someone in her corner helps. She’s going to press charges against Eric. She seemed worried she doesn’t have enough proof. Do you really think this will take Eric down?”

I shrug. “Who knows, but Laura deserves justice. She’s got to try, and we can help her. Let me know if she needs assistance hiring or paying for a lawyer.”

“With how much you’ve been spending lately, are you sure that’s a good idea? This place cost you a fortune. You won’t have anything left for your nonprofit.”

“I’ll earn more. And not all my investors have gone dead yet.” I lean forward, elbows to thighs, and let my hands fall between my knees. The nonprofit is still possible in the next five years as long as some investors stay.

“You’re not giving up on it, are you?”

“No, but it’s been placed on the back burner, considering everything that’s happened recently. I need to reestablish my reputation and prove I’m not a bad investment. That will take some time.”

“Delayed isn’t bad.” Ryan nods. “You think this is all going to work?”

“It has to.” I lean back, looking at my watch again. My phone pings in my pocket, and I drag it out.

“How much longer?” he asks.

I smile. “Not much.”

33

BETTER THAN GOOD

-Kelsey-



Summer walks a couple of steps ahead of me down the sidewalk. While the day is warmer than expected and the snow is melting, I am far from in the mood to be anywhere except in bed. I only went to work because it's my job, and I love Marley too much to leave her stranded.

“We shouldn't have left,” I grumble, slogging through the melting piles of snow.

“Marley's fine. She told us to go. Besides, Mikey was heading in. There's no way she needs all of us there right now.”

“Yeah, that's weird, right? I didn't realize he was working today. Why would she schedule three people for a Thursday afternoon? It's our slowest time.” I look up to see Summer glance back with a shrug. She laughs as she faces forward once again and continues walking. Maybe Summer's got the

right idea with life. No relationship. Make a shit ton of money. Be carefree and happy. But right now, the only thing that would make me remotely happy is hearing from Beau. I roll my eyes and hurry my steps to catch up with Summer. “Where are we going anyway?”

The street isn’t specifically deserted, but it’s not bustling. A few people go in and out of shops that line the sidewalk, but the area is more up-and-coming rather than set in stone.

“I saw this little place the other day and wanted to try it out,” Summer calls back to me. “I think you’re going to love it.”

As we round the corner, I smack into the back of a now-stationary Summer.

“What the heck? Why’d you stop?”

“We’re here.” The smile on Summer’s face could make her namesake season a reality on any winter day. I glance around, not seeing a single sign to indicate there’s a restaurant anywhere on this block.

I stare at Summer with a cocked brow. “Where?”

Summer points to a nondescript door a few feet away. There’s no name printed anywhere on the building. Curtained windows hide whatever waits inside. And a “closed” sign hangs precariously on the knob.

“I don’t think the place is open... or even a place anymore. Are you sure this is it? It looks deserted.”

“Yep!” Summer’s cheeriness is reaching its peak today. She bounces toward the door and opens it. At least light creeps through as she disappears into the building. With a sigh, I follow.

“We better not get food poisoning!” I call after her as I trudge through the doorway into a gorgeous, mahogany-encased shop with floor-to-ceiling shelves. Toward the back, a balcony hovers over a seating area furnished with vintage couches. My jaw drops as I step past Summer and take everything in. It’s gorgeous. But it’s definitely not a restaurant. “I thought you said we were getting lunch. What is this place?”

“It’s yours.” Beau’s deep voice rolls through my body, warming every inch. I spin to face him. “If you want it.”

His beautiful gray eyes capture me for the first time in days. I want to run to him. Hug him. Kiss him.

Strip him down and have my way with him.

Instead, I stand there stupified, my heart aching for his touch.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

He takes a step closer and pauses as though testing the waters. When I don’t back away, he moves closer until he’s inches from me. The air between us sizzles to life.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes in our past, Hart. Probably too many to ever count.” I nod, and his mouth lifts on one side. He reaches up and grazes his thumb over my cheek. My skin

burns at his touch. I could melt into him in an instant, bury myself in his muscular arms, but I force myself to stay standing, not fully ready to accept he's in front of me. "So when it came time to apologize, I needed to have it right. To prove to you just how much you mean to me. How much I love you."

Those words have repeated over and over in my dreams for the past week. Every time the illusion played in my sleep and those words were said, I'd go to say them back, only for Beau to disappear before a single syllable escaped my lips.

He loves me.

"I love you, too," I blurt out before I could wake up.

His smile grows and we're still here. "I didn't think getting you to say that would be that easy if I'm being honest."

I roll my eyes. I had my reasons.

"Can I finish my apology?" he asks.

"Please."

"After the gala and with everyone learning everything, I was sure you wouldn't want to speak to me." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "But I wasn't willing to give you up without a fight."

"You call not answering my calls putting up a fight?"

"No." He laughs before sobering. "It's been a hell of a week without you, Kelse."

It's been a hell of a week for me, too. Not hearing from him. Not knowing how he felt—hoping even if he didn't want me anymore, that his dream was still in place, that he hadn't lost too much money for the nonprofit.

“Did you lose your investors?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not all. Ryan told me about your little speech after I left, and I knew I had to make things up to you big time. I promise the avoidance was with the best intention. I had calls to make, a dream to save, and another to make a reality.”

“Mine?” I ask. He nods. “You bought me a bookstore.”

“It was the least I could do after everything.”

He bought me a bookstore.

“This had to cost a fortune. I know we had a deal, but you didn't have to do this. How can you afford this and your nonprofit?”

“It's not about the deal, Kelse. It's about you and me. If that means I put the nonprofit on hold for a little longer, I'm ok with that.”

“You can't do that.” *He can't.*

“I can. And I did. The nonprofit will happen, just not as quickly.” He cups his hands on either side of my face and stares into my eyes. “It's all worth it, I swear.”

“What about ForFans? Won't you have money coming in from there that you could keep putting toward the nonprofit?”

“That went out the window the moment you popped back into my life.” He closes the space between us. “I’ve shut it down and removed my videos. It’s done. Gone.” He smiles. “I’ll earn the money somehow. The nonprofit isn’t gone.”

I nod. This is too much at once.

“What now?” I ask.

“Now we set up your bookstore, have a grand opening, and make your dream come true. Everything a happily ever after deserves.”

Happily ever after...

For me. With him. Is it that easy?

“I can’t do that.” I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, his face etched with concern.

“There’s something else I need first,” I say. He quirks a brow, and I smile. “I need you to kiss me before we can move on with our happily ever after.”

He leans in closer, lifting my chin with his finger. “You got it, Hart.”

Beau’s lips crush against mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. God, I’ve missed this man.

He pulls away and smiles. “I hope this means we’re good.”

“We’re better than good, Beau.” I wink. “We’re in love.”

EPILOGUE

-Kelsey-



I lean against the pillar, watching Beau work his magic. He commands the room whether he is trying or not. People are drawn to him. I'd say it was because he looks incredible in his suit, but I know it's more than that. Passion. Charisma. Kindness.

It's quite the package.

Beau mingles with guests, his investors, and people I've never met. The smile on his face hasn't fallen all night. And why should it? His dream is now a reality.

"The warehouse looks incredible," Summer says, scooting up next to me. She hands me a glass of champagne and takes a sip from her own.

"You have no idea how far it's come." It's even hard for me to imagine the transformation that's occurred in the last seven

months. Gone are the graffiti, the rubble, and the weeds. In their places, new walls, an enormous jungle gym, and loads of hope.

“I thought he said it would take years to make this happen.” She nods toward Beau.

“He did. But then his investors stayed. And a few more joined. It’s incredible how quickly you can rebuild a reputation when you set your mind to it. And when your intentions are good.” Beau glances over and winks before returning to his conversation. Butterflies flutter in my stomach. As proud as I am of Beau, I’d much rather we were at home, in bed. But Beau deserves this moment, and I can be patient a little longer. I turn to Summer. “How long before you’re heading out?”

Summer looks at her watch. “I should leave now, actually. I’ve got the drive tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you want to go?” I ask. Summer hemmed and hawed over attending her brother’s wedding all month. “You don’t owe anyone anything.”

“I’m not sure, and you’re absolutely right. I don’t owe anyone there a single thing.” She downs the rest of her champagne. “But I think I owe it to me. To prove to myself that I made the best choice by leaving. Prove that I really don’t need them.”

“You don’t.” I smile. “But it’s okay to make sure. And if you need anything while you’re gone, you know how to reach me.”

“Don’t you worry about me. You’ve got a man to congratulate this weekend in more ways than are appropriate to say in public.” She giggles and hugs me. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Safe travels.”

Summer strolls past groups of people toward the front of the building and disappears. Beau moves closer but is stopped by another person and pulled into more conversation. That’s okay. He’ll make it this way eventually.

A waiter walks by, and I place my partially empty champagne glass on his tray. My head is already floating from the residual excitement, and I don’t think I could take another sip. Across the room, Ryan talks with a pixie-haired blonde, never touching her but never out of reach.

A hand glides across my lower back, pulling me against a hard body. Beau kisses my temple. “Are you ready to head out?”

“There are still so many people here. Are you sure you should leave?”

“I’ve made my rounds. Talked with everyone and the important ones twice. The event coordinators will take care of the rest for tonight.” “Monday will bring a whole other chaos with the Grand Opening, but I’m ready to quiet things down for the next few days.”

“Then I’m ready if you are.” I smile up at Beau. He takes my hand and raises his other to Ryan across the room. Ryan

returns the gesture before turning back to the blonde. “Who’s the woman Ryan’s with?”

“That’s Laura Reddings. The girl from college.”

“The one Eric...” I don’t have to finish my sentence before Beau starts nodding. He knows what I was asking. “What’s she doing here?”

“She’s pressed charges against Eric. Ryan’s letting her stay at his place for a while as she talks with her lawyers.”

“I hope it all works out for her and she gets justice.”

“She will,” Beau says with confidence. “She has more evidence against Eric than she realized.” He looks down at me and nods toward the front of the building. “Let’s get going.”

Beau leads me out the double doors to his car. We’re on our way home in a matter of moments.

“It’s a little selfish, but I’ve been wanting to leave for a good hour.”

Beau quirks a brow. “Why’s that?”

“No reason, Lover Boy.” I smirk and trail a finger up his thigh.

“Tease,” Beau responds. “We’ll get there. We have to make a stop first.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”



We pull up in front of the bookshop. The warm orange of the street lights emphasizes the quietness of the street. Not a soul is out this late on a Thursday night.

“Why are we here? Did you forget something earlier?”

“Let’s go inside.”

We get out of the car and round to the front. Beau takes my hand and leads me to the door of the shop, unlocking it. We step inside.

Strands of tiny lights dangle from every spot of the ceiling behind draping sheer fabric. An aisle of scattered rose petals runs from the door to the seating area, lined on either side with flickering faux candles. Every few feet, a frame showcasing a picture of Beau and me rests on a stand.

I look up at him, my eyes wide and questioning. “How?”

“I had a little help.” He smiles. “Walk with me, Hart.”

My skin tingles. Is he really doing what I think he’s doing? We take a few steps toward a picture of us as teenagers. In it, his arm is slung over my shoulder, and we lean against some lockers.

“This was from the first week we met,” he says. “I was completely enamored by you, and you didn’t even know it.”

He leads me to the next picture. We are huddled together with some friends in the stands, huge smiles on all our faces and decked out in school colors. In the image, my head rests on Beau’s shoulder. “Homecoming freshman year. That was the first night I thought you might like me back.”

He nudges me forward to the third picture. We stand under a white and silver balloon arch dressed in a tux and a simple red dress.

“Spring formal?” I ask.

Beau nods. “I was speechless when I picked you up. And I was so sure that after a year of flirting back and forth, I was going to ask you to be my girlfriend that night.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Chickened out.” He laughs. “Like I said, I was speechless because of how gorgeous you were that night. I kicked myself in the ass about that for the next three years.”

“You got me in the end.”

“That’s the hope, Hart.” He takes my hand, and we go to the next frame. Instead of a picture, there’s a black sheet of paper.

“We’ll call this one *The Missing Years*,” Beau says.

I nod and smile. Some things don’t need more explanation.

The next several photos are all from the past eight months. Us at the gala. The day I moved in with him. Our mini vacation in the mountains this past July. Every snapshot reveals such a casual moment in our lives, yet putting them together adds to something far more special.

We reach the end of the aisle, and Beau lets go of my hand. I step forward toward the last stand with the empty frame. I spin back around, knowing he’ll have a reason for this one, too.

“I’ve spent too many years of my life without you, pushing you away, losing touch.” Beau starts, bending down on one knee. He reaches into his pocket, revealing a small velvet box. “And I know I’ve got a lot of making up to do in our lifetime, but I’m ready for it. I’m ready for this life to be ours. Every day. Every moment.” He opens the box. The simple solitaire diamond sparkles in the lights. “You are my heart, Hart. You. I love you, Kelsey.”

“I love you, too,” I blurt out.

Beau laughs. “I know you do. That’s why I hope you’ll say yes to being my wife.”

“Yes! Without a doubt, yes.” My cheeks ache from smiling.

Beau stands and slips the ring on my finger. His lips press against mine as his arms wrap around me. Never have I felt more secure than in his arms.

“What now?” he asks.

“Now we head home, Lover Boy,” I say with a wink. “And truly start our happily ever after.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Something Secret found life thanks to my amazing friend and critique partner, Mia Sparrow, whose feedback, encouragement, and brutal honesty keep me writing. As always, I owe the majority of my writing success to her. I can't quite be sure where I'd be without her, and I'll be forever thankful for her friendship.

Again, I want to thank my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Rachael Robinson. Without her, my covers would be a disaster. Her incredible talents and skills bring my stories to life. She is wonderful in every way.

I must thank my husband, whose support and encouragement are unwavering, even when it interferes with our life; my son for his beautiful distractions and entertainment, whose simple presence makes the days a thousand times better; and my cat, who always seems to know when I need to give her a pet.

Finally, I want to thank my fantastic ARC members, street team, and readers. You make dreams possible.

ALSO BY

Something Series

[Something Sweet](#)

(Available on KU, Kindle, and Paperback)

Something Spicy

(Coming soon)

Love Locked Down

[Yours Truly](#)

(Available on KU, Kindle, and Paperback)

Depths of Hell

[Purgatory](#)

(Currently on Vella)

ABOUT AUTHOR

Jessica Brown is a writer and SAHM based in Upstate New York where she lives with her husband, son, and tabby, Cutey. She started writing in 2017 and hasn't covered even a fraction of the stories floating in her head. She can't help but create the drama you hate to love and HEAs with the heroes you want in your bed. When she isn't writing, you can find her posting on Instagram, playing with her son, and drinking tea. All the tea.

And maybe some coffee, too.