



TALL, DARK,
AND

Dirty

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.M. HARGROVE

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Tall, Dark, and Dirty

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Editing Services: My Brothers Editor

Never Date Your Male Friends. Why hadn't I listened to my own advice?

They say dreams don't come true.

In my case they did.

After I finished my FBI training in Quantico, I landed back in my hometown of Atlanta, working undercover.

It was what I'd dreamed of since I was a kid.

I'd found my one and only true love – a.k.a. work — and was perfectly content.

Until an old friend, my best friend from fifteen years ago, came barging back into my life.

Except now, Landry Baines wasn't a scrawny teenager.

He was a taller, more muscular version of his old self.

Cue, the drool.

And the sleeping ovaries snapping to attention.

That's how I ended up breaking my no-sleeping-with-men-on-the-first-date rule.

What was I thinking?

Clearly, it had been sex.

Now, I was so screwed.

Landry wanted in... and more.

He wanted control and I wasn't giving that up for anyone.

That's how this Tall, Dark, and Dirty man, who was once my best friend, ended up becoming my enemy.

This is the third **stand-alone** novel in the **Baines Family Series**.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mom, who instilled a love for reading romances in me. Unfortunately, she is no longer with us, but I know she would be proud of the books I've written.

One of Mom's favorite music artists was Neil Diamond, hence the name of the main female character.

Young child with dreams

Dream ev'ry dream on your own

When children play

Seems like you end up alone

Papa says he'd love to be with you

If he had the time

So you turn on the only friend you can find

There in your mind

Shilo, when I was young

I used to call you name

When no one else would come

Shilo, you always came

And we'd play

Young girl with fire

Something said she understood

I wanted to fly

She made me feel like I could
Held my hand out, and I let her take me
Blind as a child
All I saw was the way that she made me smile
She made me smile
Shilo, when I was young
I used to call you name
When no one else would come
Shilo, you always came
And you'd stay
Had a dream, and it filled me with wonder
She had other plans
“Got to go, and I know that you'll understand”
I understand
Shilo, when I was young
I used to call you name
When no one else would come
Shilo, you always came
Come today
Songwriters: Neil Diamond
Shilo lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

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One



LANDRY — FIFTEEN YEARS EARLIER

“SHILOH! SHILOH ARE YOU OUT HERE?” MY VOICE PIERCED the silence that greeted me. Steel neighed as I led him around the field, searching for my best friend. Trotting to the fence that marked the edge of our property, I scanned the landscape in hopes of spotting her. Then I heard leaves rustle and a tinkling laugh coming from straight ahead.

“Can you see me?” she hollered.

I scanned the trees before me and didn’t see a thing. Until she clambered down a branch, hopped to the next, and lowered herself to the ground.

“Hey, you should be careful up there! I had no idea where you were.”

She ran to the fence, was over it in seconds, and hugged my horse’s head. “You didn’t see me! I spied you long before you even knew I was there. I’m practicing my skills for when I go undercover.”

“Undercover? What are you talking about?”

She crossed her arms and glared. “Landry Baines, I am going to be the best undercover agent in the whole wide world. I’m going to save people one day. Just you wait and see.”

She said it with such conviction I believed her. But an undercover agent? “Girls can’t do that. You could get killed or something.”

“Maybe, but it’s what I’m going to do. It’s my vision. And girls can do anything boys can.”

“Your vision?”

“Yeah, don’t you have one?”

I’d never thought about a vision. “No. Am I supposed to?”

“Duh. Of course, you are. You can’t have a wonderful life filled with everything in the world if you don’t have a vision.”

I felt insignificant all of a sudden. No one ever told me I needed a vision. “My family is rich, so I don’t need one.”

She groaned. “That doesn’t matter. Just because you’re rich doesn’t mean anything. A vision is a roadmap to your future.”

Wow. It sounded like something I needed. “Okay then, I’ll work on it.”

As she liked to do when she tired of a topic, she changed it, saying, “Hey, when are you ever going to let me ride Steel?”

“Never.” The only girl that would ever ride Steel was my sister because she was an expert on the back of a horse.

“Why won’t you let me?” Her lower lip popped out so far I almost laughed. Taking her seriously when she did that was close to impossible. I bit my lip until the urge passed.

“You know why. It’s because he’s too spirited.” I lowered my hand to help her mount up behind me. “Come on, let’s go for a ride together.” We did this often, but she’d been pestering me to let her ride alone. I refused because I knew Steel and he was a headstrong stallion. I’d been riding my entire life and knew horses like the back of my hand, and this one wasn’t a good fit for her. Shiloh mounted Steel and sat behind me. Then I took off at a trot.

“He’s not too spirited for me. I’m strong.”

I couldn’t disagree because she almost beat me every time we arm wrestled. Still, if anything happened to her, I’d feel guilty forever. “Yeah, but not strong enough. You’re a girl.”

“Landry Baines, that doesn’t matter. Girls can do anything they want!”

“Oh yeah? Then why aren’t they playing professional football?”

Her response was, “Don’t be such a party pooper. That’s plain dumb.”

I let it drop because I didn’t want to argue. Shiloh and I became friends a few years ago when one day, my mother’s screeching drove me out of the house. I did my usual... bolted for the stables, had Steel saddled, and took off. I rode straight to the edge of our property, ridding my head of her nasty rage. She was always mad at one of us kids. I could barely remember a day when she didn’t scream at us. Just once, one time, I’d like for her to open her arms and hug me. I doubted that would ever happen.

When I got to the field, I sat for a while, thinking about how screwed up my family was. I had a father who was never home and an angry mother who took it out on all of us. Well, except for my sister Ravina. Mom was never mean to her except if it had to do with riding and competing. I wished she would treat me like that.

My mother was either angry, or she would ignore us boys completely. Our nannies raised us, which was fine by me because I could avoid Mom’s unpredictable emotions. But I hated it when she yelled, which was all the time. That’s when I’d take off.

I spent a ton of time on my horse, but that one day, as I sat, I heard a voice ask, “Hey, whatcha doin’ over there?”

I looked around and there she sat, high up in a tree. I quickly learned that was Shiloh’s favorite thing to do. I’d jokingly nicknamed her Koala... quiet and nicely hidden in the trees. Her family owned the property next to ours and she was as miserable as me. Her dad left when she was only six and her mom remarried a couple of years ago. She had been the only child, but after the marriage, she ended up with two stepbrothers. They teased her a lot, so she’d run out here to get away from them. Seemingly, we were two peas in a pod. It

was nice having someone around who understood my miserable home life. Unhappy was what we both were until we found each other. We were both ten at the time and our friendship had grown in the past three years.

“My older stepbrother leaves for college soon.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep, and I can’t wait. Maybe the other one will treat me better when he is gone.”

Her older stepbrother was the instigator of all her problems, I’d learned. She hated him, or so she said. He pulled her hair, called her Freckles, told her she had sticks for legs and made fun of her clothes. Most of that was true, but Shiloh wasn’t one to be teased. Her deep red hair was perfect, and I liked how her cheeks and nose were peppered with freckles. She was as skinny as a stick, but that was because she ran everywhere, only stopping to climb trees or talk to me. Shiloh had a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and I was sure she pulled all kinds of shenanigans at home.

I wasn’t comfortable doing anything like that. If I ever got caught, my mom would lock me in my room for days. She did that to my older brothers. Made them stay in there for a week. That would be the worst, not to be able to ride Steel. No, I’d rather not take my chances. “You think?”

“Ummhmm. He’s the one who bothers me most, so when he’s gone, it should be easier.”

“Does your mom ever say anything?”

“No, because my stepdad does when he sees it. But Jared teases me when no one is around.”

Shiloh claimed her stepfather was super nice to her and she talked about her mom all the time. I envied that about her. My dad always took my mom’s side, no matter what. There was so much he didn’t see that it made me mad. I wanted a home and family like Shiloh’s. I wouldn’t care if my older brothers teased me every day as long as my mom hugged me and acted as though she cared about me.

“I’m sure things will be better.” I didn’t want her to be upset.

“No, they won’t.” Her voice had taken a serious downturn.

“Wait. You just said it would.”

“About Jared, yeah, but we’re moving. My mom and stepdad decided they wanted to be closer to town, so they put the house up for sale.”

“Koala, you can’t move! How will we talk?”

One of her shoulders lifted. “I know. I don’t wanna move. We’ll probably end up someplace that doesn’t have one single tree for me to climb. How will I practice my undercover skills?”

“Can you ask them not to go?” I didn’t want to imagine how awful it would be without Shiloh around. She understood me like no one else did.

“Duh. I’ve been asking every day until my mom tells me to hush. I even tried asking Bud, but no go.” Bud was her stepdad. “My other stepbrother doesn’t want to go either. He said he doesn’t want to go to a different school, but they won’t listen. Our opinions mean nothing to them. And it’s not like they got different jobs or something. Everything is the same.”

My heart slammed into my gut because this was the worst news ever. When we’d first hung out together, we’d made a pact never to abandon one another. If Shiloh left, our pact would be destroyed and there was nothing either one of us could do.

It was exactly one month later when I came out here and found her sitting on the fence, bawling her eyes out.

“What happened?” I asked, jumping off Steel and running to her.

She sniffed several times before answering. “The house sold yesterday. We’re moving in a month. Mom and Bud found another place already and it may as well be on the moon. That’s how far it is from here.”

“Where is it?”

“In Dunwood Hills. I’ll be starting school there next week. Mom’s not even letting me wait until after we move. She said it’s better if I just go now and get it over with.”

“Your brother too?”

“Yeah.”

“Gosh, I don’t know what to say.” I wanted to try and be happy for her sake, but that little bit of perk inside of me was nowhere to be found.

“Nothing to say. We have another month or so until I go.”

“Promise me something. Text me.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know I don’t have a cell phone yet.”

“When you get one, then.”

“You’ll have to give me your number.”

“I will. The next time we’re out here.”

I had pleaded with my mom to send me to the public school so I could go with Shiloh, but she’d refused. She’d told me never to ask again, or she’d ship me off to boarding school like she had my brothers. My sister went to boarding school because she wanted to. I was the only one at home and it seemed Mom was happier like that. Now it wouldn’t matter because Shiloh wouldn’t be there anyway.

Less than a month later, we met out here and she told me it was goodbye. I had to choke back my tears so I wouldn’t look like some sissy pants. My older brothers made fun of me and called me that when I cried so I’d learned early on not to do it.

“I’m going to miss you, Landry Baines. You’re the best friend anyone could have.”

“I’m going to miss you too, Koala. It won’t be the same without you. The trees are going to miss you.” I slipped her a note with my phone number on it. “Text me when you get your phone.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” We hugged each other and I saw her brush away tears. Then she hopped the fence and disappeared among the trees.

I waited and waited for her to text, but she never did. A year passed, and then another, until I all but forgot about her. Or so I told myself. There was something about Shiloh that owned a slice of my heart. She was someone I’d never forget.

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Two



LANDRY

INSECURITY PRICKED MY SKIN AS I STOOD OUTSIDE OF THE Dark Cave. The sensation was foreign to me as trying something different usually didn't affect me. But this place was far more than different. How did I end up here? Why had I allowed Brady to talk me into this?

“Landry, you have to come with me,” he'd said. “They only allow members to bring a guest twice a year. I promise you'll love it.”

I succumbed to his relentless persuading, which was how I found myself standing outside of this sex club. Christ, I loved sex, lots of it, sometimes too much. But fucking someone in an open environment wasn't something that ever piqued my interest. I had my own ways of getting what I needed in that department and was very successful.

His words came back to me then. “It's a great place to blow off steam and you don't have to worry about the walk of shame.”

Bringing strange women home was not a part of my agenda, so that walk of shame wasn't my concern. I'd never brought women home, making it much easier to leave when we were finished. If we went to her place or a hotel, that usually happened after she fell asleep. If we fucked in the car, it happened when I drove her back to hers. I enjoyed my one and runs, as they served my purpose without any

entanglements. But Brady had been right about something. I'd been working like a demon lately, with the business consuming me, so it would be nice for a break. And that was how I found myself out here, feeling stupid in the black leather pants Brady told me to buy, a black T-shirt, and one of those silly masks that covered your eyes.

“Hey Landry, you're looking good. You ready for an adventure?”

I spun about because that wasn't Brady's voice. “What the hell are you doing here?” Instead of Brady, I was staring at the other person who made up the Three Musketeers, as we called ourselves.

Benson Douglas stood there, encased in black as I was. His dorky grin made me wonder if I looked as stupid as I felt. “I feel like an idiot wearing this getup.” My hands aimed at my pants and mask.

“That'll change once you get inside and see everyone else. Brady couldn't make it, so he asked me to meet you. I was planning on being here anyway. Let's go.”

“What happened with Brady, and why didn't he call?”

Benson offered up a slight shrug. “All I know is something at work came up and he knew I was coming. You know how he always has to cancel out. The cons of being a surgeon. Guess he didn't want you to miss out.”

“Well damn. I didn't think he was on call tonight.” Brady was a physician, and his schedule was unpredictable.

“Not sure what is keeping him away. He didn't say.”

We entered The Dark Cave and two huge dudes stood guard right inside the entrance. One asked to see Benson's membership card and they scanned it. He told them I was his guest, so we went to the next level of security. There was a window with another dude behind it. Benson gave his name, and the guy typed it into his computer. “This is your guest?” he asked. Benson nodded and then I was asked for an ID and the five-hundred-dollar cash entry fee. This had better be worth it. I handed the man my ID and five one-hundred-dollar

bills. “This card will work all night. After that, you’ll have to wait for an invitation to become a member.” He asked for my email and then handed me the temporary card. Once he cleared me, we went to the third layer of security, which was an elevator that Benson’s membership card activated, and then required a passcode. He punched in a series of numbers.

“Is this Fort Knox or something?”

“Right? They don’t want anyone here who will cause trouble.”

At least it offered a higher level of comfort. If I ran into anyone I knew in here, it wouldn’t be that bad.

The elevator door whooshed open to an area that absolutely resembled a cave. Carved rock walls were everywhere, and the floors were made of stone. There were several options for where to go, but I continued to follow Benson. He said he’d give me a tour so I could decide on my own what intrigued me the most. The first room we entered was large, with all kinds of kink on display. The walls were equipped with chains and cuffs, several X-shaped crosses, and whips, canes, and floggers hung everywhere. I noticed one couple going at it. The woman was chained, topless, and he was flogging her breasts. I wasn’t sure that was my jam, but she acted as though she enjoyed it. To each his own.

There were padded benches and weird-shaped chairs everywhere. Several couples were engaged on the benches. One man was whipping the woman as she begged for more. Another was occupied by a couple, only it was the man who was getting a whipping. His dominatrix was quite skilled with that thing as I spied the crisscross marks all over his back and ass. Was that really pleasurable?

“Come on, let’s grab a drink.”

I followed Benson to the bar, which was jammed with people dressed like us. Most of the men either wore leather pants or black jeans. The women were nearly naked, but most were clad in some sort of red or black leather. I noticed a topless woman strapped into a chastity belt. Another wore a leather thong, and her eyebrows, nose, ears, and lips were

dotted with piercings. Her nipples were also pierced and attached by a chain to her thong. These people were sure into pain, it seemed.

Benson must've sensed my reaction because he said, "Landry, you'll see all kinds in here, from hard core to people like us."

I wondered what he meant by that. He had no idea what kinds of sex I preferred, and I knew nothing about his preferences either. We'd discussed the frequency of it, but that was it. Maybe he was one of those guys who whipped their girlfriends. Then he said, "Wait until you get a look at the cages."

"Cages?"

He laughed and said, "Yeah." He gestured with a flick of his head and my eyes went above the bar. A huge cage was suspended there. Inside were two couples fucking. One woman hung from chains as her guy banged her and the other was on her knees, taking it doggy style. Then I noticed there was another guy in there. He lay under one of the women, his mouth performing oral sex. This was insane. The more I saw, the less interest I had. My tastes ran to one on one, and sharing wasn't part of it.

We ordered drinks and I took a long guzzle of mine. As I drank, I saw a woman who looked familiar. Shit. I hoped it wasn't someone from work. That's all I needed. The gossipmongers at the office would love to take a bite out of this. The mask didn't completely hide my identity, as hers didn't either. Each time I took a drink, I eyed her surreptitiously. There was certainly a vague familiarity about her.

Then her eyes widened, and she stalked toward us in her black stilettos. She was hot. Gorgeous. Stunning. Long, thick auburn hair rippled down her back in waves. Her amber eyes were such an unusual shade and that's when it nailed me. As she was about to reach us, she turned a scathing glance on a man at the bar.

Whatever was going on between these two, I didn't want to interfere, yet I had to speak to her. Their verbal exchange finally ended and that's when I approached her. "Excuse me, but are you Shiloh?"

She flinched when I said her name. "Sorry, you must be confused. My name is Dusty." Then she hit me with a megawatt smile. "But since you asked, who are you?"

Dusty was a dead ringer for how I thought Shiloh would look after fifteen years. No one else could possibly have eyes or hair like hers.

"I'm Landry. Landry Baines."

Her eyes widened slightly as she stared. "Landry Baines, pleased to meet you."

"Then you are Shiloh?" By then, Benson had sidled next to me.

She leaned in and spoke to us in a terse voice. "No, as I said, my name is Dusty and I'm working tonight."

I nearly fell on my ass. "You work here?" I was so shocked I all but shouted.

She crossed her arms as anger flashed in her spectacular eyes. "And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Fuck, I'm sorry." I was sincere. It was her business where she wanted to work.

Then those fiery orbs turned on Benson and asked, "And you are?"

His tongue seemed to be twisted as he stuttered, "Um, I'm his friend Benson."

Dusty leaned in and said, "You two look out of place in here. Maybe you should leave." She flicked her fingers in the direction of the exit.

"Leave? Why?" Benson asked.

She rolled her eyes. "As I said, in case you didn't hear, you stick out like two sore thumbs. Cliché, I know, but clearly, this

place isn't your vibe. Talk about awkward looking." Her gaze narrowed at the two of us.

She was dead serious. Benson's lips pressed together, but then he nodded.

There was no way I was letting her go without getting her number. "Fine, we'll leave, but can I have your number first?"

Her plump lips pursed for a second. "Are you crazy? Why would I give you my number? So you can stalk me? The answer is hell to the fucking no. Now leave me alone before I call in the management and complain you're harassing me."

She was all business and didn't have the slightest interest in me. We left the room and headed for the entrance. But as we neared the exit, hesitancy had my step faltering. Why were we leaving? I wasn't going to let her decide what I did. Besides, Benson was a member and should complain about her. She was rude and as an employee, I would think she'd know the customers ruled.

"Benson, stop. We can't just leave because she told us to."

"I don't know. She was pretty adamant about us not hanging out in there."

"So, you're going to let some rude employee dictate to you?"

"Look, I don't want any trouble with this place. You saw all the bouncers. The last thing I need is to get thrown out and have my membership revoked."

"Why would your membership be revoked? Her rude and abrasive comments were uncalled for. We should complain."

Benson shook his head. "If we complain, she would only say we were harassing her or giving her trouble. That's not accepted here."

He was adamant in his view, so I didn't push it. When we got a block away, he asked, "Where did you park?"

"I Ubered here. My car's at work."

"I'll drive you."

I came to a halt because something nagged at my conscience. “No, that’s okay. I’m going back in.”

“You can’t, man. You heard what she said.”

“I did, but like I said, she’s not going to tell me what to do. We did nothing wrong in there.”

“Fine with me, but if you go back in, don’t get your hopes up about becoming a member.”

“Becoming a member here isn’t what I’m interested in.” This club wasn’t my thing, but she was, and I wanted to find out more about her.

Benson shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He walked away and I turned and went back toward the entrance of the club.

The two giants checked me out. “I just left but need to get back inside. I’m a guest of Benson Douglas.” I showed them the temporary card I’d been given.

One of them nodded, so I entered. At the desk, I showed the card, and they rechecked me in. Then someone appeared to escort me in since I didn’t have the security code. When I walked back inside, I immediately scanned the room for Dusty. It took me a few minutes to locate her, but when I did, I went directly to her.

“Why are you still here? I thought I told you to scram.” Annoyance etched her features.

“I thought maybe...”

Her jaws clamped together. “Let’s get something straight. There is no maybe. Now leave me alone before I have you tossed out. Get away from me. I mean it.”

Some large dude came up to us and asked, “Is he causing you trouble?”

She looked me square in the face and answered, “No, but if he does, I’ll call out.”

The giant dude stared me down for a hard minute, then nodded and sauntered off.

Her reaction let me know my presence repulsed her. She wasn't interested in me at all, even though there was that familiarity about her. I froze, trying to figure out what to do.

Her voice hit me hard again. She gritted her teeth and said, "I swear to God, I'll make a scene in here if you don't leave me alone."

I almost staggered backward from her scathing tone. Why did she dislike me so?

"Let me be clear. You. Are. In. My. Way. Now get out before I do something we both regret."

I stared at her a moment, shrugged, and walked away. If she didn't want to get to know me, I certainly wouldn't force her. Though she resembled Shiloh, this woman was nowhere close to being as generous and kind. I clearly had erred. This time when I walked out the door, it was for good.

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Three



SHILOH

OF ALL PEOPLE, WHY HAD LANDRY BAINES SHOWN UP? His charming smile had completely disarmed me. And the Landry I remembered hadn't been close to being as hot as he was now. He'd grown a substantial amount, both in height and muscle mass. The black T-shirt he wore showcased his pecs and biceps, which were nothing to sneeze at. And his mouth... a girl could get lost just fantasizing about what it was capable of doing. It was difficult being such a bitch to him, but I had to get him out of there. I'd try to call him after this whole thing was over. I figured he worked at the family business now, so I'd leave him a message there.

With a firm self-scolding, I pulled my head out of my vagina and focused on the present situation. We expected a local human trafficker in here tonight and my job was to apprehend him. If I were successful, we would cut off a huge supply line.

A voice buzzed in the hidden earpiece I wore. "Good thing you got rid of that pesky dude. One hundred and eighty degrees. Behind you." I slowly spun so I wouldn't attract attention. And... bingo.

"Eyes on," I whispered. The mic that was concealed in my bra would send that message on.

Time to put on my show. I sashayed my way toward him, but not directly, so I wouldn't appear too obvious. The room

had filled up in the last few minutes. I was in the first one when you entered the club. My target was eyeing the women who were chained. Sparking his interest in me may be difficult. If I allowed him to chain me up, I wouldn't be able to leave with him unless he took me.

“Apparently, he likes his women in chains. That’s what he’s focusing on. May need help.”

“Copy that.”

Slowly, I sidled up to him and eyed the women with interest. He glanced my way briefly, but then I received his full attention.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“You first.”

“Sin.”

“Indeed?”

A short chuckle left him. “Short for Sinclair.”

“Dusty.”

“You don’t need dusting off, but a good spanking might curb your smart mouth.”

“That a fact?”

“Indeed.”

I chuckled back at his copied response.

“How do you feel about the chains?”

Shrugging, I said, “They’re fine if my partner is skilled.”

“Skilled? In what way?”

“Flogger and whips.”

A smile lit up his face. He wasn’t handsome at all. He reminded me of a homely stuffed animal as he appeared completely harmless. “I am extremely skilled with both.”

“How skilled?”

“Would you care to find out?”

“I might if we do it someplace else. I’m not into public displays.”

“Very well. We can take a private room here... or... I have quite an extraordinary playroom in my home.”

“How extraordinary?”

“I don’t divulge my secrets to anyone. You have to see it.”

“How do I know you’re trustworthy?”

Another laugh, but this time it sounded different. Not as friendly. “Do I look like someone who would harm you? Look around. I’m the biggest nerd in this room.”

He did look like a nerd. Was that how he got women to trust him?

I dipped my head. “You lead the way, but I’ll follow you home.”

“Um, no. I drive you there and back. That’s nonnegotiable.”

Alarm bells clanged in my head. I hoped the tail I had wouldn’t lose us.

“Fine. But I leave when I want. Clear?”

“As crystal.”

I followed him out to a nondescript car. It left me to believe he was Joe Average, which he was not. This guy was the trafficking kingpin of the Southeast. I was damn near positive we were not going to his house but to a holding station.

When we got to the car, I discreetly removed the hidden tracking device from my skirt, and as he opened the door, I dropped my phone. It slid under the car, so I bent to retrieve it and when I did, I attached the tracker underneath. Then I sat inside, thankful he hadn’t noticed. He closed the door behind me and then got in.

“How far away is it?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes.”

My mic had better still be transmitting.

True to his word, he pulled up in front of a large warehouse.

“Is this your house?” This was totally sketchy but made sense. A prick of apprehension tickled my spine.

“Not exactly. You might say it’s my playhouse.”

I got out and looked around. There were several shipping containers in the parking lot, along with a tractor trailer.

“Do you own all this?”

“Yeah. Follow me.”

“Is this a business?”

He stopped and stared at me. “What’s up with all the questions? Do you want to play or not?”

I only nodded in response.

We walked around to the side where he unlocked a door by entering a security code. The door opened and we faced another door. This one used fingerprint technology.

“Wow, are you storing gold for Fort Knox in here?”

He muttered an answer, which I could barely make out. It sounded like, “Something like that.” I imagined his prey was worth a fortune in gold.

We finally entered the warehouse, and it was empty except for a few tables and chairs scattered around. He led me across the large space to a door that, of course, was locked. After he opened it, he waved me through.

“Welcome to my special room.” He flipped the light switch and the room lit up. Not bright lights, but dim ones, which made it difficult to make anything out. I noticed some leather-covered benches, but the walls were too far off.

“It’s really dark in here.”

“Your eyes will grow accustomed. Take off your clothes.”

“Uh, no drink to get to know each other first?”

He huffed but agreed. “Hang on, I’ll be back.”

I dug my fingers into my leather bra and plucked out a small plastic packet that was filled with a powdered sedative. It was just enough to knock him out for several hours so we could gather evidence. I’d opened the packet so all I had to do was dump the contents into his full glass.

He uncorked a bottle of red wine and poured two glasses.

“Can we sit down someplace?”

There was a sofa against the wall. My eyes were now used to the darkened room. We sat and he handed me the wine.

I grinned and switched glasses with him. “A girl can never be too safe.”

He blew out a breath of annoyance and said, “You watched me open the damn bottle.” He turned back around to pick it up for emphasis and that’s when I spiked his glass.

“True, but like I said, a girl can’t be too safe.” Then I raised my glass and said, “Here’s to hoping you have magic hands and fingers.”

That brought a hearty laugh out of him and was a great distraction. The powder disappeared into the red wine, and he tipped the glass. I saw he took a good swallow, so I did too. It was important to keep up the pretense.

“Tell me about yourself. Your business.”

His hand swatted the air. “It’s boring. You don’t really want to know.”

“I do!”

“I’m into imports and exports.”

At least he told the truth in a roundabout way.

“Cool! What types of products?”

“Everything from gadgets to electronic parts. What about you?”

“I’m a hairstylist.”

“I should’ve guessed with those beautiful waves of yours.”

I patted my hair and offered up a saucy smile. “Thanks. Do you like animals?”

“That’s an odd question.”

“Not really. I’ve found in my experience that animal lovers are better people all around.”

“I have three cats. Does that count?”

“Oh, yes! I love cats. I have five of them. Huey, Louie, Daffy, Daisy, and Donald.”

“Are you a cartoon fan?” He took another swallow. He was getting impatient. I took one too, but he emptied his glass before I was halfway finished.

I wasn’t, but those were the first names that popped into my head. “Sure am.”

“You satisfied?”

“With what?”

“Our getting to know each other. I’ve heard enough and my fingers are itching to put some beautiful marks on your pale flesh. Take off your clothes.”

“I can’t finish my wine first?”

“Yeah, but hurry. In the meantime, strip.”

He finally yawned. I stood and unsnapped my skirt, slowly sliding it down. I had to make sure my gadgets stayed concealed when I did.

Then he surprised me by getting to his feet. “I don’t feel so well.” He rubbed his eyes and stumbled backward, landing on the couch again. With an accusatory, glazed stare, he asked, “What the fuck did you do to me?”

Bending over him, I patted his hand. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.” I waited until he was out cold and then pulled my skirt back on. My search began for cameras, of which there were four—one in each corner. I used one of the chains from the wall to destroy each of them. Then I was out of the room.

“All clear. Entrance is on the side toward the back.”

I went to the door, propping a chair up against it to keep it open. I did the same for the next as four more agents filed inside.

“Nice work, McClain,” my boss said, handing me my weapon.

“Thanks. Let’s get to it.”

We each took a quadrant of the room and searched. “Hey, is this room smaller than the building? There might be a concealed door somewhere,” I called out.

The back wall could be a fake, so I ran my fingers along every square inch, searching for a hidden door. There were shelves in the corner and when I lifted one of the boards off it, I heard a click. I tried to move the shelves, but it was attached to the wall. Running my hand under the board again, I discovered there was a small switch. The board was cumbersome, so I called for help. “Found something! I need a hand.” Another agent came over and helped to lift the board. I pushed the release switch and the wall popped open.

I walked through the door, my gun raised. I felt around the entryway for a light switch and finally landed on one. I had made a lot of discoveries since I’d been doing this job, but this one sent me raging with fury. Tied with duct-taped mouths against the back wall were what appeared to be young girls. My guess was they were between the ages of six and eight. I suppressed the urge to vomit.

“In here,” I shouted.

The other agent with me said, “This beats all. These victims haven’t even hit puberty yet.”

Two other men ran inside, and both cursed when they saw what was locked in there. “Of all the... these are kids,” one of them spat. “What the hell is wrong with people?”

“They’re sickos, that’s what,” I said. “They need to be hung up by their balls.” I slowly approached the children and squatted down. “You’re safe now.” I reached for the one at the end and gently removed the tape from her mouth. “We’re going to get you all out of here.”

My boss was on the phone, getting more assistance. We'd need ambulances to have them medically examined. Who knew what had been done to them already?

Jerry, my boss, came in. "More teams are arriving. Let's find the keys to these locks."

"Don't bother," another agent said, walking in with bolt cutters. He went to work, freeing all the children. There were twenty-two total, three of them young boys.

Ten minutes later, the place was swarming with law enforcement and EMTs.

"Is the perp awake yet?" Jerry asked me.

"No idea. I should check."

"Nah, let me do it." I knew what that meant. My nerdy, sinful friend was going to get the blunt end of Jerry's shoes.

"Hey, anyone have the time?" I asked.

"It's after midnight," a response came back.

I left my phone in the room with Sin, so I walked back there. He was still out, but Jerry hadn't cared. The guy was on the floor and would be more than a bit bruised.

I grabbed my phone and called my brother. I'd promised to keep him informed. He despised the type of work I did and always wanted to know where I was when I was undercover.

"Where the fuck are you?" he yelled.

"Ouch, calm down. My ear!"

"It's past midnight."

"Sorry, but we took down our suspect and time got away from me. I'm fine."

In a softer, gentler tone, he asked, "You sure?"

"Yup. I'm here surrounded by a ton of agents. Go to sleep and I'll call you when I wake up. It'll be a late night for me."

"Okay. Talk tomorrow."

I loved my brother, I really did. But sometimes he still treated me as though I were still a teenager.

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Four



LANDRY

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, NEWS BROKE OF THE ARREST OF Wilson Sinclair, a suspected human trafficker. FBI agents had engaged him at a local sex club. Pictures were posted everywhere of his mug shot, along with photos of the children rescued. Of course, the faces of the kids had been blurred out. It was a good thing Benson and I left that place. But when I thought about it, I wondered if Dusty had been safe. With her snappy attitude, she certainly seemed capable of taking care of herself. The man who'd been arrested supposedly controlled much of the trafficking in the Southeast.

Switching gears, I called Benson instead. He answered on the first ring. "Hey, I want to apologize for being so abrupt last night about staying," I began.

"No worries. What happened after I left?"

A rueful chuckle came out. "Dusty kicked me out when I went back in. Gave me proper hell for being there. She was mighty pissed."

"Yeah?"

"You should've heard her. Anyway, I left after that. But did you see the news this morning?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"Apparently, a major sex trafficker was arrested. The FBI tracked him to The Dark Cave, of all places."

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what happened last night when you went back inside?”

“Like I said, she kicked my ass to the curb and told me to leave.”

“No, not that. Did you see anything that indicated the FBI was there?”

“Not a thing. But I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“True. Glad nothing happened while you were there.” His laugh came through loud and clear. “I told you not to go back inside, but no. You had to be a knight in shining armor.”

“My shining armor must’ve rusted on me. Maybe I need to polish my game up again.”

That brought another roar of laughter out of him.

“Serves you right, you idiot. What are you up to today?” he asked.

“Not much. I’m going into the office for a couple of hours, but other than that, just a long workout. My niece is coming out tomorrow to ride, along with my sister’s stepdaughter.”

“Fun.” His single-word comment was said laced with heavy sarcasm.

“Believe it or not, it is. Those girls are hilarious.”

“Better you than me. Wanna grab dinner one night this week?”

“Sounds good. I’ll call you Monday and let you know a good day.”

“It’s a plan. I’ll talk to you then.”

A serious workout was in order, so I headed to the gym. Our home was rather large. It had been built by my father before I was even born. It sat on over a thousand acres and to anyone else, it would be called magnificent. Since I’d grown up here, I was used to it. Only me and my brother, Stanton,

along with his family, resided here. My brother, Tristian, was married and lived not too far from here. My sister Ravina had recently married and she and her husband built a house near Tristian and his wife, English.

The Baines Corporation, a billion-dollar entity, was the firm my father and his brother started. What began as a small import-export business grew exponentially, but my uncle was into shady business dealings, so my father split the business and carried on. He kept up the import-export side but excelled at buying unsuccessful companies and turning them into profitable ones. That's what we mostly did today, along with investing in other side businesses.

Stanton and I had offices at home to make working more convenient, but there were certain things I liked to get done in the main office. Getting a solid workout in this morning was top of my list. We had a home gym, complete with everything a heart could desire. I'd been into working out for years, and whenever a new gadget or piece of exercise equipment came out that seemed ideal, I was usually suckered into buying it.

With my warm-up on the treadmill finished, I went to the free weights to start weight lifting. That was when my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number but answered it anyway.

"Landry Baines."

"Landry, hey, it's Shiloh. Remember me?"

For a second, I was speechless. "Shiloh McClain, my old friend and neighbor?"

"The only one. Glad you remembered me. I need to talk to you about something and I hope you don't mind me calling. I called the landline and whoever I spoke to gave me your cell phone number."

"No, it's fine. Great, in fact. I can't believe you're calling after all these years."

"I'm calling for a couple of reasons, but one, remember Dusty from last night?" Then the bells clanged. It *was* her, after all. "I'm also her. You were right when you saw me, but I couldn't say anything last night because I was working

undercover. I'm an FBI agent, and we were on an op at the sex club, so I had to get you away from me."

"So, what you're saying is you were the rude woman from The Dark Cave."

"Correct. I didn't want to act like that because I had so many questions for you, but I needed you away from me and in a safer place in case something went bad. We were working on breaking up a sex trafficking ring."

In one respect, that made me feel slightly better, but having her there in that role ramped my anxiety up. "You were in danger?" I had to know.

"Not at all. An entire team was in there if anything went wrong."

"But you just said something could've gone wrong."

I heard her inhale. "Landry, it's my job and I wasn't in danger. What I was referring to was you could've compromised our op."

Not that I was an expert on this, but the way I saw it, she wasn't safe. Any number of things could've gone wrong, and I told her so. "Don't tell me you were used as bait. You could've been drugged, kidnapped or worse."

She laughed at me, reminding me of our days when we were adolescents. "Other than dying, there's not much worse than that, but I was fine. I can take care of myself."

"You might think you can, but I don't buy it."

"Okay, I didn't call for your ideas on my competence. I called because I wanted to catch up."

Not wanting to ruin our conversation, I said, "One question though. Was it the news story I heard this morning about the sex trafficker?"

"That's the one. We got him."

"Congrats on a job well done last night then."

"Thanks. I'm super psyched. He was a major player here, so maybe it will stem some of the trafficking. Unfortunately,

someone else will probably step in and take over his operation.”

“That fast?”

“No, because we took control of his warehouse, but the business will be moved somewhere else. It’s how those scumbags operate. The human slave trade is so lucrative, those people will do anything to keep it running.”

“Admittedly, I’m not well informed about it.”

“Most people aren’t, but I can tell you it’s awful. They steal young children, or sometimes the parents sell their own kids. Can you imagine?”

I thought of Easton and Juliette and shuddered. “No. The thought alone is abhorrent.”

“You can’t get close to imagining what’s done to them. I want to catch every one of those traffickers and lock them away for life.”

“But what happens to the sickos who purchase them?”

“That’s another story altogether. It’s hard to track them once they’re sold. They’re often shipped to a foreign country or put to work in brothels that cater to those types of men. Doing an undercover op as a potential slave is nearly impossible because they drug the victims and get them addicted to heroin or other opiates. We usually go in as potential buyers when they have auctions.”

“That’s disgusting. Not posing as buyers, but what the buyers do.”

“It is. I’ve never done that because there are only a few women who participate in those. Disclosing my identity would be too risky.”

I released a pent-up sigh. “Shiloh, that’s good news on my end. I would hate for you to be put into that situation.”

“It won’t ever happen. My true area of expertise is finding out who the traffickers are.”

“How?”

She laughed. “We have our ways, which I’m unable to discuss.”

“Then why don’t we talk about something else, like why you never texted me after you moved?”

“Easy. It was a while before my mom allowed me to get a cell phone, and by then, I’d lost your number.”

“Well, that explains it. Back then, I just thought you decided you didn’t like me anymore.” Silence nailed me. Was that the case?

Her voice took on a softer tone. “Um, wrong. I never stopped thinking about you, to be honest.”

Wow, that came as a surprise but lifted my spirits too. “Shiloh, I’d love to take you to dinner sometime. Would you, by any chance, be interested in that?”

“Sure. I’d love to sit down and catch up with you.”

“Then how about tomorrow?” Sundays were a good day for me.

“Sounds great.”

“Shoot me your address and I’ll pick you up around seven. Is that okay?”

A couple of minutes after we ended the call, her address came through in a text. Then I created a contact for her.

When Sunday rolled around, I couldn’t decide where to take her. I should’ve asked what kind of food she preferred. Finally, I made a reservation at a restaurant that served a variety of everything.

At seven on the nose, I arrived at her home. She lived in a townhouse about twenty minutes away from me. It was a great area that had a security gate, which pleased me.

I rang the buzzer at the gate, and she let me in. A case of nerves hit me as I walked to her porch. I hadn’t had a bona fide date in so long that I couldn’t remember the last one.

She opened the door and was a vision. Tight jeans were painted onto her long legs and my tongue forgot how to form

words. I stuttered out a hello and eyed her sexy ass as we walked to the car. It wasn't until I opened the car door that I took in the whole package. Shiloh was stunning. She had gone from a lanky, stick-legged adolescent to one gorgeous woman. I was hooked and fucked at the same time.

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Five



SHILOH

LANDRY STOOD ON MY PORCH, AND I GAPPED. WHEN WE'D been in the club, I saw him, yet the mask covered his facial features. I recognized his body from the club, sure, but his face was perfection. He'd worn braces back in the day, but now his teeth were something you'd see on a toothpaste commercial. That megawatt smile had me crumbling. His eyes were as bright blue as I remembered, but back then, I didn't care so much about that. Things sure changed. Long dark lashes fanned across his cheeks when he blinked, and I envied him. Had he been a woman, he'd never have to use mascara. It just wasn't fair!

His nose was between cute and handsome. Not too big or too small, and it didn't have any ugly bumps or humps on it. I'd seen many a nose that had been broken and the result wasn't so great. I wanted to reach out and pinch the end of it. Of course, I didn't. He would've thought I was cuckoo.

It was his mouth that pulled me in the most. He flicked his tongue over his bottom lip, and I wanted to pull it into my mouth. Dinner was going to be torture, watching him eat.

Finally, I shut my mouth and smiled back. Did he notice I was ogling him?

"Hey," I said. "Thanks for picking me up."

"Anytime, Koala."

“Oh my god! I’d forgotten you used to call me that!”

“I never forgot. I even remember how you used to practice being undercover up in the trees.”

Oh, my heart. He didn’t forget about me the way I had about him. Okay, maybe I hadn’t forgotten him, but my memories were not of the man-god that stood before me. “I can’t believe we’re together again.”

“Believe it because we are.”

We headed to his car... if you wanted to call it that. “What the hell kind of car is this?”

“A Ferrari. I’m not into cars like my brother is.”

“Umm hmm. Sure looks like you are to me.”

I slid into the seat of his car and squirmed. I was already hot between the thighs, but I knew it was only going to get worse.

“You look great, by the way,” he said after he got into the car. “A far cry from the lanky kid I knew.”

I laughed. “I was thinking the same thing about you. Gah, I was so skinny back then. My mom had to cram food into me so I would gain weight. If only I had that problem now.”

“What? You’re great. Besides, who wants to be that skinny?”

“True. And I don’t move around as much as I did back then.”

“Huh. You were almost a constant blur, either running or climbing those damn trees. Did your new house have trees?”

I remembered complaining to him about that. “It does. My mom and stepdad still live there. It doesn’t have as many as the old house and the property isn’t close to being as large, but there’s this huge oak right outside my bedroom window that I used to climb. I’d sneak out at night and meet my friends.”

“You did, huh? I bet you had a ton of boyfriends.”

“Who, me?” I aimed a thumb at myself. “I was more interested in other things, but I did have one in high school. He turned out to be an ass. Broke my heart when he dumped me for a cheerleader. What about you?”

He cleared his throat as his brow furrowed. “I was probably what you’d consider an ass in high school. Always searching for something, someone, but never finding it. In retrospect, high school wasn’t my best years.”

That piece of information startled me. Landry had been amazing when we were friends back in the day. He’d been a fabulous listener, being there when I needed a friend the most. I couldn’t imagine him being an ass. “I don’t think high school is the best age for anyone. You know, kids are growing and developing, lots of things happening all at once. It’s a rough time for a lot of people.”

“I suppose.” The frown disappeared as a grin took over. “I remember that day you told me you were practicing going undercover. You were in a tree, hiding.”

“My favorite pastime. It’s been ages since I climbed a tree. I’m not even sure if I still can.” I hadn’t thought about this in forever. It was funny too, because when I was a kid if there was a tree around, I’d be in it. My mom used to fret all the time, worrying about me falling out. I never could understand that, though I do now.

Glancing up at Landry, I noticed a smirk form. “There’s always a way to find out. We have tons of trees on the property. We could find the perfect one for you to try your skills on again.”

I returned his smirk and asked, “Is that a challenge? Because you probably don’t remember, but I love a good challenge.”

“Maybe it is.” His brows waggled.

“Wait! Will you finally let me ride Steel?”

“Please tell me you’re joking!”

“Not a chance.”

“Back at you. When was the last time you were on a horse?”

“Hmm. Can’t say I recall. It may have been with you.”

“Steel is no gentleman with a rider on his back. I won’t risk you getting hurt.”

I offered him my best eye roll. “Some things never change.”

“In this case, that’s true.”

“Do you still ride a lot?”

“I do. My sister and I take my nieces and they love it. I ride as often as I can.”

“That’s great. Life can get in the way of doing things we enjoy. I’m happy you find the time to do that.” A vision of a young Landry came to mind. He’d ride up on that gallant horse of his. I knew nothing about riding until I met him. He’d pull me up onto Steel and we’d ride and ride. I loved it and imagined myself being a princess behind her knight. Even though I’d only thought of him as a friend, that fantasy always burned bright within me. That thought was never shared with him because I didn’t want him to think I was prissy like that.

We were quiet for a minute.

He reached over and grabbed my hand. When he touched me, a spark ignited in me. “It’s great being with you again. You’ll have to come riding with me sometime.”

“You know something? I’d love that very much.”

“Then it’ll happen. So, tell me what you’ve been doing besides arresting the bad guys.”

I inhaled deeply and took the plunge. “I went to State for college. Mom pretty much forced me since I’d gotten a fantastic scholarship and funds were short for them. Bud had opened a new business and they were struggling. Anyway, I went, and I suppose it was fine. I majored in criminal justice because I wanted to be an undercover agent.”

“I can’t believe you never gave up that dream.”

“Why would I?”

He glanced at me briefly but put his eyes back on the road. “Most people don’t know what they want. I waffled for a while until I went to work to help my brother. I never had any idea of how much I’d enjoy it until then. But you... you knew from the start.”

“Maybe I was one of the lucky ones. Who knows? But after graduation, I applied to the FBI and ended up getting hired. I was surprised.”

“Why?”

My shoulders lifted. “Because it’s hard to get hired without any law enforcement experience. The only thing I had going for me was I interned for the local police department at school.”

He quirked a brow and said, “I bet you looked hot in your uniform.”

Then we both cracked up. “Puhlease. Those uniforms suck.”

“It’s all perception.” Then he added, “On another note, I’m sorry about last night. When I saw you, I knew there was something familiar about you. Now I’m glad I didn’t know you were FBI because it would’ve freaked me out.”

“Freaked you out?”

“Okay, concerned, worried. I don’t really know your skill set.”

“Soooo, do you want to wrestle and find out?”

His head whipped around to eye me.

“Hey, eyes on the road, dude.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“And I was joking about the wrestling.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. I wouldn’t mind being dominated by you.”

Landry being dominated by me? Now it was my turn to be shocked.

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Six



LANDRY

EVER SINCE I'D SEEN SHILOH, SHE'S BEEN THE NUMBER ONE item occupying my mind. As I sat at work scrutinizing contracts, images of her in those tight jeans continually interrupted my train of thought. Why was this happening? Women didn't normally affect me like this. Shiloh was my friend... is my friend. This shit needed to be reined in.

My eyes dropped back to the computer screen, but all I saw was her sexy ass. What the fuck! Then I remembered what she wore to that sex club, and I fidgeted. At the time, I didn't react to her because everything happened so suddenly, but now... it was damned uncomfortable sitting here.

I stood to stretch and as my arms were reaching into the air, my sister pranced into my office.

"Hey, what's going on?" she asked breezily.

"Ravina, what are you doing here?" I quickly responded, my butt landing back in the chair. I didn't want her to see the bulge in my pants. She'd think I was some kind of perv.

"I had some work to do, but I'm on the way out. Wanna grab lunch?"

"Oh, damn. I wish I could, but I have deadlines for contracts that need to be signed and I haven't finished reviewing them."

Ravina was an easy read. Her expressions were a dead giveaway as I noticed now how disappointment turned the corners of her mouth.

“I was hoping we could hang for a bit. We haven’t chatted in a while.”

“True. Maybe we can do it another day this week. How is everything? You okay?”

Her hand batted the air. “Oh, sure. Everything’s great, in fact. Juliette has really come a long way. Her mother inhibited her so much, that child has done very little. I feel terrible for her, but we’re letting her explore her world a little.”

Juliette was Ravina’s stepdaughter who’d moved in with them a while back. “That’s so great. It must be a huge relief to see her settle in. What kind of explorations are you doing?”

“Riding for one, as you know. But we’re taking her everywhere we can. Legoland, amusement parks, festivals, plays, museums. She seems to love art, like her father. Gabriel is doing a painting with her. She’s pretty good. We enrolled her in art classes, and she loves them. Her mom wouldn’t let her do anything like that.”

“Sounds like our mother. Well, for the boys anyway.”

Ravina’s frown had me regretting what I said. It was never her fault our mother favored her and made it known so much. “Hey, sis, I’m sorry I said that.”

Her head shook. “No, you’re right. I hated that she was so mean to you. All I ever wanted was to hang out with you boys, but she’d never let me. It weighed so heavily on me.”

“I know.” I rose to stand and went around the desk to hug her. “You’re the best sister anyone could ask for.”

Her arms wound around me as she hugged me back. “Same to you, bro. You know how much I love you.”

“I love you too and I can speak for Stanton and Tristian when I say they do too. And I’m so proud of you for striking out on your own.” She’d started an event organizer business and it was going gangbusters.

She took a step backward and said, “Let me get out of your hair then and leave you to it.” Her arm waved at my desk.

“Thanks and call me for lunch another time when you’re here.”

Her fingers wiggled as she left the room.

I almost wished I’d gone with her. My brain wasn’t computing today. And it was all because of an amber-eyed, sexy goddess. I’d sworn to myself I wouldn’t call her because I didn’t want to sound like a dog in heat, but damn, it was difficult. Every time I dwelled on her, my cock wanted to spring out of my pants. It was getting damned uncomfortable. The worst part was I had no idea what she thought of me and if she even was attracted to me. I’d like to think she was, but who knew?

The computer glared at me, so I forced my ass into the desk chair and mustered up the attention to review the contracts. Then my phone buzzed. It was my admin.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Baines wants to know if you’re finished reviewing the contracts.”

“Not yet. Tell him I’ll be in his office as soon as I’m done.”

“Yes, sir.”

Stanton had been bothering me about this, so it was time to kick it into high gear. I reread all of them and it took forever. Why did lawyers insist on using legalese? Who in the hell came up with that language anyway? It was absurd. I clicked approval and added a signature to the last one. Then I went to my brother’s office.

“Hey, you okay to discuss the contracts?” I asked after knocking and sticking my head into his office. His wife used an office here at our headquarters. I didn’t want to disturb them if she was in here.

“Finally. I didn’t think you’d ever finish,” he snarled, giving me a major glare to top it off.

“Whoa, bro, slow your roll.”

“I’m not on a fucking roll.”

“Fine, then what’s got you in such a salty mood?”

He groaned. “Edward is cutting teeth again and we haven’t slept.”

“Oh, sorry about that. Poor little guy. But don’t be growling at me.”

“What the fuck took you so long? You usually fly through these.”

I shrugged and said, “They’re fine. All that is needed is your approval and they can be sent. They should be in your inbox by now.”

He stood and stretched. Then he buzzed his admin, begging for another cup of caffeine. Glancing at me, he raised his brows. I knew he wanted to know if I wanted one too, so I mouthed, “No.”

He set the phone back on the cradle and plopped back into his chair. “Man, I’m whipped today.”

“How can I help?”

“You can’t, but thanks for the offer. There are calls to make and I have to be the one to do it.”

“If you change your mind, holla.” I went to leave, but his voice stopped me.

“What’s new with you? We haven’t talked in a few days.”

We lived at the family estate. The house was huge, so the only time we saw each other was either in the gym or the kitchen. They resided in one wing with their son, Edward, and my quarters were in another wing. We did have the home office, but in the last couple of weeks, we hadn’t worked much in there.

“Isn’t it a bit funny that we have the same home address, work together and can sometimes go days without seeing each other?” he asked.

“Hadn’t thought of it that way, but yeah.”

“Have you talked to Tristian? It shouldn’t be long before English has her baby.”

“I talked to him yesterday. She’s doing great. Has about four weeks left but is ready to go now.” I felt sorry for my sister-in-law. I couldn’t imagine being pregnant.

“Phew. I just can’t imagine being a woman and having to go through that.”

“I was just thinking that.”

“Women definitely got the short end of the stick. Watching a baby being born is bad enough.”

“Thank God I don’t have to worry about that. It’ll be a long time before that happens to me.” I’d taken a seat across from him and picked up his favorite desk ornament. It was an antique roman coin suspended in a cube that was supercool.

Stanton’s brows raised. “Man, you need to get out more. You should be dating lots of women.”

I never discussed my dating life, not with any of my siblings or friends. It was my business and mine only. “What makes you think I’m not?”

He smirked. “A man just knows.”

“Bullshit. That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” He propped his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers.

“Just because you’re a happily married man doesn’t give you a crystal ball.”

He chuckled. “Fine. But seriously, bro, you need to get out more. Now that I’m back here full time, you don’t have to spend every waking hour working. The last thing I want is you burning out on me. I need you too much.”

A smile tugged at my mouth. Stanton was not one to show emotion, but it was gushing out of him now. For him to say that was refreshing, if not a bit surprising. “No worries on that. I promise not to burn myself out. If I haven’t told you recently,

I totally love what I do. Acquisitions are my jam, man. I may have gotten off to a slow start in the career category, but I'm glad it turned out this way."

My brother leaned back and our eyes met. He smiled. "Are you saying you're glad I got into that car wreck?"

The blood drained from my face as I gasped. "No, I would never think that." There was a reason behind this. Before the wreck, as we usually referred to it, I was a worthless piece of shit, drifting aimlessly through life. Then the wreck occurred. Stanton was driving with my father, headed to a meeting but never made it. Stanton was seriously injured, and my father was killed. It was a terrible time for everyone, but ironically, it pulled us siblings together.

His hand came up. "Fuck, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry."

"So am I. Let's talk about something else."

"Great idea. How's your love life?"

We were back to this again. I huffed out a breath. "It's fine." Then I gave him a smart-ass grin.

"Okay, I get it. I'll leave it for now, but Stacey has a friend you might like."

Stacey was his wife, and I adored her, but a blind date wasn't on my radar. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'll do my own date fixing." I rose and added, "Better get back to work."

"Fine. We'll continue this discussion later."

"Um, Stanton, there's nothing to continue."

All I got was a grin from him.

When I returned to my own office, my admin stopped me. "Sir, your cell phone rang a couple of times, and do you want me to order your lunch?"

"That would be great." I told her what I wanted and went to see who had called. To my surprise, it was Shiloh. There was also a text from her.

I opened it and read. **Hey, what are you up to tonight? I'm free and wondered if you were.**

Instead of texting her back, I called.

She answered, sounding short of breath. "Hello."

"Are you okay? It's Landry."

"Sorry, I'm running. Can I call you back when I finish?"

"Sure thing."

I stared at the phone for a few seconds, realizing that was why her legs and ass looked so damn good. Running. Maybe I should do more of it. What I really wanted though, was to see those legs and ass without any clothing. The idea of having her bent over and me banging her was too much. That sent me into my bathroom for quick relief. As I handled my stiff cock, I heard her moaning. The vision of me pounding my cock into her was enough to have me busting one. I spurting into the sink, wiped my guy off, then rinsed off the evidence. As I walked out, my admin knocked.

"Sir, your food's here."

"Come on in." That was close. A few seconds earlier and I'd have been caught red-handed. Or maybe cock-handed. I laughed at my little joke. I only hoped that joke wouldn't be on me because my intentions were to get Shiloh into bed sooner rather than later.

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Seven



SHILOH

AFTER DINNER WITH LANDRY, I WAS SEXUALLY FRUSTRATED. I hadn't been laid in ages and he was so fucking hot. All I thought about was how it would be if we slept together. My vibrator was getting worn out with all the damn visions of him. The only thing that had benefited was my exercise. I'd been running like demons were chasing me. Then I laughed because they were. Those horny little devils were after me.

When I'd woken up this morning, I'd had it. I thought I would wait for him to call this time, but I was done with waiting. I wanted to have his cock inside me too much. That's when I broke down and called.

Music throbbed in my ears as I kept up my pace. He called back and it nearly made me giddy. I knew he was interested, but a guy like him could have any woman he wanted. It wasn't like I never went out with guys. I did and dated a fair amount. My problem was no one interested me enough for more than two dates. They were either threatened by my job, intimidated by my strong personality, or we just didn't jive. I also was picky... too picky, as my friends always told me.

"Shiloh, you're waiting for your white knight, and they don't exist," they'd say.

Only I refused to settle. I'd wait for my knight and if he never rode in on his horse, then so be it. But Landry had a

horse. A fine stallion named Steel, and I wanted him to ride in and swoop me up with those hunky arms of his.

Back at home, I hydrated and after cooling down, jumped into the shower. Lingering in there wasn't happening today because I wanted to hear Landry's sexy voice.

A sudden case of nerves hit when I tapped his number.

"Hey," he answered.

"Hey back. How're you?"

"Better, now that I'm talking to you."

He's happy I called! "Glad I can help there."

"So... dinner tonight?"

"That would be great." As long as dessert was sex.

"Okay, your choice this time. I'll pick you up at six thirty, unless that's too early."

"No, we could go earlier if you want."

"Six?"

"Perfect. See you then."

I ran to my closet to see what I'd wear. But wait, I needed to figure out where to go. He'd said my choice. I came up with the perfect place and made a reservation for six fifteen. Then back to my closet to dig out something hot and sexy to wear. I found the perfect thing. It was a boho dress with a deep V-neck that was both sexy and cute. I added a scarf that matched my purse and picked out my jewelry. I'd wear my hair up in a twisty bun.

The afternoon dragged by a minute at a time. It was finally time to dress, and I took extra care with my usually sparse makeup. I emphasized my eyes with shadow, liner, and mascara. I normally skipped the mascara. I hated removing the black goop. I ended with a nice tint to my lips. Then it was wait time.

At six o'clock sharp, my doorbell rang. He stood there with a smile, and I watched his gaze widen as he took me in.

“Wow, you look gorgeous.”

“Thank you. You don’t look so bad yourself.” He wore a pair of dark pants that hugged his hips along with a pale-blue shirt, the sleeves folded up to his forearms and unbuttoned at the neck. And he smelled so good, I wanted to lick him. My face heated at the idea of it, so I turned my head, in case my face had reddened. “Let me grab my purse.”

He ushered me to his car, and I slid inside. Cars weren’t normally my thing, but this Ferrari was special. The seats hugged me and the scent of leather permeated my nostrils.

“So, where to, boss?” he asked.

I directed him to my favorite restaurant. It was a small Italian place, with intimate seating.

“Have you ever eaten here?” I asked as we walked inside.

“No.”

“I hope you love Italian because this is one of my favorite places.”

“I do. Love Italian that is.”

We were seated and Landry ordered some kind of wine. The waiter brought it back quickly. It was a chianti and was scrumptious. “Oooh, this is wonderful.” I took another long sip. The wine burst with flavor as I swallowed.

“I love Italian wines, both white and red.”

“Mmm, me too.” I licked my lips.

“Shiloh, you look... sexy. Is it okay for me to say that?”

“Of course. And thank you.”

“I’ve thought about you... a lot.”

“Good thoughts, I hope.”

“Depends on what you consider good.”

My head tilted as I said, “Do tell.”

He leaned forward and said, “This may have you running out of here, but I’ve had lots of dirty thoughts about you.”

Verrry dirty thoughts.”

I clenched my thighs because those very words made me want him all over again. Grinning, I asked, “Care to share?”

“NSFP.”

“NSFP?”

He leaned even closer and whispered, “Not suitable for public.” His eyes latched on to mine and I couldn’t even blink. I wanted to reach between my legs to ease the ache. I swallowed the clump of flour that somehow got jammed in my throat. Then I reached for my wineglass with a shaky hand. Good grief, I was hot. And sweating. It wouldn’t be right for me to dab my napkin to my chest, but god, I needed to.

“You okay?”

“Umm hmm.” Barely. I was a horny bomb getting ready to explode. I wondered how fast we could eat.

The waiter came to take our order.

“I’ll take the seafood special with a side of sexghetti.”

“Ma’am?”

“Hmm?”

“What side was that?”

“The spaghetti.” I glanced at Landry and a grin took over his face.

“I’ll have the same,” he told the waiter.

When the coast was clear, Landry said, “Sexghetti?”

“What?” I perked up.

“That’s what you ordered.”

My eyes bugged out. I hoped they didn’t launch onto the table. “I said that?”

“You did. To your defense, it sounded delicious.”

I cackled. “Jeez, what an idiot.”

“Not necessarily. I think you’re on point.”

The only point that interested me was his cock pointing toward my vagina. Heat flushed me again. Fuckety fuck.

Deciding to be extremely bold, I said, “So for dessert, I thought we could go back to my place.”

“Great idea, and the next time, we should order in.”

That was an even better idea.

We both ate like we were starving. I was consumed with hunger, but not for food. Landry paid the bill and soon we were back at my place. He grabbed my hand as we rushed inside.

The door closed behind us, and I turned the lock. Landry pulled me into him and nuzzled my neck. “I’ve done nothing but think about you, how unbelievably sexy you are and how beautiful.”

Wow. Was he for real, or just trying to lay me? At this point, I didn’t care. I knew him well enough and even though I didn’t sleep with dates this quickly, I was okay with him. “I’ve done the same. I can’t get you out of my thoughts.”

His lips brushed mine slowly, and he kissed the corners of my mouth. It wasn’t rushed at all, but then he really kissed me. His tongue pushed through my slightly parted lips and began an exploration that tickled my skin with goose bumps. I shivered as he continued to kiss me. A zing raced up my spine. I circled my arms around his neck, pulling him tighter against me. That’s when I felt it—his hardened length. It pressed into my stomach and let me know it wanted more. One of his arms left my waist and moved south to my ass. He squeezed it as he continued to kiss me.

Enough of standing here and kissing. I broke away and walked him to my bedroom. Once there, we stared at each other. There was something I had to know before we proceeded. “Do you frequent sex clubs a lot?”

He was quick to answer and without hesitation. “Absolutely not. My friend wouldn’t stop pestering me to go because it was one of the few nights they allowed members to bring guests. I was not very happy there. Not my thing at all.”

“Good to know because I wasn’t happy about you being there. Not because of work, but because... you know.” He nodded at that.

It was sort of a standoff until he unbuttoned his shirt, slowly teasing me. When he pulled it off, I ogled the gorgeous sight before me. Not only did he look perfect with clothes, but without them, he was extraordinarily built. Beautifully sculpted with a perfect *V* that drew my eyes to his pants. I took two steps forward and reached for his belt.

His hands landed on mine. “Not yet, Cinnamon.”

My brows arched. “Cinnamon?”

“I love cinnamon everything, so I thought it was appropriate. It’s sweet with a hint of spice, just like you. Raise your hands.”

His words slid over me like butter and I lifted my arms up. My dress slipped off with a whoosh and he tossed it to the floor. I was left standing before him in a bra and thong. My bra had zero padding, so it was easy to see my rock-hard nipples as they aimed directly at him. The back of his hand brushed against one, then the other. I swallowed a moan.

“I want to see all of you.”

“I want the same.”

My hands moved back as I unhooked the bra. I shimmied it off.

“Leave the thong.”

My eyes hadn’t left him as he undid his buckle, then pants, and let them drop. Holy mother, he went commando and his dick... was I drooling yet? I touched my chin to see.

His cock must have been magnetized because my hand went right to it and wrapped around its velvety smoothness. Ahh, it was perfect. “Very pretty,” I sighed.

“My cock is pretty?” He sounded slightly shocked. But it was the prettiest cock I’d ever seen.

“Beautiful.”

“That’s a new one on me.”

“Good.” I dropped to my knees and licked it. Up and down, then slid it into my mouth, going back and forth, taking more each time. I was very proud of myself when I got the entire length in, which was no small feat.

“Stop. You have to stop, or I’ll...”

Reluctantly, I released him and stood.

Then he mimicked me and dropped to his knees. He nuzzled my panty-covered pussy first. A few nips and nibbles later, he pushed my thong to one side and worked his tongue along my entire slit. Up and down, up and down he went until, at last, he zeroed in on my clit. I throbbed with need, racing to orgasm. With his attention focused there, it wouldn’t be long.

Before I reached my goal, he stood, pulled off my thong while he did, then walked me to the bed. I sat on the side as he spread my thighs wide. A finger eased inside me. “God, you’re soaked.” His thumb massaged my clit until my climax roared its way out of me. It left me breathless and throbbing in the aftermath. Then he rolled on a condom and pushed into me. It was glorious. His movements were slow and calculated, ensuring I was fine.

I urged him on, saying, “More. I need more.”

The pace ramped up as he set a punishing rhythm. It was better than great. My legs were now on his shoulders as he grabbed the cheeks of my ass. I wanted to close my eyes but couldn’t stop staring at him. He was stunning. Then one of his hands moved to my clit and the other played with my nipples, squeezing and pinching them. I wound up to another orgasm and as soon as I came, so did he, groaning. Gah, it was S-E-X-Y. If I died right this minute, it would be a perfect ending for my life. There wouldn’t be a soul alive who couldn’t say she died with a smile on her face.

Eight



SHILOH

MY TEMPLES THROBBED. I HAD MADE A VAST ERROR IN sleeping with Landry. What the hell had I been thinking? This would complicate everything between us. Waking up next to him had been a shock. One, I never spent the night with anyone or brought anyone home. Two, he'd been my best friend back in the day and now I screwed that up. Why, oh why?

Stop it, you big dummy. You know why. He was the sexiest thing on the planet and how long had it been since you'd gone down that naughty road?

The groan I released had another agent asking, "You okay over there, McLain?"

"I'm fine. Just a headache." Annnnd, the yummy ache between my thighs that reminded me of my sinful night, but I left that slight detail out.

"Need something for it?"

Yeah, a hammer to my head. Maybe that would knock some sense into me. "Thanks, but I have it handled."

Five minutes later, he handed me a giant cup of coffee. "This will help."

I glanced up in gratitude. "Thanks." Fred Walden was my partner. He always looked out for me. I was pretty sure it was because he was older and had been at the bureau for much

longer than me. What I loved about him the most was his belief in me. Even though he was old school, he gave me excellent advice and I had to credit him for my success at the job.

“Hey, did you hear about the potential target we have?”

Leaning back in my chair, I said, “No. Care to give me more details?”

“The boss mentioned it late yesterday after you left. They have a lead on our guy’s partner. The one we took down last week.”

“Seriously? That’s great. If we can knock him out of the business, that would be awesome.”

“I think we’re having a meeting on it later this morning.”

“You have just gotten rid of my headache.”

He let out a laugh. “You love this, don’t you?”

“It’s why I’m here.”

He left my desk and I booted up the computer. I ran a search on possible suspects in that case, but nothing popped up. They must really be keeping it under wraps. My excitement dwindled as I realized I was late on two reports. Better get to work.

As I typed, my mind drifted back to Landry and what his mouth had done to me. Goose bumps sprang up and I shivered. He sure knew what to do with that mouth and tongue of his.

“McLain! Get to the conference room,” the director shouted. I must’ve been sexdreaming. Shooting out of my chair, I grabbed my phone, cup of coffee, and notepad. Then I jogged over to the conference room, where everyone was already seated.

My boss, Jerry, had his computer up on the large screen and our suspect’s photo was on it. He didn’t look very threatening, but appearances were always deceiving, as I had learned, particularly in human trafficking. He was someone you could trust and that’s part of how they worked.

“White male, age forty, five feet ten, dark hair, brown eyes, and a bit on the stocky side. He’s known to frequent auctions and we think he’s another main player in the trafficking ring. No address on file, of course, but I want eyes on that warehouse. Also, we’ve tracked the owner and are checking to see if it goes up for sale. There’s a solid chance the traffickers won’t be back there. They’ve made us, so we’re pretty sure they won’t take any chances. We’ll keep a watch on it though. Cameras have been installed outside and in, so we’ll be alerted to any activity. If we can track the sale of it, we’ll have more information. Questions?”

Standing, I asked, “Has anyone contacted Sinclair other than his attorney?” Sinclair was the one we apprehended the night I was the target at the sex club.

“No, and we have our eyes on that too.”

“What about the data pulled from his computer?” another agent asked.

“No names, just places. We’ve shut those down, as you all are aware. There were a lot of encrypted files, so we’re still digging. We’ve even impersonated him on TOR but haven’t gotten any bites so we’re sure the word is out.” TOR was the onion router, otherwise known as the dark web.

“This guy was good,” I mumbled. Usually, they left some type of footprint.

“What’s that, McLain?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking how well he covered his tracks.”

“True, but we still have some options. We have a team checking everything coming into the nearby ports... Savannah, Charleston, Jacksonville. They can’t hide forever.”

No, but if we caught them, then another team would pop up. These traffickers made me ill. All those poor kids stolen from their lives. Even if they were lucky enough to be reunited with their families, they’d be scarred forever. It infuriated me. We had to catch these sickos.

“Hey, what about child pornography rings? Anyone scoping that for a connection?” I asked.

“Yeah, we’re on it,” Dan, who was part of that team, responded. “We may, and I say this with great hesitancy, we may have someone. We’re digging into this computer now.”

Digging in was another term for hacking. We used a program designed just for this where we could enter without their knowledge and poke around their files. Most of these perps were extremely capable with computers, so sometimes it took a while to get into their encrypted files.

Dan shot me a look and mouthed, “We need to talk.”

I nodded. He probably needed me again for a setup. I was good with this. These guys tried to approach their potential targets all the time. With the help of an expert makeup artist, a wig, and a change of clothes, I still passed as a teenager. I’d meet these perps and after they offered me money to take pictures or to go with them in their vans, which they usually drove, we’d nail them.

Jerry closed out the meeting with the order to be on standby. If they got any kind of information on where this guy would be, it would be showtime.

I grabbed my things and met Dan outside in the hall. “You need me?”

“Yeah. Follow me.” We went to his office where he pulled up a log on his computer. “We’ve been chatting with this one. He claims he’s seventeen, but we know better. We’ve gotten to where he wants to meet.”

I scanned the messages and was alarmed. He wanted nude pics of this so-called fifteen-year-old masturbating. He made all kinds of sweet promises to her if she’d do it. When she wouldn’t, he asked her to meet for a burger at a popular place the kids hung out after school. It was disgusting.

“What can I do?”

“You in for another targeting snatch and grab?”

“You bet. Anything to stop him.”

He gave me the details and then typed in a message to the creep. “Let’s see what he says. It may take an hour or two. I know we’re not the only ones he’s chatting with.” His screen name was LoverBoy.

“I’ll be at my cubby.” I left to go finish my reports. When I was about done with the third one, Dan showed up.

“He’s in. Tomorrow at four and we have the place.”

“Have you cleared it with Jerry?” I wanted to be sure he hadn’t set anything up yet for our team.

“Yup. I’ll come get you at one, bring you up to speed and turn you into a sixteen-year-old.”

It was crazy we had to go to these extents, but the outcome made it well worth it.

That night, Landry showed up at my door unannounced. The surprised expression clued him into the fact that he should’ve called first.

“I’m sorry. Are you busy?”

“No, but I didn’t expect you.” Then I asked him in.

He entered bearing a bottle of wine. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No, I just got out of the shower.” I pointed to my wet hair.

“I hope you’re hungry because dinner is on the way.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah, a surprise.”

It certainly was. I liked that he wanted to see me but wasn’t exactly happy about his methods. He noticed my silence. “Uh, did I fuck up?” His frown was deep.

“Kind of. I’ll give you a pass this time, but next time, call first.”

The frown vanished and he smiled. My damn ovaries started whooping it up. Why did they always betray me?

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I missed you.”

“You did?” Another surprise.

“I did. Last night was...”

Before he could say anything else, I said, “A mistake.”

He stepped back as though I gut-punched him. “A mistake? Why do you say that?”

Not wanting to stand in the foyer and debate this, I walked into the main room and sat. He followed and sat next to me.

“Landry, I really like you. You were my best friend back in the day. I’m worried sleeping together will ruin things for us.”

“How’s that even possible?” A smirk curved his yummy mouth. “We’re like peas and carrots.”

“Okay, Forrest Gump, slow that thought. We used to be peas and carrots, but let’s be honest. We’re adults now.”

Once more, the deep furrows showed up. “Okay then, bacon and eggs. And what’s wrong with two consenting adults having sex?”

“Sex means more to me, but I leaped into it with you like it didn’t.”

He stood and paced. I could almost hear him thinking. “Right. I admit I’ve slept with my share of women. Total honesty here.” Then his index finger popped up. “However, I’ve never gone back to see them, bringing wine and dinner. You are not a one and run for me. First, I’d never do that to you. Second, you mean more than that to me.” His hand covered his heart. Those words sent mine pummeling my rib cage. Sure, I’d had men who I thought were great, but none of them were Landry.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” One of my skills was noticing if someone lied. I’d learned all the tells and he was displaying none of them. He stared at me square on and never flinched.

“Dead serious. You’ve always meant something to me. I’m not saying I’m in love with you, but I do want us to see each other.”

That was doable. “Okay, but let’s start over. No sex until we reach a closer point.”

His hands rose as he answered, “Fine with me. I’m in for however you want to proceed.”

The doorbell rang and he went to get it. He came back with his hands full.

Moving to the kitchen island, I grabbed plates, wineglasses, napkins and silverware. We ate the scrumptious seafood he’d ordered and drank the expensive bottle of wine. Landry knew how to impress, but he may not have done this on purpose. When you were raised with the kind of money he had, these things were normal. Not for me, they weren’t, so I enjoyed every bite and sip.

I tapped his hand that rested on the counter. “Thank you. This was delicious and so much better than my frozen diet dinner I had planned to eat.”

“I’m getting all those out of your freezer. The last thing you need is a diet dinner.”

As I opened my mouth to respond, my phone rang. It was Jerry.

“Sorry, I have to take this,” I told Landry.

Then I answered, “Hey Jerry. What’s up?”

“You up for an op tonight?”

Jerry was someone you didn’t say no to. “Sure. Details, please?”

“We’re going to a dance club, so wear something appropriate. Jeans will do. And come as a blonde. Since you didn’t wear a wig at The Dark Cave, I’m concerned that they’ve made you. You have to look different tonight.”

“Got it. I’ll be in blonde braids. What time?”

“Nine. At the office.”

“See you then.”

Landry waited as I spoke, but when I told him what was happening, he wasn’t pleased. “You have to go to work? Now?”

“Yup. I’ll be late too. We are setting up a sting.”

“What kind of sting?”

“Sex trafficking.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to be the target.”

“It’s my job.”

“Why can’t someone else do it?”

“Men don’t often make good targets, especially the men I work with.” A giggle flew out of me as I imagined the guys dressed up as women.

“What so funny about that?” He glared.

I told him, but he saw no humor in it.

“You can’t keep doing this. It’s dangerous.”

I propped a hand on my hip and stared at him, open-mouthed. Was he serious? This was my job, and I knew how to protect myself. “Seriously?” Sarcasm coated my question.

“You put yourself in harm’s way with this job of yours.”

My brows shot up. “This job of mine? Landry, this is my career, for your information. It’s not just a job.”

“Whatever. You can’t dispute the fact that it’s dangerous.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“Listen to me and listen closely. I will not give up my job, which I happen to love. I’m in a dangerous situation, but my team does everything they can to ensure nothing happens. I’m also well trained in how to protect myself.”

“Little good that will do if they hold a knife to your throat or shoot you before you have a chance to protect yourself.”

Fury shot through my veins like fire. “You know what? You should leave before I say something I’ll regret.”

He huffed. “If that’s what you want, I’ll go. But this isn’t over.”

“Oh no? You won’t ever dictate to me on my career, or there’ll be nothing to discuss.”

He stomped out, slamming the door as he left. I was stunned at his response. But I would never bow down to any man, including Landry Baines.

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Nine



LANDRY

MY TIRES LAID A GIANT PATCH OF RUBBER AS I SQUEALED OUT of the parking lot. This was absurd. Couldn't she see there were so many more options for careers besides the path she'd chosen? I was angry and wanted to punch something. For lack of anything better, the steering wheel took the brunt of it. I drove home like my car was on fire... until the blue lights in my rearview mirror had me pulling to the side of the road. Great. Perfect. Now I had a speeding ticket added to this fiasco of a night.

I rolled down the window and handed the officer my license and registration. Before he looked at it, he asked, "Do you have any idea of how fast you were going?"

"Sorry, I don't."

"Have you been drinking?"

Fuck. "Yes, I had a glass of wine."

"Step out of the car, sir."

It wasn't possible for me to be legally intoxicated. One glass of wine in someone my size would put me well below the legal limit.

I got out and he asked me to do a field sobriety test. I felt like a complete and total jackass following his instructions as cars drove by. I'm sure everyone was gawking at this shit show. Touch your nose, walk a straight line, etc., he told me. I

completed each demand perfectly. When he asked me to say the alphabet, I asked, “Forward or backward?”

His eyes pinned me as he said, “Don’t get smart with me, sir.”

My eyes locked with his. “Not trying. It was a serious question.” It was a game my brothers and I had played growing up and I’d won every time. I never knew back then it would come in handy.

Like me, his eyes never left mine as he said, “Fine. Then backward.”

After I finished without an error, he said, “I’m writing you a speeding ticket. You were going almost fifteen miles an hour over the limit. Slow down, Mr. Baines.”

“I will.” I took the ticket and got back into the car. Fuck me. I was so over this day.

Stacey, my sister-in-law, was in the den when I got home. I paid zero attention to her as I opened the massive liquor cabinet we kept in the house. After pouring a glass of Jameson, I turned and her cartoon-like eyes made me ask, “What?”

“You, that’s what. I’ve never seen you do that.” She aimed her index finger at my glass.

“Yeah, well, after this shit day, I need it.”

“What happened?”

“I had a huge argument with someone I was hoping to get close to and then got a fucking speeding ticket.”

She stepped into my personal space. “Someone you hoped to get close to?”

Damn. I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Now she’d go into attorney mode and drill me with intrusive questions. That was the last thing I wanted. “Yeah, but I really don’t want to discuss it.”

“Maybe I can help. You know, from the woman’s point of view.”

After thinking about it for far too long, I agreed.

“Start from the beginning.”

“We were childhood friends and I ran into her several weeks ago. We went out and things were going well. But here’s the problem. She’s an undercover agent for the FBI.”

She was still staring at me and when I didn’t say anything else, she prompted, “And?”

“That’s it. That’s the problem.”

She tapped a finger on the arm of the sofa before saying, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s dangerous! She needs a different job.” Anger laced my words. I’d spoken so loudly she actually winced in her seat.

“Landry, calm down.” Then a grin spread across her face. “You like her. As in, really like her.”

“Of course I like her. If I didn’t...” I stopped talking. I did really like her. Had I been blind to my feelings? That was idiotic. I’d never been blind to them before. As I reflected on it, being this emotional over a woman was a strange concept to me. They’d always been kept in check.

“What? Finish what you were saying.”

“I’m done with this. We’re not going to work, so what’s the point?”

A roar of laughter came from her. I stared in surprise.

“You Baines men are all the same. Bossy as hell, trying to push your way into someone’s life.”

“That’s not true. I’m nothing like my brother.” I was referring to her husband, Stanton.

Her brows shot up with that statement. “Come again?”

“Stanton and I are nothing alike.”

She laughed even harder. “Yes, you are. You’re exactly like him. And I bet you’re bossy as hell too.”

Unfortunately, Stanton came in just then. “Are you talking about me?”

“Not this time. It’s your brother I was referring to.” She stuck that damn finger out in my direction again. Then she proceeded to tell him about my dilemma.

“Oh, man. Give it up, bro.”

“The woman?”

“No! Give up the fight, or you won’t have a choice to make.”

If Shiloh stayed with the FBI, I couldn’t be with her. Just the anxiety alone would kill me.

“Can’t do it. I can’t be with someone I’d constantly worry about. What if Stacey had a job like that? Wouldn’t it kill you?”

Stanton was grinning like his wife. “Sure it would, but I’d still be with her. I want her to be happy, and if that job made her happy, then so be it.”

This astonished me. My brother liked to control everything, including his wife. The arguments I’d heard between them were fiery as hell. But they always managed to make up and then they kissed and pawed each other all the time. I wasn’t sure that behavior could ever be a part of my world.

“Just think about it. If she means a lot, it’s worth sticking by her.” He went and grabbed a sippy cup, filled it with milk, and patted my shoulder on his way out of the kitchen. It was funny seeing him do that, but I was used to it by now.

Perhaps they were right and I should reevaluate things. I checked the clock and was positive Shiloh had already left. Maybe I’d shoot a text off to her.

The bottle of Jameson still sat out, so I grabbed it, refilled my glass with ice, and went up to my room. Doubts assailed me as I sat, pondering what I should do. Every time I thought of Shiloh, my heartbeat ramped up. It crashed against my breastbone in what must be an unhealthy manner. Maybe I

needed to stop thinking about her. The problem was, every time I tried, her luscious curves would pop into my head. The truth was, I'd never been involved with a woman such as her. It was solely my fault. Women weren't part of my life as in relationships. Up until now, my involvement with them had been purely sexual and after that, I didn't care to see them again. Most of the time, they never knew my real name.

Shiloh was different. Her sassy mouth made me want her even more. And our history didn't hurt either. God, she'd been my hero back then and how I'd envied her. Her family situation was so much better than mine. Her mom and stepdad loved each other and her too. What a difference from mine. And she always knew the right thing to say... to calm my anger... to make me believe that the world was better than what I thought of it.

The real question was... could I ever love her? Or any woman for that matter. My mother had left me so soured over relationships I'd stayed clear of them my entire adult life and never planned to get married.

I shoved those thoughts out and turned on the TV. After scrolling through dozens of options, I shut it off and grabbed the current book I was reading. An hour later, and two more glasses of Jameson down the hatch, I picked up my phone and sent Shiloh a text.

We need to talk. Call or text when you can. Sorry about tonight.

I never received anything from her, so at midnight, I hit the bed. I got up at six a.m. every morning and it would come all too soon for my liking.



SHILOH

THE STING WAS A SUCCESS. AT FIRST, I THOUGHT HE'D SLIP away. He showed zero interest in engaging with me. My anger at Landry made me a little too chatty. When I stopped talking, he turned to me and asked if he could buy me a drink. I ordered one of those horribly sweet frozen umbrella drinks.

I took my sweet time sipping it. He pushed me to drink faster, so I signaled the bartender for another.

My target stared at me for a while. "You look familiar to me," he'd said.

"Eh, you've probably seen me in here before." Then I leaned in and whispered, "It's one of the few places around that don't check IDs."

A creepy grin showed up then. "How old are you?" he whispered back.

I stirred my drink with the straw I'd asked for. Then I shook my head.

"Oh, come on. Your secret is safe here." He tapped his temple.

"Promise?"

"You betcha."

"Okay. I'm sixteen. My parents would kill me if they knew where I was."

“Don’t worry. I’m not your parents, so I won’t kill you. You here alone?”

That sent a major case of shivers down my spine and the hair on my neck spiked to attention. I gave him the sauciest smile I could muster up under the circumstances. “Yeah. My friend bailed on me at the last minute.”

“How’d you slip past your parents?”

“The window. Works every time.”

“Hmm. If you were my daughter, I’d keep you under lock and key.”

“And what fun would that be?” I pouted.

He bumped his shoulder against mine. “Hey, I have an idea.”

“What’s that?”

He leaned in close and asked, “Do you smoke weed? I have some great stuff in my car.”

My eyes widened as I asked, “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” He licked his floppy lips and I almost barfed.

“I’d love to. I’ve only smoked a couple of times and it was a while ago.” This was even better than I thought. “I have to pee first, and then I’ll be right back.”

I slipped off the barstool and went to the restroom. “Did you receive?” I questioned the team.

“Copy that. We’ll be right behind you as you leave.”

The other group outside answered, “We have you out here.”

“Copy.” I used the facilities and went back to my suspect.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded and we left. Apparently, he paid the tab while I was gone. He led the way out the door and we crossed the street where a parking lot sat. When he stopped by a black van, I wasn’t a bit surprised. I only hoped he was careless and left lots of evidence in the back. He unlocked the door and

offered me his hand to climb in. Then he went around the front and got in the driver's seat. He reached over and opened the glove compartment. Inside sat a canister that held a blunt. He lit it up and handed it to me, where I pretended to puff on it. I coughed for effect, and he chuckled.

“Take it easy on that.”

“Ooh, that burned going down. By the way, what do you do for a living? My mom always says not to hang out with bums and no-count people.”

“Your mom is smart.”

“So?”

“Let's just say I buy merchandise at auctions.”

“Is that why you drive this ugly van?”

“It's very useful.”

“I gotta tell you, women won't flock to you in this thing.”

He smirked, which indicated he was ready to make his move. “Is that right?” He reached down in the door compartment and pulled out a set of cuffs. Before I knew it, one of my wrists was locked in them.

“You're pretty funny, handcuffing me.”

“Little girl, I'm not trying to be funny.” His tone became sinister. It was dark in the van, but my guess was his eyes had narrowed.

He went to slap the other one around my free wrist and I came to life. I grabbed the dangling end he held and jerked him toward me. Then I flattened my hand and plowed it straight into his nose. The crack echoed in the van, followed by his scream. I was out the door, and one of the guys occupied my seat. Another opened his door and pulled him out.

He yelled again as he plopped onto the asphalt and even more when his arms were wrenched behind him and cuffed. They read him his rights as they pulled him to his feet.

“I need a hospital! She broke my fucking nose.” His shout was a bit garbled due to the blood running into his mouth.

Jerry said, “You’re lucky that’s all she broke.”

By then, I had disappeared into one of the cars to keep my identity hidden, but I heard everything through the mic. “Serves you right, you fucking perv,” I mumbled. A laugh sounded in my ear. One of the guys liked my comment.

Jerry stuck his head into the car and asked, “You good?”

“Yeah. Just an itchy head from this wig.” I pulled it off and scratched my head like a dog. The wig was great though. It had tons of braids and it reminded me of one of those Viking women on that TV show. I shook it out and fondled one of the braids.

“You really like that, don’t you?” Jerry asked.

“Wouldn’t you if you were a woman?”

He shrugged. “I know nothing about that stuff. We’ll leave in a minute. I just want to make sure that perv isn’t going to tell us anything.” He snickered when he said perv.

“You really like my choice of words, don’t you?” I mimicked him.

“It sounded better when you said it.”

“That’s because I’m talented.”

He laughed as he walked away. I was still scrunched down in the back seat as I waited, so I grabbed my phone to check it. That’s when I saw the message from Landry. Anger reared its ugly head once again. I’d been so immersed in the op I’d shoved everything else into the safe corner of my mind so I could focus. But now, it all came roaring back.

The idea that he wanted me to give up my JOB, as he’d called it infuriated me. I reread the text.

We need to talk. Call or text when you can. Sorry about tonight.

Short and to the point. This wasn’t exactly what I’d call an apology. He was just crossing his t’s. He owed me much more

than this and until I got it, he was out of my picture.

I hit him back with a brief response.

Nothing to talk about.

It was late, so I figured he wouldn't answer. But my phone lit up with those little dots.

We have everything to talk about. Please.

Time was what I needed, so I texted him back. He didn't drop it.

Please, Shiloh.

I need time.

Okay.

A week would give me time to cool off. It was degrading that he'd devalued my career. That was not cool at all.

Jerry hopped into the car, and we drove off to the office. I was exhausted from the op and the argument.

"You're awfully quiet back there."

A long sigh left me. "I'm talked out and tired. I had to chat my ass off with that perv."

"Yeah, we heard, motormouth."

"Shut up. He wouldn't engage, so I had to do something. Next time, I'll use that sneaking out thing again."

"Yeah, you ordinarily start with that."

"Off my game a little."

"Nah. You just wanted to make sure you baited him."

Maybe, but the fight with Landry had affected me more than I cared to admit. He'd been my person when we were teens and it shook me to my core when he'd said those things. Then an idea struck.

"Hey, Jerry. Would it ever be possible to bring someone along for one of our stings? You know, where I'm the bait."

"Hell no. You know the rules, McLain."

Inhaling fresh air, I surged on. “It would be fine. He could hang in one of the cars with an earpiece so he could hear.”

“What have you got up your sleeve?”

“I need to prove something. That’s all.”

“You know I can’t agree to that.”

My wheels were still spinning. “Okay then, what if he came in his own vehicle but still had the ability to hear what was going on?”

“Why are you so persistent over this?”

“Jerry, it’s important to me.”

“If I okay this, the big boss cannot ever hear about this. We’d all be fired for breaking protocol. And keeping it hushed wouldn’t be possible with everyone involved.”

Jerry was right. Risking everyone’s careers wasn’t cool. “Yeah. Okay, forget it. I don’t want that to happen to anyone.” My creative brain needed to come up with something else.

We arrived at the station and I finally sat up. I’d been distracted enough not to do it earlier.

“Wait here until the coast is clear,” Jerry said as he left the car.

He’d parked in the rear lot and the guys transporting our perv went through the front, as usual. I watched the door for Jerry, and he finally showed.

Inside, I headed straight to the evidence room so they could grab everything they needed from me. His blood covered my clothing as his nose bled like a gushing hose. After getting swabbed, I went to the locker room to change. I kept clothes here all the time, so I wouldn’t have to look like a bloodied-up hooker. The shower was fabulous, hot as Hades. I scrubbed off the layers of makeup and then the rest of me. Ahh, it was nice to have a fresh, clean body. Since the locker rooms were in a section where suspects never entered, I took my sweet time. Then I hurried to the kitchen and grabbed some water.

Jerry came in to do the same. “Need to sober our suspect up.”

“He wasn’t drunk. He never even hit the weed before he cuffed me.”

“We’re getting a BAC and THC on him. Don’t worry.”

We’d all been trained to take blood and DNA samples so we could grab them immediately. His inebriated claim would not hold up in a court of law.

“Can I go and listen?”

“Sure. The coast is clear.”

I went into the room where all the video and audio links were. The perv acted pompous and the urge to kick him in the balls struck. “Asshole,” I mumbled.

“They all are,” another agent said, boredom licking his words.

Truth. I listened for as long as I could keep my eyes open and then told them I was going home.

When I got there, I went directly to bed, never checking my phone again.

The sun was up, streaming through the slats of the blinds when I woke. The reflection of the light reminded me of a jail cell. God, I was in too deep with this job. I needed to get a life. Then Landry popped into my head. Damn it!

Coffee was the next thing on my mind. Thank God for those quick brews. Whoever invented them was a genius. Black and strong was my preference and I sipped it with glee. I adored, no make that worshipped, everything about coffee—the aroma, the taste, and the way it put a smile on my face. Maybe I should’ve been a barista. I laughed at my little joke.

Mug in hand, I opened the laptop on my desk, hopped through the layers the security and checked out what happened last night after I left.

Of course, the perv had lawyered up after thirty minutes or so. They all did. I wasn’t worried. We had so much evidence it

was insane. When they searched the van, they found blood and hair samples that would be analyzed. Duct tape, multiple sets of cuffs, along with hooks to attach them were on the floor and ceiling. They also collected empty syringes, which we figured had been filled with ketamine or some other major sedative to knock the victims out. He was going down and it would take a miracle to save him.

Unfortunately, most of these suspects ended up pleading out for shorter sentences, which pissed me off. I didn't believe in the death penalty, but a life sentence was what they deserved.

An empty mug sat next to me, so I filled it up and went to dress. Time to get to work.

I grabbed my purse and was almost to my car when my phone buzzed. It was Landry. Guess he wasn't giving me time, as I'd suggested.

“Hey, Landry.”

“Thank God you're okay.” Relief showed in his words.

“Why wouldn't I be?” Maybe he didn't deserve my sassy response, but I still felt he deserved it.

I heard a breath before he said, “You know why. Look, I was wrong. I admit it. Can we talk?”

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Eleven



LANDRY

NOT A SOLITARY BREATH MOVED IN OR OUT OF ME UNTIL I heard her response.

“Fine, but not today.”

Was that anger I detected?

“Please, don’t be angry.”

“What do you expect when you belittled my ‘job,’ as you said?”

I didn’t belittle the job. I belittled her, which had been fundamentally wrong.

“I’m sorry. You are the most capable person I know. Please, let me make it up to you.”

“Not today,” she reiterated.

“Tomorrow?”

“Okay.”

Her curt responses worried me. “I can pick you up.”

“Nope. Just tell me where to meet you.”

Disappointment owned me then. “I’ll text you with a place.”

She ended the call without so much as a goodbye. I was truly in deep shit.

The next call I made was to my sister.

“Hey bro, what up?”

“Ravina, tell me the name of your best florist.”

“Um, why do you need that?”

I didn’t have time for this. “Why else does one need a florist? Just give me a name and I’ll fill you in later.”

Ravina had connections due to her business as an events coordinator. I needed a florist pronto and I knew she’d have a name handy.

“Yeah, okay. I love Blossoms. But then there is...”

“Thanks.” I hung up and googled Blossoms. Then I made the call.

“I need two dozen white and red roses sent immediately.”

“Sir, we can deliver them this afternoon.”

Not soon enough. “No, I need them like now. It’s extremely important. I’ll pay extra on the delivery fee. I’m Ravina Baines Knight’s brother.”

“Where do they need to be sent and what do you want on the card?”

After giving them the information and being assured they would go out in a few minutes, I allowed myself to breathe.

Then I called my sister back.

“What’s your favorite spa?”

“Good grief, Landry, what woman did you piss off?”

“Long story, but I’ll call you back later. Just give me a name.”

“Serene World.”

I googled them and paid a ridiculous amount of money to have a five-hundred-dollar gift certificate delivered immediately. It was well worth it. Then I prayed it worked.

Shortly after, I received two confirmation texts, and I sagged in relief. Hopefully, both would be on her desk when

she arrived at her office.

Hours passed and yet I heard nothing. Finally, I gave up and immersed my head in work. It was nice to escape there, but was I really escaping? My head was so wrapped around this infuriating woman that focusing was a joke.

Then my phone rang, and I snatched it, answering before I checked the caller. It was my sister.

“I’ve been waiting on you to call me back.” I detected a very salty tone.

“Sorry, I’m at work.”

“Who’s the woman?”

“Someone I’ve known since I was a kid.”

“Do I know her?”

“Nope.”

“Come on, Landry. Tell me more. I’ve never known you to send flowers.”

“I’ve never known a woman who deserved them.”

“What did you do?”

I blew out a breath so hard my lips fluttered. She heard it.

“Wow, it must’ve been really bad.”

“It was. I belittled her and her job.”

“You did what?” she screeched.

A lungful of stale air left me. “It’s a long story.”

“I have plenty of time. Spill. Now.”

When my sister used that tone, there was no escaping her probing questions. I began by telling her how I met Shiloh. Then I gave her the rest of the story.

“Let me get this straight. This is the woman who was your best friend when you were just a teenager. Then you didn’t see her for years, and you somehow reconnected. After one date, you tried to boss her around?”

“Pretty much, yeah. No, worse than that. I suggested she find a different job.”

She laughed so loud I had to hold my phone away from my ear. “Ravina, this is not funny.”

“Brother, you have met your match.”

“Explain that, please.”

She was still chuckling when she said, “No explanations are necessary. This is a woman who will take zero shit from you. I am dying to meet her.”

“Did you not listen? I seriously doubt she’ll want to see me again. I’m hoping the flowers and spa gift certificate work.”

“They might, but you’ll be on your knees begging before it’s over.”

That would be a cold day in hell. I’d never beg for anything, even a woman. “Funny. That won’t ever happen.”

“Yeah, well, call me when you two are back together. I want to meet her. Maybe we can do dinner?”

“Whatever.” It wouldn’t happen, but I didn’t have to repeat myself. “I’ve gotta run. Work calls.”

“Byeeeeee.”

Now that my sister knew about Shiloh, it would only be a matter of hours before the entire family knew. Ravina wasn’t really a gossip, but when news like this struck, she’d run to Stacey and English, my sisters-in-law, and spill the news. That meant my two brothers would know. Damn, I should’ve just googled a florist and begged.

I dove into work, and a couple of hours later, my phone buzzed.

“What is it, Sharon?” I asked my admin.

“Mr. Baines called to remind you of your meeting in ten minutes.”

“Thanks.”

I grabbed my laptop, along with my notes, and headed to the conference room. We had a web meeting scheduled with a potential seller.

On the way, I grabbed a large coffee. Stanton was already seated when I entered the room.

His brows rose as he said sourly, “Glad you could make it.”

Ignoring his comment, I sat and opened my laptop. We’d be connecting with the main computer in there, but all the information we needed to review was also on my laptop.

With a smug grin, I said, “I’m ready.”

He connected the computer and we waited for the other party to join us. When he did, Stanton greeted him.

The call went very well. His company hadn’t shown a profit for two years, so he was ready to dump and run, especially after our juicy offer.

“Our legal department will draw up the contract and we’ll get back to you within the week,” Stanton said.

“I look forward to it.”

The session ended, and we both smiled.

“What are your plans for a time line?” I asked.

“We both know that companies like this don’t do well without an internet presence. We’ll build that up and once we see a healthy profit, we sell. I’ll get our web team on it immediately after the company is ours.”

“I already have some ideas. Sport fishing is competitive with all the big-box stores that specialize in it. We need to add specialty items that no one else carries, such as handmade flies. Then we can add smaller name brands of clothing too.”

Stanton nodded. “I’d like to niche this. Something around you can’t get these brands anywhere else. Maybe we could get some exclusivity contracts.”

“That’s exactly my line of thought. I’ll get one of the team to begin the research. If we can expand what they already sell,

it'll give us an advantage out of the gate.”

My brother stood and checked his phone. His brows arched as he stared at it. Then those eyes turned to me and asked, “So you have a new woman in your life?”

News traveled faster than the speed of sound in this family. “Who knows.” I gave him an abbreviated rundown of Shiloh.

He shook his head and smirked. “Good luck with that.” Then he was gone.

At least I didn't have to have a long conversation with him. I wasn't ready to discuss my personal life yet. Besides, if Shiloh didn't communicate with me about the gifts, I'd consider us finished. I wasn't particularly happy about it, but there was nothing more I could do. Begging was not an option.

My phone buzzed and I found it was my friend Brady calling.

“Hey man, what's up?” I answered.

“Not too much. I was wondering if you wanted to catch some dinner tonight.”

“What time?”

“Seven?”

“Sure. That works for me.”

We decided on a place, and I went back to work. I hoped the contract we'd just negotiated would be ready by tomorrow. It was standard for our legal team, and changes could be implemented after the other party checked it out.

I was in my office, my nose to the computer screen, when I heard a voice and a knock.

“Hey, can I come in?” It was my sister-in-law, Stacey. She was an attorney who worked out of our offices, saving her time and money. She didn't do anything for the Baines Corporation but helped abused women get financial and housing assistance, along with freedom from their abusers.

“Yeah, come in.” I knew by that secretive grin what she wanted to discuss.

She flopped into a chair and said, “So, I hear there’s someone special in your life.”

“Hold your horses. I doubt that’s true after what happened. I’m sure Ravina filled you in.”

“True, but your persistence can change her mind. Has she called today?”

“No, and I honestly don’t expect her to.”

“Oh, come on, Landry. One major sin isn’t totally unforgivable.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But I have been thinking. This is her career, and I’m not sure I can handle being involved with someone whose life is in constant danger.”

“Okay, good point. I want to ask you though, how do you really know her life is in constant danger?”

“You know what she does. That’s not exactly safe office work like you and I have.”

A finger lifted. “If she’s important enough to you, you’ll learn to deal with it.”

I shrugged. “It may not be my decision after all.”

“Don’t stop. If you don’t hear from her today, send her something else.”

I wasn’t opposed to sending her gifts, but I didn’t know what.

“We’re supposed to have dinner tomorrow. Do you have any ideas of what else I can send her?”

“Matter of fact, I do. Send her a cute stuffed animal. Write something catchy on the card.”

That sounded really dumb to me. What grown woman liked things like that?

“I know what you’re thinking, but trust me.”

What could it hurt? “Okay. Where do I buy stuffed animals?”

She wrote down the name of a store and handed it to me. “We get Edward’s from here. They have a huge selection.”

I stuffed the piece of paper into my pocket and thanked her. After she was gone, I was second-guessing that idea. However, when I finished with my day’s work, I got into my car and headed in that direction. It was on the way to the restaurant so maybe I could find something fast.

The store was cute on the outside and when I walked in, two women rushed to help me. They pointed me in the right direction, and I sifted through all my options. Stacey was right. They had every animal one could want. Not knowing which animal was Shiloh’s favorite, I decided on an adorable koala bear. It was soft and fuzzy, and its name was Ken, but I already decided I would scratch that out and call him Landry instead.

“Do you deliver?”

“Yes, we do, but all of our deliveries have gone out for today.”

“That’s fine. Tomorrow is good. Do you have a card I can fill out?”

She handed me one, and on it, I wrote: *When you’re lonely and thinking of me, fuzzy Landry can keep you company. Can’t wait to see you tonight. Meet me at the Primrose Bistro.* I hoped she didn’t think the card was too cheesy. Okay, it really was, but the idea was to make her laugh. I sealed the tiny envelope and handed it back to the salesclerk. Then I made the purchase and gave her Shiloh’s address.

It didn’t take as long as I thought it would, so I had plenty of time to make it to the restaurant.

A table for us had been reserved in Brady’s name, so the hostess escorted me to it. She kept glancing over her shoulder at me as she walked. I checked her out. I was a man, after all. She was a huge disappointment compared to Shiloh. I decided then and there that I wouldn’t stop my pursuit until she and I spoke and I had a chance to explain away my monumental fuckup.

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Twelve



SHILOH

THE ENTIRE TEAM WAS IN THE KITCHEN WHEN I ARRIVED AT work. I went in to grab my usual coffee and when they spotted me, cheers went up. I chuckled at them and figured it was due to the successful op from the night before. But when the whistles and catcalls started, I asked, “What’s this all about?”

“Someone has a huge fan,” Jerry said, his voice sort of singsongy. That wasn’t normal for him, so I knew something was up.

“What do you mean?”

“McLain, go check out your desk,” one of the guys said.

“My desk? Why?”

“Just do it,” someone else said.

“Like Nike, huh,” I murmured to myself. After filling a hefty mug with java, I headed out of the kitchen. I glanced over my shoulder to see I was being followed by all the guys. What the hell was going on?

A minute later, I had the answer. Sitting on my desk was the largest flower arrangement I’d ever seen. The damn thing was so heavy, I couldn’t lift it. Landry, you jerk. The corners of my mouth tugged into a grin as I read the card.

“Well, who’s the lucky guy?” Fred asked.

“Not lucky enough,” I said.

“Oooh, someone must be in the doghouse,” Jerry said.

“Why would you say that?” He knew nothing of my dating life, so I wondered how he came to that conclusion.

“No one sends that many flowers to someone unless they’ve died or the sender is in the doghouse. I can see you’re alive and breathing so it must be the other.”

“Hmm,” was my response. Then I saw the other gift. It was a smallish box tied with a pink bow. I opened it to reveal a gift certificate for an absurd amount. “Christ.” All of this must’ve cost him a mint. The flowers alone had to be upward of a few hundred bucks.

“What’s in the box, McLain?” Jerry asked, grinning.

He let out a long whistle when I showed him. Then the other nosy guys had to have a look too.

The comments that followed ranged from how I must be a queen, *wink-wink*, to asking what the hell had he done wrong.

“Mind your own business. My lips are sealed,” I replied. Admittedly, a warmth settled in my chest. Landry had always been my hero, my person, but that comment he’d made set me off. It was good to know he was serious about being wrong.

Jerry still stood by my desk. “You need something else, boss?”

“Yeah, reports, reports, reports. When can I have them?”

“I’ve already started, but I’m not done.”

“Then get cracking. My boss is up my ass and I can’t put him off much longer.”

“Yes, sir.” I got comfortable in my uncomfortable chair and went at it. It took me longer than I’d anticipated and was well after lunch when I finished. After I emailed everything to Jerry, I also printed them up. When I was finished, I hunted someone to go to lunch with.

“Everybody already went and came back. Your nose was so deep into work, you never answered us when we called out

to you,” Fred said. “I think someone brought you something back and left it in the fridge.”

“Thanks.” Sure enough, there was a sandwich with my name on it in there. I refilled my bottle of water and sat at the table to eat. There was always food in here, be it snacks or sweets. I was grateful for the sandwich though. I hadn’t eaten anything since last night and was famished.

As I ate, I scrolled through my messages. Landry left me a text earlier, but that was it. I needed to thank him for his gifts but wanted to do it over the phone and not with a text. They were too extravagant to send a measly text message. It would have to be later because I didn’t want to have this conversation where someone could overhear me, and I didn’t want to bother him at work.

That afternoon, Jerry heaped more reports on me.

“What the hell, Jerry.”

He offered up a sheepish expression, spreading his hands. “Sorry, but McLain, you’re the best at these. I can count on you to be accurate and to give full explanations. Oh, and we’re meeting in the conference room in fifteen to go over our latest active cases and their statuses.”

“Great.” I scowled.

“I promise not to take too long so you can be out of here at a decent hour.”

“Fine, but the next reports go to someone else.”

He held his hands up as he walked away. “You got it.”

I opened the folder he’d sent and saw the reports weren’t as bad as I thought. Then I grabbed a pad of paper and pen and made it to the conference room in time to score a good seat. I usually got stuck with one of the cold metal ones. Not this time. I had one that was ergonomically correct and comfy. I stuck my tongue out at one of the guys as he motioned with his hand about my chair.

Jerry reviewed all the active and outstanding cases we had. There were five total. When he finished, he called out to Fred

and me. “You two are going to investigate a suspected abduction that just came in.”

It was in a town about thirty miles north of here. A thirteen-year-old girl disappeared after she got off the school bus two days ago. The bus driver watched her exit the bus and then turn down the street she lived on. That was the last time anyone saw her. The police had cased the neighborhood, which was known to be safe.

“Why abduction?” I asked.

“No one has heard a word from her. Calls to her mobile weren’t answered and now they go directly to voice mail. There was an employee at the family business who apparently made obscene comments to her, and he hasn’t been seen either. That’s why we think he has her. We need to move fast because it’s already been forty-eight hours.”

I glanced at Fred, and he nodded. “Give us what you have, and we’ll take it from there.”

Jerry passed down a file folder, but when I opened it up, there wasn’t much. “I know, I know. Gather what you can and good luck.”

Fred and I exited the room and he offered to drive, which pleased me. I could dig a bit further while he drove, and we could come up with a plan.

“Let’s begin with the police chief. Hopefully he’ll be cooperative.” There was always this thing about not sharing information between agencies, but since they’d called us, it might be different with this case.

Chief Arnold welcomed us, which was pleasant. “Thanks for coming up so soon. We’re short-staffed and I’m afraid our time is running short.”

“Have you considered the possibility she was trafficked?” I hated to ask it, but we had to know.

He blew out a breath as he nodded. “The only thing about that is she was taken out of her own neighborhood, which doesn’t add up to the way the traffickers usually operate.”

Not necessarily. “Have you checked her cell phone?” Fred asked. “Many of these traffickers make contact on social media.”

“That’s where we need you folks.” Chief Arnold rubbed his eyes. “Our staff doesn’t match up to your skills. Some of my team can barely find their way around a computer.”

“Don’t worry. We can handle all of that. Do you have her phone?”

“It’s in the evidence locker, along with her backpack. I’ll get it for you.” He picked up the phone and asked someone named Dottie to retrieve it. She came in a few minutes later with a box in hand.

“Thanks. So, this is everything?”

I checked out the contents and there wasn’t much. A backpack and denim jacket were it.

“Can we talk to the parents?” I asked.

“Sure. Let me give them a heads-up you’re on the way.”

He called them and gave us their address. “We’ll keep you informed.” I entered their information into my phone.

Katie Snellgrove was thirteen years old, an *A* student, and played the trumpet in the marching band. Her parents’ red-rimmed eyes were indicative of their emotions. They were very frank with us. She didn’t have a boyfriend, but lots of girlfriends. Had they been interviewed?

She had a laptop that we took with her parents’ permission. “You can have anything you need to find her,” her father said. “Just please find her,” he begged. I didn’t bring up the possibility of trafficking. They didn’t need this added to their burden.

On our way back to the office, I dug into her computer. She had social media profiles on several different sites. “Looks like she was active on here but never used her own name. That’s a red flag,” I said.

Fred asked, “What name?”

“One is A Girl Who Loves to Dance and the other is Freedom.”

“Hmm. That Freedom sounds a little suspicious. Do you think she was bullied?”

“I don’t know yet, but my first thought was her parents were overly strict. I’ll do a deep dive into this one first.”

We hit heavy traffic on the drive back, giving me more time. What I found had my Spidey senses tingling. “I think I may have something. She’s been chatting with someone named Freedom Lover. Hmm. Seems like he’s been stalking her.”

“How so?”

“His name, first off. He may have found her under a different profile and then created this one. ‘Freedom Lover is looking for a friend that understands him.’ That’s his description, along with a picture of a boy who appears to be in his teens.”

“Flag him.”

“Already have.” I downloaded his picture and emailed it to myself. Our system would find out who this boy really was. Many times, predators used stock photos as their profile pics. The first step I’d take when we got back was to get a search warrant for the information on this guy and then have all her chats downloaded. Even the deleted ones were saved for a short period of time.

Fred was parking the car when I said, “You handle her phone and I’ll do the computer.”

“You got it.”

My first stop was Jerry’s office. “Hey, we’re going to need a search warrant. Just giving you a heads-up.” I explained the details. Then I went to my desk to finish my research. Fred brought the evidence box in and one of the other guys worked on it.

It was after nine when I leaned back, groaning and cracking my vertebra against the chair. A long yawn escaped

from me, and I shut everything down. I was pleased with all the information I'd gathered. When the rest of the data came in from this site, I was sure we'd have a lead. I prayed it wasn't too late to get her back.

As I was gathering up my things to leave, Jerry stopped by.

“Go home and get some sleep. Those bags under your eyes have morphed into suitcases.”

“Gee, thanks. I'm heading out now.”

I hadn't eaten since lunch, so I pulled some leftover Thai out of my fridge. While it microwaved, I checked my messages and saw one from Landry.

How was your day?

Busy. Looking into a new case. Thirteen-year-old girl missing.

That's awful. I hope you find her. We still on for tomorrow night?

Sure. Where?

I'll pick you up. It's somewhere special.

My fingers tapped out a response, but then I deleted it.

I'd rather drive.

Come on, Shiloh. It's not that far from your house.

All the more reason for me to drive.

I won't do anything, promise.

What did that even mean. ???

I'll keep my hands to myself. He added a winking emoji.

Since I was too tired to argue, I replied. **Fine. What time?**

Seven. Does that work?

Yup. If I'm running late, I'll text you.

See you tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it.

Then I remembered his gifts. **Oh my god! I almost forgot. Thank you so much for the wonderful gifts. They are**

amazing? I can't wait to use the gift card.

I'm glad you're pleased.

I am. Thank you. See you tomorrow.

I shoved some food into my mouth as fast as I could. Then I went to bed. In the morning, I awoke with my hand between my thighs. I'd dreamed that Landry's mouth was there instead. What a disappointment to find it was only a dream. Tonight, I would be strong. I had implemented my zero-sex rule with him. We had a long way to go before I would succumb to him again.

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Thirteen



LANDRY

EXCITEMENT RACED THROUGH MY VEINS AS I DROVE TO PICK up Shiloh. I was sure to keep my speed within the limits, but it wasn't easy. Stop behaving like an idiotic teenager. I hadn't acted this way when we were teens.

It was slightly before seven when I arrived at her house. I sat in the car until it was seven on the dot, then went to her door. She answered and I clamped my mouth shut to keep my tongue from rolling onto her porch. Shiloh was gorgeous. She wore a black fitted sweater that highlighted her curves, paired with black leather pants that clung to her like a glove. Drool pooled in my mouth. "Are you ready?" Did my voice crack?

"Why? Don't I look it?" A smirk danced around her lips.

"You look stunning. How's that?"

"Quite the compliment."

"Good. It was what I was going for." I held out my hand and she took it.

"I want to thank you again for your gifts. The cute stuffed animal came today. He's adorable."

"You mean Little Landry?"

Her laughter was music to my ears.

"Yes, Little Landry."

“Okay, so I know that note was super cheesy. I just couldn’t help myself.”

“It definitely made me laugh, along with the rest of the guys.”

“Wait. You showed it to them?”

“Not willingly. Fred grabbed it out of my hand. They wanted to read what came with it. That’s the hazard of working with men. They give me so much shit it’s crazy.”

“Now I feel like a big moron.”

“Why?”

“Because the note was so bad.”

“I loved it. Besides, what they think doesn’t bother me a bit.”

That was nice to hear. We got into the car and drove to the small restaurant. It only had seating for about twenty people, but my family knew the owner, so I was able to get a table.

“I’ve never eaten here,” she said as I pulled into the parking lot. Fairy lights dotted the trees around the building. My sister had helped them decorate when they moved here. It was beautiful.

“I hope you love it. The owner is French, and the food is amazing.”

The host greeted us, and Jacques came out to see us after we were seated. He carried two bottles of wine, one red and one white. “You decide which after you choose your food.”

A server brought us appetizers of coquille St. Jacques, which was amazing. We paired the bottle of white with it and it was delicious.

Shiloh hummed her approval as she ate. “I don’t think I’ve ever had anything so tasty. The scallops melt in my mouth.” She was right.

Next, we were served escargot en croute.

“What’s this?”

I chuckled out my response, “Snails or escargot.”

“Um, I’ll pass.”

“Please try one bite. They taste like mushrooms with a firmer consistency.”

“Then why not eat mushrooms?”

“These are better.”

“I’m trusting you here.” She took a tentative bite, but as the flavors exploded in her mouth, her eyes widened and she hummed her pleasure.

“Told ya.”

She eagerly ate more as I watched. It was a true pleasure. I never imagined I’d enjoy watching someone eat so much.

“This is unreal. The flavors are fantastic. You were right. They remind me of mushrooms, but better.”

“Jacques makes the best too. He also serves them in the shell and I don’t know how he makes them, but they are wonderful.”

Once we finished, the plates were cleared and more bread was added to the table. We were seated in a small, cozy alcove which added a layer of privacy.

“I want to tell you again how sorry I am that I said those things. I’ve never had so much concern for anyone before. You and I go way back, and I never want to ruin the closeness we shared.”

She gazed at me with intent. “You really hurt me. I remembered you to be a better person than that.”

“I one-hundred-percent agree. I’m not even sure where that protective attitude came from. You’re more than capable. You wouldn’t be an agent if you weren’t.”

“Then no more comments like that. I love my career and intend on staying.”

“That’s what I want. I can’t promise to love it because of the danger involved, but it’s what you do and who you are.”

Relief over her reaction filled me, and I was finally able to settle back in the chair. She told me more about her current case and my heart ached for the girl's parents.

"If they are anything close to being as strict as my mother was, I can't blame her for wanting to spread her wings." A memory socked me of when I asked my mother if I could spend the night with a friend. I thought she was going to slap me for being so bold.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just remembered how my mom used to act."

"You had it hard, as I recall. Steel was your freedom back then. Do you still get that feeling when you ride him?"

"When I ride alone, I do. Most of the time, though, I have my precocious niece with me. My sister's stepdaughter has also taken up riding, so I'm surrounded by women out there." A grin curved my mouth as images of Easton and Juliette came to mind.

"From the look on your face, you truly enjoy them."

"Wait until you meet both of them. I will warn you. Easton will want to show you the pile of horse poop behind the stables."

"What?"

"For some reason, she is very interested in how big it is each time she comes."

Shiloh scooted her chair closer and asked, "How often do the girls ride?"

"Usually every Saturday. Ravina, my sister, is an expert rider and brings them out. I go with them because they are so entertaining. You should come out this Saturday."

"Gosh, riding out there would bring back so many memories."

I recalled us both on my horse and how Shiloh would grab onto my shirt. It made me proud to have her up there with me.

"If you come, you'll finally get your own horse."

She threw back her head and laughed. “I used to think you were so mean to me when you wouldn’t let me ride alone.”

“I remember. But to be fair, Steel’s difficult to control. He’s such a persnickety thing. He doesn’t respond well to anyone but me on his back.”

She winked. “I can’t say I blame him.”

“Hmm, you’re naughty tonight.”

The waiter showed up then and refilled our wineglasses, this time with the red. “Your food will be out momentarily.”

We’d ordered the bœuf bourguignon that Jacques recommended. It arrived in two piping-hot black skillets. The aroma was amazing.

“My mouth is watering already.” Shiloh licked her lips.

The waiter said, “Try dipping the bread in the sauce. It’s lovely.”

He left and we ate, both of us commenting on how fabulous it was.

We were just about to order dessert when the waiter rushed over and told us there had been a tornado spotted nearby.

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“Hurry, we don’t have much time to spare.”

We followed him into the large refrigerator, which was the sturdiest place to be. Everyone was crammed into the space, but only for about ten minutes. We came out when the coast was clear. The tornado had passed us, luckily.

As we returned to our table, Shiloh said, “This will be a dinner I’ll never forget.”

“And not just because of the tornado. I’ve enjoyed our conversation too.”

“Don’t forget the food. It was the best I’ve ever had.”

Our dessert, tarte tatin, was delivered with a side of homemade vanilla bean gelato on the side. We were stuffed.

On the short ride home, Shiloh asked, “Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“I’ll come in, but not for anything with alcohol.”

“Coffee then?”

“Sounds great.”

But when we got closer to her house, there were all sorts of fire trucks and police cars passing us. We turned on her street and the road was blocked by fallen trees.

“Oh my god, look at that. The tornado must’ve gone through here,” she said.

I found a spot to park and we walked from that point on. When we got to her townhouse complex, we saw the damage before we got there. Trees were down everywhere, and the fire department was putting out fires.

“Oh, no! That’s my townhouse, the one with the roof gone.”

Sure enough, her place had taken it hard. “Looks like this was ground zero. Come on.” I grabbed her hand as we maneuvered through the debris. “Careful here. You don’t want a nail shooting through your shoe.”

We made it to her house, but it was apparent she wouldn’t be able to stay there. It was in shambles.

“Shiloh, I’m so sorry.”

Tears created streaks down her cheeks as I pulled her against my chest. I felt her shudders as she cried.

“Sir, you shouldn’t be here,” one of the firemen said.

“This is her home.”

“Still, it’s not safe. We’ve been putting out fires all over the place.”

“Can she go inside?”

“Not tonight. Maybe in the morning.”

She picked up her head. “What will I do? I don’t have anything with me.”

“You’re coming home with me. My sister-in-law is bound to have clothes and everything else you’ll need.”

“I can’t go in and just take from her.”

“You won’t. She’ll help you. Let’s get out of here and I’ll bring you back in the morning.”

“My car.”

My gaze followed to where she pointed. Crap. Trees covered it. “It’s under debris. You can borrow one of mine.”

“Uh, how many do you have?”

“Three. Let’s go. Tomorrow, when it’s daylight, we can get a better assessment of what’s going on here. You can also call your insurance agent.”

We went back to my car, picking our way through the debris. It was a mess over there. Then I drove home. Her sniffles broke me as I drove.

“Don’t worry. It’s all fixable.”

“Yeah, but what do I do in the meantime?”

“Have you seen where I live?”

“No. We never rode there, remember?”

“We have plenty of space. You can stay there and have your own bedroom. Honestly, it’ll be fine.”

We made it to the long drive up to the house and she asked, “This is where you live?” The huge security gate swung open after I punched the remote.

“Yup.” I continued up the long drive until it ended at the circle in front of the house.

“Christ, Landry, this place is a palace.”

“Uh, not quite, but it’s rather large.”

“I had no idea.”

I turned in my seat to look at her. “You do realize what the Baines Corporation is, don’t you?”

“Just a company that your family owns.”

I'd explain the massive wealth we had later. "Okay. Let's go find Stacey before she disappears to bed."

It was funny because when we went inside, Stacey was about to go up the staircase.

"Stop! We need your help."

She backtracked and came to us. After introductions were made, I explained what happened.

"Good lord, that's awful," Stacey said, grabbing Shiloh's hand. "Come with me. I have more clothes than I know what to do with."

I was going to tag along until Stacey stopped me. "Not you. She may need to try things on. We'll meet you back in your room."

"Hey, do you want anything to drink? I'll grab us something."

"Yeah, a shot of tequila."

I chuckled, to which she said, "I'm serious, Landry. Bring me some liquor. After tonight, I need it."

"Yes, ma'am." I gave her a quick salute and went to the bar as they went on their way.

At the bar, I grabbed bottles of tequila, bourbon, scotch, and vodka and carried them upstairs. Each of the suites had small bars of its own, with glasses, some mixers, and ice in small refrigerators. I'd let her decide what she wanted when she returned. It was quite some time before that happened and when it did, her arms were laden with clothing. Stacey followed with a large canvas bag. "I'll be right back with the shoes."

"Where can I put these?" I helped relieve her burden by taking some of the clothes from her.

"Follow me." We walked down the hall to the next suite and I ushered her inside, not stopping until I got to the empty closet. We both hung up the clothes.

"This place is incredible."

“This room is yours for as long as you need it.”

“Landry, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I pushed a strand of hair behind her ear that had gotten loose. “I’m here for you. Always.”

Stacey called out from the hallway. “Landry? Which room?”

I walked out and she saw me. “I didn’t know where she wanted to stay.”

“Right here.”

She carried two canvas bags. One went in the closet and the other in the bathroom. “This should do it. If you need anything else, just ask.”

Shiloh hugged Stacey. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“Don’t think anything of it. I can’t wait to have a real conversation with you. You need to get some rest as it’s late.”

Stacey disappeared and Shiloh said, “She is the best.”

“She is, and wait until you meet my sister Ravina. She’s pretty amazing too.”

“Follow me.” We went to my room, where all the liquor sat. “What’s your pleasure?”

“Scotch on the rocks.”

I poured us both a glass and we sat.

“So this is where you grew up?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t a happy place for any of us. We didn’t find joy in this house until after my mom went to prison.”

She recoiled when I said those words.

“Yeah, she was responsible for my father’s death. A car accident. She had someone tamper with the brakes. Stanton was driving and you can figure out the rest.”

“Landry, that’s terrible. I’m so sorry. I knew you had it bad, but murder brings it to a whole new level of awful.”

She reached for my hand. I took hers and she gave it a firm squeeze. "I'm sad for you."

I raised and lowered a shoulder. "It's in the past. Nothing to be done about it now. The future is a gift, so I look toward it each day. Now, let me walk you to your room so you can get some rest."

When we got to her door, we stood outside for a moment. I took in a deep breath and exhaled a quiet sigh. Her sweet fragrance, a combination of lavender and jasmine, intoxicated me. I bent down and softly kissed her smooth cheek. "Sleep well, beautiful," I whispered, wishing the moment could last forever.

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Fourteen



SHILOH

THE SLEEP I SO DESPERATELY NEEDED NEVER CAME. AT FIVE o'clock, I gave up and opened my phone. I searched through my contacts for my insurance agent and shot him an email. When I scrolled through the newsfeed, I saw just how fortunate we'd been. Two people had died as a result of injuries they received.

Thirty minutes later, I was in the shower. Stacey had been a godsend. I was so grateful for her rescuing me by giving me toiletries, makeup, and clothes. After my shower, I sifted through the clothes and pulled out a pair of jeans. They were a bit short but not too bad. Then I threw on a shirt and shoved my feet into a pair of sneakers. The sandals I'd worn the night before wouldn't do if I wanted to go back to my home.

It was now six a.m., so I texted Landry to see if he was awake. I waited for a response but didn't get one, so I cracked the door to my suite open and checked the hall. Silence greeted me, so I went in search of coffee. This place was massive. I figured the kitchen must be on the main floor. Once I hit the bottom step, an aroma of cinnamon surrounded me. My stomach instantly went on alert and made an obnoxious growl. Allowing my nose to follow the delicious aroma, I located the kitchen to see three women busy at work.

“Um, good morning.”

Three sets of eyes landed on me and the owner of one set smiled. “Good morning to you too. And who might you be?”

“I’m Shiloh, Landry’s friend.” Then I explained what had happened. I was instantly wrapped in a warm embrace that had my mouth turning up in a grin.

“Good lord, dear. What a horrible mess. Come here and have a seat while I fix you a strong cup of coffee. I imagine you need it after last night.”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“There’ll be no ‘ma’aming’ me, missy. My name is Sally and I’ve been working for the Baines since before Miss Ravina and Mr. Landry were born. Now, you sit there and let me get you fixed up.”

She waited on me like I was royalty. Soon a plate of cinnamon muffins was placed on the table in front of me. Butter, a napkin, and silverware were added. “Now you eat. You need some meat on those bones.” A pat on my shoulder came next.

The aroma coming from the muffins was too much to ignore, so I grabbed one and bit into it. My belly smiled as much as my mouth. “These are delicious. I’ve never tasted anything like them.”

“My secret recipe. These are the house specialty, and my kids love them. When Miss Ravina visits, I make sure to send at least a dozen home with her.”

“She’s a lucky woman, indeed.” I sank my teeth into my muffin, and it was heaven. Sally saw I’d polished one off and said, “Go on. Eat another. There is plenty to go around.” Then she leaned in and whispered, “I keep dozens of these in the freezer.”

The coffee, along with the sweet delicacy, perked me right up. Sally and I were chatting when Landry walked in, a towel wrapped around his neck, shirtless and gleaming with perspiration.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

As I stood to greet him, he stepped back, saying, “You don’t want to get close. I’ve been working out.”

“Pfft. I don’t mind.” I kissed his cheek and ogled the sculpted perfection before me.

“How was your sleep?”

My scrunched-up scowl gave him the answer.

“Not good then, I take it.”

“No. I had too much on my mind.”

He sat down across from where I’d been seated, so I joined him. Then he reached for my hand. “Give me all your insurance information and I’ll get someone on it. As soon as I shower and dress, we’ll go.”

“I can deal with my insurance company.”

“No, you deal with work. You’re going to be late today.” He stood, grabbed some coffee and said he’d be back soon.

Work! I’d put that on the back burner, but I had the abduction case to deal with. I left Jerry a text explaining the situation and told him I’d be in as soon as possible, but it would be later than usual.

He responded, telling me not to worry about it and to take care of things. He was great about that.

When we arrived in my neighborhood, it was cordoned off. Landry parked the car, and we hoofed our way in again. Police were stationed everywhere and tried to stop us, but this time I pulled out my FBI badge and they let us through.

“Why didn’t you do that last night?” Landry asked.

“My brain was so addled it never crossed my mind.”

The front of my townhouse was a wreck. The roof of the porch was gone. I asked one of the firefighters that was roaming the area if it was safe to enter.

“At your own risk. This building didn’t get hit as hard as some of the ones in the back and as far as I know, there wasn’t a fire here. However, the roof has significant damage.”

We again navigated our way around all the debris and I unlocked the front door with a trembling hand. I got my first real look at the damage. “Ohhhh shit. Look at this place.” Tears sprang to my eyes, but I refused to give in to them.

Landry was behind me. “Be careful in here. It doesn’t look safe. Look up there.” He pointed to a huge hole with a tree branch poking through.

“Yikes.” I scanned the living area to see my laptop intact. Then I went to the stairs and my heart kicked up a notch.

“Babe, don’t go up there. Who knows how safe that is. The entire floor could fall.”

One, he called me babe. (That was fine as long as it didn’t turn into baby. Baby was one of my hate terms men used.) And two, he was right. “I’m going to grab my laptop and we can leave. I want to talk to the guys outside to see when this place will be inspected.”

“Sounds about right to me.”

I leaned into him as we walked. “You called me babe.” I smirked.

“I did.” He preened.

“What does that mean exactly?”

“You’ll figure it out, Agent McLain.”

I bumped hips with him. “Aren’t you the feisty one?”

He waggled his brows.

The firefighter out front took my name and number. Someone will be in touch soon. Then I went to inspect my car.

“What do you think?” I asked Landry.

“Hard to tell with all that stuff on it. I think you should leave it until they remove everything.”

We got back to his car, and he asked, “Where to now?”

I hated to say it, but it was necessary. “Um, I need a car to drive.”

“Right. We’ll go back to the house then. Once your place is checked out, I can send a group in there to salvage your belongings. You’ll have to get everything out so they can either level it or fix it.”

“God, I hope they don’t have to tear it all down.”

“I don’t think they will, but you never know, especially since we didn’t get a look at the upstairs.”

When we got back to his castle, he didn’t stop at the circle drive but kept on going until we got to the largest set of garages I’d ever seen. We got out of the car and went inside.

“You have your pick of any of those.” We’d taken his Mercedes sedan that morning. Now, he pointed to two cars. One was a Range Rover, and the other was some kind of fancy sports car.

“Don’t you have any cheap cars I can use?”

He chuckled and put his arm around me, pulling me close. “Don’t worry about the cost. You deserve the best, anyway.”

“Thanks. I’d rather not drive that fancy sports car, so I’ll take the SUV.”

He walked to the wall where there was a pegboard and key fobs hanging on it. He grabbed one and brought it over. “I think you’ll like this one.” He pulled out his wallet and offered me a credit card. “For the gas.”

“No way! I’m not letting you pay for the gas on top of it all. Thank you anyway.”

He opened the garage door and helped me into the SUV. “Do you know your way back?”

“I think so. Just follow the main road until I hit the highway then on to the interstate.”

“That’s right. Do you need help with the car, as in figuring everything out?”

“Please.”

He got inside and told me how to operate everything. Then I was off to work. When I arrived, Jerry pulled me into his

office. I gave him the rundown and at his scowl, I knew something was up.

“I’m going to make a call. Stay put.”

He called both the chief of police and fire chief, explaining the situation. They promised to get back to him before noon.

“You need an answer on this before it rains again. If we can find out about the status, and if it’s safe, you can get someone in there pronto to retrieve your things.”

“Gosh, I hadn’t thought about that. Thanks, Jerry.”

“You bet. I’ll let you know when I hear something.”

Jerry was helpful and as I took a seat at my desk, I sagged. With the help of everyone, it appeared things would fall into place. I texted Landry to let him know.

He hit me back immediately. “Great. I can get a team in there as soon as we have the OK!”

As fortunate as I was, it was still a hard blow. My condo was my baby. I didn’t own a pet because of the hours I worked. I wasn’t married with a family, so all my comforts in the world had been stowed into that small piece of real estate. I had scrimped every penny to buy it and now it was in shambles.

“Hey McLain. I heard about the tornado. Sorry your place took a hit.” Fred stood by my desk and patted my shoulder.

“Thanks. Me too.”

“If it’s any consolation, that happened to my brother. He and his family were inside at the time. They were all safe. Material items can be replaced. They’re just things, even though they’re meaningful. Lives can never be replaced. I’m glad you weren’t there when it happened.”

I nodded. Then I stood and hugged him. “Thank you. I was sitting there feeling sorry for myself, but you put it into its proper perspective. Don’t we have a case to solve?”

A grin appeared. “We sure do, speaking of lives.”

“Let’s get to work.”

After I left last night, Fred had asked Jerry to get warrants on the social media sites so we could dig in further on Katie's accounts and those she interacted with. Jerry should have some news about those soon, so I knocked on his door.

"I was just coming to see you." He held up several pieces of paper. "The warrants were granted, so you're good to go."

I took them back to my desk and started making phone calls. In a couple of hours, I was in both sites.

The first search I executed was on Freedom Lover and then Freedom. It wasn't long before I found what I'd been looking for.

I printed out everything then went to show Fred. "Looks like we got our hit. Freedom Lover is a thirty-six-year-old male named Michael Dixon. He lives in Marietta. Check it out."

Fred read the report and said, "Do you think we'll be granted another search warrant?"

"Let's go see Jerry."

After reviewing everything, he picked up the phone to call the DA. Jerry was great at arguing his case, given all the evidence we had was circumstantial. It took a while, but the DA agreed to serve it.

"You two, make sure that's his correct address. Find a landlord, neighbor, anyone who can corroborate it."

Real estate records indicated the property was owned by an LLC. "Fuck."

"What is it?" Fred asked.

"The property is owned by an LLC. You know what that means?"

"Yeah, a hundred hoops to jump through and then landing on a dead end. Human trafficking, for sure. Let's check out the neighborhood. Maybe someone there knows something."

We left and Fred drove. After salivating over the Range Rover, I persuaded him to drive since the vehicle wasn't mine.

The house sat on a street without any neighbors nearby. “We should’ve expected as much. I’m going to take a chance and knock on the door. When I show her pic, take note of his eyes.”

Fred agreed, but no one answered. There were no cars around, so we walked the property. The garage was padlocked. “Wonder what’s inside?” I asked.

“Don’t bust the lock. That might negate our chances of the search warrant.”

“Fred, do we really have time to lose? What if that were your daughter?”

“Hold on. I hear something, don’t you?”

He held up his phone and shook his head indicating it was a bluff. He was taking a video of this.

“Yeah. Sounds like someone’s voice.”

“Let’s go.”

He broke off the lock and we opened the door. Inside were large cages, all of them empty.

“What are these for?” I asked, playing naive.

“Human-sized dogs? I’ve never seen cages this large. They look like compact jail cells.”

Of course, we’d seen them before, in traffickers’ dens. But we wanted to make the video perfect.

“Look over there. Shackles and cuffs. Those definitely are not for animals.”

“I’d better call this in.” He called Jerry and explained. Once the team arrived, they grabbed evidence from the cages. Hair, blood, and pieces of clothing were all taken in for analysis. Hopefully that would get us somewhere. Then the building was cordoned off with police tape.

“With all this, we may not even need to get inside his house,” Fred said.

“We need his computer and I bet he either keeps it with him at all times or it’s hidden in the house.”

“True. So what now?”

The only thing I knew was to wait on the search warrant. “Back to the office to dig some more. Once the warrant comes in, we get back here because, with that police tape, he’ll fly when he sees it.”

“I say we grab a bite, come back here and wait.”

That was the plan, but we let Jerry know so he could bring us the warrant as soon as it was granted.

We were back in thirty minutes and I ran a search on the LLC that owned the property. Then I began the inquiries with the state. They cooperated and I landed on a name. He had over twenty DBAs attached to the corporation, which meant investigating each one. As I worked, Fred got a call. “We got the warrant and Jerry is sending someone over with it to wait on Dixon.”

“Great. I wish we could break in.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be back. They always come back.”

Hours passed, so I texted Landry to tell him I wouldn’t be home until late. I knew he’d worry if I didn’t show up for dinner.

Night had fallen when the suspect finally showed up. When he got inside, we moved.

Fred banged on his door. “Michael Dixon, FBI, open up.”

No response, so I made sure we had men covering the back door. Finally, I heard Fred talking. I rushed back to the porch.

Dixon, an overweight man who stood around five foot ten inches, was there. As Fred spoke first, his eyes widened, but then he scowled when Fred showed him the warrant.

“I’m calling my attorney. You can’t come inside with no reason.”

“Mr. Dixon, we have a warrant, so that gives us a right to enter,” Fred countered.

His eyes shifted to a deep, menacing black. I'd seen horror all throughout my years of law enforcement, but this felt different. A chill crawled along my spine as my hand instinctively moved to my holster. I didn't draw it, but the way he flinched told me he knew I would use it if necessary.

We went inside where Fred said, "Take a seat, Mr. Dixon. We don't want trouble, but if you try anything, you'll get what you asked for."

His butt hit a nearby chair and as I watched him, I radioed Jerry. "We're inside. Send in the team."

"I want my phone," Dixon shouted.

"Where is it?"

He pointed to a nearby table. "Over there."

Fred grabbed it and slipped it into a plastic bag. "Sorry, but this is evidence since it's in your house. Everything in here is evidence." I didn't trust Dixon one bit, so I was off to hunt down his computer.

Everyone went to work when the rest of the team arrived. Dixon had two desktops and two laptops. My guess was they'd find a lot more than these, but right now, I wanted to get to work on the computers. Fred and I left, but before we got to the door, Jerry said, "Nice work, you two."

Fifteen



SHILOH

DIXON WAS UP TO HIS EYEBALLS IN TRAFFICKING. HIS presence on social media was absurd. He had over two dozen profiles where he stalked young girls. We sent what we had over to Homeland Security's trafficking department. This guy might be responsible for dozens of missing girls. He preferred them young, aged twelve to fourteen.

I notified Jerry it was time to bring him in. If Dixon got to his contacts before we could act, it was possible they'd shut everything down. People like him didn't work alone. Now we had to pay more attention to his contacts.

He'd communicated with Katie Snellgrove dozens of times, and we landed on the one chat where she agreed to meet him. That was the day she went missing. I'd laugh if this weren't a life-and-death situation. Dixon should've known all this would be traceable. Was there something else going on I was missing? He should've been more careful than this.

I delved into his computers, checking the files. I'd get the IT team to search his hard drive for anything he may have deleted. It was earth shattering to see how much was stored here. This would be a job for more than just me.

The IT team was spearheaded by a woman named Leslie Drummond. I got in touch with her immediately and in a matter of a few minutes, she was standing next to me.

“Pull up a chair. There’s a lot to see.”

She grabbed a vacant one and sat. When I showed her all the profiles the suspect had, she said, “We’ll copy his hard drive and get everyone on it.”

“Can you do this today? We need to find Katie Snellgrove ASAP.”

One call from her had my desk surrounded. They took everything away and promised me something in a few hours. That was the longest few hours I remembered.

I texted Landry again to keep him posted. “It’s going to be a late night. Sorry.”

“I’ll wait up for you. Any word on your townhouse?”

I massaged my eyes and temples. I’d completely forgotten about that. “Not yet.” I was confident that Jerry would’ve let me know.

“Later, beautiful.”

I loved his comment and then stuck my nose back into the investigation. Waiting on the results of the evidence gathered sparked my impatience. Then it hit me. Was Dixon the sitting duck in this ring? Had whoever was at the top of the chain used him to take the fall? I ran to Jerry’s office, calling out to Fred on the way.

Jerry perked up when I rushed in. “What’s got you riled up, McLain?”

“Dixon is their fall guy.” I was giddy with excitement.

“We already know that.” Jerry just burst my bubble and I deflated.

“How?”

“It always works that way.” Then I knew he misunderstood.

“No. This is different. Whoever is at the top of the hill wanted him to get caught.”

Jerry’s brows ticked up. “What makes you say that?”

“It was all too easy. The name on his social media. All his accounts. An expert would’ve made himself more obscure. Used aliases in setting up the accounts and would not attach his real name. Cleaned up the evidence better. My Spidey senses are revved up right now.”

“Maybe... maybe you’re on to something.”

“I’m not saying he’s not the one who grabbed Katie Snellgrove. But I think she’s alive. And whoever is behind this will want us to find her.”

Jerry squinted.

Before he got a chance, I said, “Hear me out. If they didn’t want him to get caught, those cages would’ve been wiped clean, and the chains and shackles would’ve been gone. Maybe Dixon got reckless and they wanted to give him the boot. Maybe he threatened to blackmail them and that’s why. I don’t have a solid answer, but my intuition is screaming.”

“We should have preliminary results in from forensics late tomorrow. Let’s see after that. But my question is, why didn’t they just get rid of him themselves? It would’ve kept their identities secret. If Dixon wants to strike, you know he’ll plead out.”

“True, but I can’t ignore my gut.” I nodded and turned to leave, but Jerry stopped me.

“McLain, I haven’t heard a thing about your place yet, but when I do, you’ll hear ASAP.”

“Thanks, boss. I’m going to call it a day.” It was after eight and my brain was mush.

“See ya tomorrow.”

I grabbed my things and left. The Range Rover was so comfy I wanted to take a nap in it. I hadn’t eaten since that fast-food outing and my stomach growled.

Not sure if I should park in the garage, I just pulled into the circle and went inside the front door. My first stop was the kitchen, and it was there I texted Landry. He joined me a few minutes later.

“Long day, huh?”

“Yeah.” My lips fluttered from the long sigh.

“Sit. I’ll fix you something.” He opened the refrigerator and said, “Lasagna and salad okay?”

“Perfect.”

I examined his yummy body as he worked on getting my dinner ready. A glass of red wine came first. It was delicious. Then he pulled the lasagna out of the microwave and set it before me, adding a salad.

“Smells wonderful.”

“Sally makes the best.”

I wolfed down the food, polishing my plate. Then a piece of Dutch apple pie was set in front of me. “If you keep feeding me like this, I won’t fit into Stacey’s clothes.”

“Good. Then I’ll buy you more.”

I swatted his arm and told him about the day.

“Maybe you’re right. It sounds too simple, so I agree, not that I know anything about your field. But why didn’t they just kill the guy?”

Shrugging, I said, “That’s where it gets hazy. I don’t have an answer for that, even though these people wouldn’t be above murder. Who knows?”

“You’ll figure it out. Not to change the subject, how about a hot bath?”

“That sounds like what I need.”

He reached for my hand, but I said, “I need to clean up.”

“No, you don’t. We have people for that.”

“Wow, I’m going to get spoiled here.” I felt a little guilty for leaving the mess, but I supposed it was something I had to get used to.

Landry snickered. “That’s what I’m going for.”

We went to my room, where he started the bath. He picked up a container of bath salts and poured a healthy amount in. “Enjoy.”

He was gone, so I stripped and climbed in. I turned up the heat of the water and sank down to my neck. The water smelled wonderful. I checked out the bath salts and no wonder. They were that super expensive brand that I would never buy for myself.

“Knock, knock.”

“Enter.” It was Landry, as I expected, delivering another glass of wine.

“Don’t fall asleep in here. If I don’t get a text from you within the hour, I’m coming back in.”

“Yes, sir.” I saluted him. The door closed and I leaned back again. The water unknotted my muscles, little by little. My body felt better, but my mind wouldn’t let go of Michael Dixon. There had been nothing on Katie Snellgrove’s belongs to indicate her relationship with him other than the social media. Why her? Was her abduction a part of this decoy too? Something kept tickling my brain, but it wouldn’t reveal itself.

“Knock, knock. This is your two-minute warning.”

“I’m getting out.” I giggled at his insistence that I not stay in here too long. The water had cooled off anyway. I wrapped one of the luxurious bath sheets around me and thought of how fabulous it was living like this. When I moved out, reality would gut-punch me.

There was a silk robe hanging on the door. Stacey must’ve added this to the clothing she lent me while I was at work. I put it on and rubbed the fabric. This was heaven. Landry was in the sitting room when I exited. He stood as soon as he saw me.

“You appear to be more relaxed.”

“I am. That water worked wonders.”

“Are you ready to sleep?”

“I think so. I need to go in early tomorrow. I want to thank you for everything. For taking care of me like this. I’ve never been so spoiled.”

“That’s my goal. I want you so spoiled you’ll never want to leave.” He grinned and left the room, gently closing the door.

He never wanted me to leave? Was I reading too much into this? I liked Landry... more than anyone else I’d dated. But forever wasn’t on my agenda yet. It was far too soon to be thinking that.

My phone rang. I answered it and my mom was shouting. “Where have you been? We’ve been calling and calling since the tornado. I even called the hospitals. We tried to go to your house, but they wouldn’t let us in. Your brothers have been texting you too.”

“Mom, calm down. I’m fine. I wasn’t home when the storm hit and didn’t know my house was involved until I went there. I’m staying with a friend until I can get inside and figure things out. Also, work has been insane.”

“Too insane to let your family know something?”

“You’re right and I’m sorry. It was a domino effect and I had so much on my plate I forgot. It’s not an excuse and I should’ve let you know something.”

She breathed into the phone and said, “Well I’m thankful you’re okay. Just because you’re an adult now doesn’t mean your parents don’t worry about you. And don’t get me started on that job of yours.”

“I get it, but I can’t say more other than I’m sorry.”

“You took twenty years off my life.”

“Mom, you look like you’re forty. I have friends in their thirties who look older than you.”

“Not anymore,” she said sourly.

“I’ll be the judge of that. I’ll keep you informed on the house status.”

“Thank you. You just made an old woman happy.”

Laughing, I said, “Shut up, Mom.”

“Bye, honey.”

Guilt was a terrible thing and it clung to me tighter than the silk I wore. How could I have forgotten to call my family?

I texted my two brothers, apologizing, and let them know all was fine.

The oldest hit me back with an angry emoji and the other sent nothing. I’d be sucking up to them before long. And that’s what I dreamed of when I fell asleep.

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Sixteen



LANDRY

SHILOH'S STRONG WORK ETHIC WAS ADMIRABLE. WHAT I wasn't fond of was how she put herself last on her list. If she didn't take better care of herself, she'd pay for it soon.

Bossing her around wasn't the way to win her over, but doing nice things for her was. She'd tied herself up so tightly to work that she didn't stop to smell the roses. That would be my goal for her. No, I still didn't like the danger she put herself in, but that was her choice, not mine.

On Saturday, I planned to take her up to the mountain house in North Carolina. It was beautiful this time of year and she could have some relaxation time.

I was grabbing coffee in the kitchen when Stacey entered.

"How's Shiloh?"

"She's working. Left early today."

"How's that going for you?"

I scowled.

"That good, huh?"

Stale air left my lungs. "It's not that. It's just that she works such long hours without any thought for herself."

"Maybe she wants it that way."

“But I don’t. I want to spend more time with her, but at this rate, I never will.”

“Landry, you can’t push things. If it’s meant to be, it’ll happen.”

I stepped back. “You misunderstood. I don’t want a long-term relationship with her. I just want time together.”

“Wait, if you don’t want anything long term, then I don’t understand.”

Stacey didn’t realize I wasn’t made for long term. This was the longest I’d ever spent with any woman. A permanent relationship wasn’t on my bucket list. I’d only mess things up for that unlucky woman. But then I thought about some of the things I’d said to Shiloh and shook my head. What was I even doing with her?

“Honestly, I don’t either. I never wanted a relationship before, but then when we ran into each other, she was all I thought about.”

Stacey patted my arm. “Take things slow and if it’s meant to be, it will be.”

I absently nodded as my brain wrapped around some of the things I’d said to Shiloh. Regret bulldozed into me. Getting involved, and I mean on a deeper level, would only end up in one of us getting hurt. I should rethink things to keep our relationship casual. After all, wasn’t buddy sex better than anything? No ties or emotional conflicts.

That evening, I received another text from Shiloh saying she would be late... again. I quickly dialed her number.

“Hey, another late night, huh?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but it’s this case. We’re getting closer to hopefully locating Katie.”

“Understand. Any word on your house?”

“Oh, yes! I can enter. The roof is wrecked, but they said the place was structurally stable. My insurance guy will be there tomorrow at ten.”

Frustration mounted within me. “You could’ve at least texted me about this. It’s important, Shiloh.” My words dripped with anger.

“You don’t think I know that? It’s my house, but work comes first right now. This young girl has been gone for five days now, and with every day that passes, the chances of finding her diminish.”

Anger got the best of me, and she picked up on my salty reply. “At some point, you’re going to have to put your work aside and think of yourself.”

“Let me be the judge of that. I have to go, but I’ll see you later.”

She didn’t give me a chance to say goodbye, which pissed me off even more. I wanted to throw something but didn’t. The meal that sat on the table went untouched and I went to the bar in the den instead. I poured a healthy dose of scotch and flopped onto the sofa. Then I turned on the TV. Every channel I landed on was depressing news or a murder investigation program. Not exactly what I needed to take my mind off things.

The walls closed in on me, so I decided to get out of there. I called my friends, Brady and Benson, to see if they wanted to join me at what used to be our favorite watering hole. They agreed to meet me.

Benson was there when I arrived, and Brady came in a few minutes later. We sat at a booth in the back of the place. I ordered a double scotch on the rocks, gaining me some raised eyebrows.

“What’s up with you?” Benson asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing, my ass. You’re acting like someone kicked your puppy.” Brady stared pointedly.

“All right. It’s a woman problem.”

Both of them stuck out their hands. “We don’t want to know. You and women don’t mix,” Benson said.

“Yeah. Why are you even involved?” Brady asked and then took a long draw of his beer.

They were both right. “It was a mistake. I knew her from way back and thought maybe... you know?”

Both of their heads shook, making me feel like a teenager who’d snuck out of the house and got caught.

“Come on, guys, I can’t be celibate.”

“Who said anything about being celibate? The key is not getting involved,” Brady agreed with Benson.

“I’m not totally involved. Only at the surface level.”

“Riiight. Actions speak louder than words. If you’ve seen her more than once, you’re involved. It’s your way, man.” Brady was right. I usually was a one and run and never invited women home. Here I was, having her live with me. Temporarily. There was that.

“Damn, you look miserable,” Benson said. “It can’t be that bad.”

“She’s actually perfect. It’s me. I’m not good enough for her. Relationships are my Achilles’ heel. You know my background. I don’t trust myself.”

Brady looked around the room. I wasn’t sure if he heard me until he said, “Maybe you need to change things then. You’re a great guy, Landry. Give yourself an honest chance.”

“I’m not sure I can. It’s a self-trust thing.”

Benson piped up. “Look, you need to forget about your upbringing. You had nothing to do with your mom being such a bitch.”

I cracked up. “What do you mean? I had everything to do with that.”

“No, man. I’m talking about your mom and the way she treated you.”

I nodded. “No, it wasn’t my fault, if that’s what you mean. That doesn’t make me less of a fucked-up man.”

They were silent until Brady held up a finger in the air. “You need counseling,” he announced as though that was a revelation.

“Seriously? Don’t you remember all the counseling sessions I had in college? Multiply that by a hundred and that’s what I had afterward. I must be immune to it because nothing helped the way I feel.”

“Have you thought about opening your heart?” Was Benson serious?

“Is this a joke?”

“No, man.”

“Dude, that’s my issue. I can’t.” My two best friends were clueless. “I came here to forget my problems, so let’s drop it.”

They both shrugged. Clearly, they didn’t understand my dilemma. I didn’t fault them. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t overcome this. My two brothers had, and they’d been treated worse than me. My sister had too. What the hell was my problem?

My phone dinged and I saw it was a text from Shiloh telling me she was headed home. I wouldn’t be there when she arrived. It was a dick move. Maybe she’d grasp my feelings this way. I tipped the glass up and let a long stream of cool scotch coat my throat. Maybe I’d get drunk and stay at Benson’s or Brady’s tonight. That would really show her. It was also a dick move, but I wasn’t feeling particularly grown up right now.

I plunged into a conversation I remembered from our college days. That lightened the mood and soon we were howling over some of the stupid things we did. Oh, to be so carefree again.

I ordered another round and another. I figured it was late when we left, but I barely remembered the ride home. The sun was spilling into the room when I awoke, my face down on the couch with my cheek smashed into a pillow. Fuck me. Why had I drunk so much?

The phone in my pocket poked me in the hip, so I pulled it out. Upon looking, I had over twenty missed calls and texts from Shiloh, Stacey, and Stanton. I flipped through all of them, and the last one was from Stanton. He was pissed.

Where are you? I'm calling the police, dammit. You're a fucking asshole.

I was in deep shit.

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Seventeen



SHILOH

GOING TO BED ANGRY WAS NEVER A POSITIVE THING. AFTER texting and calling Landry repeatedly with no response, I sought out Stacey.

“I’m concerned because he’s never ignored me before.”

“First, we know he’s not in jail because he would’ve called me. I’ll call the area hospitals to see if he’s there. Keep texting him and I’ll let you know what I find out.”

Later, after I stumbled back to my room, Stacey texted.

He’s not in any of the local hospitals. Stanton is also calling and texting him. We both think he’s out with friends. I’ll let you know if any new info comes in.

TY. I totally appreciate it.

Get some rest.

That wasn’t possible, even though I couldn’t stop yawning. My jaw was going to ache from it if I didn’t get some sleep. A fresh mind was what I needed, but at this rate, I’d be up all night.

At dawn, I gave up, showered, and went down for a giant cup of java. The aroma hit me well before I entered the kitchen.

“Girl, you look awful,” Sally said. “What’s got those purple moons sitting under your eyes?”

After a moment and a huge yawn, I decided to tell the truth. “I’m upset because Landry didn’t come home last night.”

Sally frowned and then a scowl turned her mouth upside down. “That rascal. I’m going to give it to him when he gets back. A man should never do that to his woman.”

“Whoa, slow down. We’re just friends and I’m not his woman.”

“Let me tell you something, honey. You’re not just friends. I’ve known that boy since he was born, and he’s never brought a woman home. You hear?”

Hmm. That was interesting news. “Never?”

“Never. And I would know because I know everything that goes on in this house. These walls have ears and don’t you forget it.”

Did she mean she had spies, or was she the spy herself? My brows inched up. “You?”

She beamed. “Yes, ma’am. Now let me get you some rocket fuel. You look like you could use a healthy dose.”

That was an understatement. “Thank you.” I sat on a stool at the large island. One woman, whose name I didn’t know, was working on some dough.

“Is that bread you’re making?”

“No, ma’am.” She glanced up and said, “I’m making biscuits. Stick around. They don’t take too long.”

I eyed her as she patted down the dough until she was satisfied. Out came the biscuit cutter and soon the baking sheet was loaded with a dozen. She made it look so easy as she repeated the process a few times.

“How many of those are you making?”

“Six dozen. We freeze some, you know. Then we don’t have to do it as often.”

Smart. I’d never think of that. “I bet they’re good.”

“Just wait. I put together some honey butter yesterday and that piled on one... mmm.”

My mouth watered at the thought. Maybe I would hang out in here until they came out. It had been years since I'd eaten a warm homemade biscuit.

Sally put a huge mug of black coffee in front of me. “I brewed this special for you. Extra strong. This should get you going.”

“Thank you. You're too good to me.”

“Hush and sip that. Careful now because it's steaming hot.”

I wasn't sure what kind of coffee they used, but it was amazing. It wasn't the cheap stuff I bought or the crummy kind they used at the office. The aroma itself was intoxicating.

My phone was on the counter when a text came in. I grabbed it, but it wasn't Landry. It was Fred.

Forensics are in. See you soon.

That meant we'd hopefully have more to go on in finding Katie.

The biscuits came out and I asked if I could make a couple to go. Fred would enjoy one of these. Sally buttered them up and then wrapped them for me. I refilled my coffee and left after thanking the ladies profusely.

Before I left the house, I texted Stacey to let her know I was leaving and hadn't heard anything. Then I was off to the races.

Fred was waiting for me when I arrived. I handed him the biscuit as we went to his office to pour over the reports.

The DNA was a combination of Dixon's and Katie's. This always frightened me as you didn't know if she bled from a casual wound or if he mortally wounded her. We had hair matches too. There were other results that didn't belong to either Dixon or Katie.

“Is Jerry in yet?” I asked.

“Yeah, let’s go. Time for some questions.”

We grabbed Jerry and explained and then requested that Dixon be brought to an interrogation room.

The evidence reports were laid out on the table and when he sat, the first one he saw was the DNA match.

“Agents Walden, Cromer, and McLain interviewing suspect Michael Dixon. Do we have your permission to record?”

Dixon nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

Jerry began with, “Do you know what this is?” He pointed to the DNA results.

“No.”

“These are DNA matches of you and Katie Snellgrove taken from your garage two days ago.”

“That’s not my garage. Or house, for that matter. I rent and don’t know nothing about the garage.”

“Then can you explain how your DNA got into one of the cages, along with Katie Snellgroves?”

“Nope. I ain’t been in there in months.”

My two hands landed on the table and I leaned in. “Look, Mr. Dixon. Your DNA did not just walk into that cage, nor did Katie Snellgrove’s. Tell us how it got there.”

He shrugged but said nothing.

“Where is Katie Snellgrove?”

“I don’t know, as I don’t know her.”

“Then where is Freedom?” When I asked that, his head jerked up.

“What happened to her?”

“That’s what we want to know. You met her five days ago. Where did you take her?”

“To a coffee shop. I felt sorry for her cuz her parents never let her do things like that.”

“Then where did you go?”

“I dropped her off where I picked her up.” He rubbed his arms and fidgeted in his seat. I called BS on that.

“You can do better than that, Mr. Dixon.” I stared him down and he shrank in his seat. His five feet ten inches lost several. He had beefy arms... arms that could overtake Katie’s scrawny ones without too much trouble. I noticed a few scratches on the front of his wrists. “How’d you get those?”

“My cat.”

Jerry photographed the wounds.

“Cat, huh? Where was your cat when we paid that visit on you?”

“Most likely outside. He is a good mouser to have around.”

I didn’t have the patience for this, especially with the way I felt today. I slammed my hand on the table so loud Dixon jerked. “Enough of this. Tell us where she is. You do realize this is a death penalty state, right?”

He glanced down but never answered. “If you help us now, we can help you.”

“Help me? How?” Jerry took over. “You’re in big trouble, Mr. Dixon. We found lots of child pornography on your computers, links to a human trafficker, evidence that you participated in human auctions, and more. Add to that, we have a missing thirteen-year-old and DNA evidence linking the two of you. You could be thrown on death row. If you cooperate, we might be able to get that reduced. Information in exchange for your life, Mr. Dixon. Now, what’ll it be?”

“Like I said, I took her to the coffee shop, then took her back.”

“Did anyone else know of your plans?” Jerry asked.

Here was where it got interesting. Dixon didn’t answer immediately and I prayed he wouldn’t lawyer up.

Then he shocked us all by saying, “Yeah. There was someone. But if I tell you, he’ll kill me.”

“That’s only if he knows.”

Dixon leaned back and sneered. “Oh, he’ll know. He knows everything.”

“We can protect you,” Jerry said.

“You talking WITSEC?”

Jerry glanced at both Fred and me. “No, that’s not our agency, but we can keep you guarded.”

“No way. I want to talk to my lawyer.”

“Fine, but Mr. Dixon, the best your lawyer can do with the evidence we have is to plea down your sentence. Unless you want the death penalty. It would go a long way if you would just tell us where Katie is.”

Dixon leaned back and frowned. “None of you are listening. I don’t have her.”

I stood and walked around the small space. Then I asked, “If you had to give us your best guess, where would it be?”

After a brief silence, he said, “Up in the quarry. There’s a building back there.”

The quarry. “You mean the one up in Dahlenega?”

“Yep, that’s the one.”

Jerry called for a guard to return Dixon to his cell and he hollered, “I want my lawyer.”

“You’ll have him and pray that girl is still alive.” Jerry’s fists hit the table and then we were out of there, preparing for a run up the road to see if we had a rescue or a body.

BY THE TIME WE GEARED UP, TRAVELED THE DISTANCE TO THE quarry, and crashed in the door of the outbuilding, two hours had passed. Katie Snellgrove’s arms and legs were shackled

and then chained to a chair, hungry but otherwise fine. When we freed her, she bawled, asking for her parents.

“We’re going to take you to them, Katie, but did any of them touch you?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I woke up here and don’t remember.”

“Was anyone here with you?”

Her head bobbed up and down. “A man would come every day, maybe three times. I was so scared at night. I was all by myself.”

I wrapped my jacket around her and asked, “Can you walk?”

“I... I think so.”

As I helped her to the car, I told Jerry, “We need a sketch artist. It may be the only way to get Dixon’s accomplices.”

Katie’s story didn’t line up with Dixon’s. When he met her, there was someone else along and he never took her back to where he’d picked her up.

“Katie, when did they drug you?”

“I met Freedom Lover, only he wasn’t who he said he was. He was old and yucky. I got scared and tried to run, but someone grabbed me and that’s all I remember.” She spoke between sobs, so I had to strain to understand her words. I repeated them just to make sure I didn’t miss anything.

“He was real bad.”

“Yes, he was.”

She got into the back seat of Jerry’s SUV, and I covered her with a blanket. Fred and Jerry came, and we left for the hospital. Jerry called Katie’s parents on the way, allowing her to speak to them.

I leaned my head back and listened. This was one of the good cases. We got the victim back and now could go after the perps with more evidence.

“Happy, McLain?”

I opened my eyes to see Jerry watching me from the rearview mirror.

“You bet I am.” Chalk up one for the team.

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Eighteen



LANDRY

CLEARLY, I'D FUCKED UP. MY BROTHER HANDED ME MY ASS first, and then his wife added the icing on the cake.

“You need help, man, if you’re going to do this kind of shit. Why not give anyone a heads-up?” Stanton gave me his death stare and even at my age, it had me shriveling.

“Shiloh is great and going through a lot right now. I just don’t understand you, Landry. Why are you doing your best to ruin things between the two of you?” Stacey glared.

“Take it from me. Backtrack and start sucking up now, before it’s too late.” He spoke from experience when he disappeared on his wife before they were married. It was not good. Why hadn’t my stubborn ass thought about that?

“I know, I know. You two are right. Last night the walls closed in and I ran. To be honest, I’m not even sure what I want.”

My brother crossed his arms and glowered. “Then why the fuck did you even bring her here? Why the encouragement? I can only guess at what you told her.”

Each of his words made me feel smaller and smaller. “Okay, I fucked up and need to fix it, but I don’t know how.”

“A lot of sucking up. That’s how.”

Why the hell had I drunk so much last night that I couldn't even get myself home? I thought I was smarter than that, but apparently, I had some growing up to do.

I left the two of them, their stares burning my back. The hottest shower I could tolerate didn't even wash the guilt away. This day was going to suck.

The first thing on my to-do list was to call Shiloh. She didn't answer, so I left her a text. Then another. And another. After fifteen, I gave up. She was ignoring me, and who could blame her? For fuck's sake, we'd slept together and then I pulled this on her. "Urrgh!" Frustration oozed from every pore. And don't get me started on the self-loathing.

When I got to work, my admin was busy, so I breezed past her without a hello. After slamming things around, she showed her face and asked if I needed coffee.

"No. Water."

She tiptoed out and returned with a pitcher of ice water and a glass. I downed one like I'd been in the desert. That's exactly how my throat felt... on fire with thirst.

Concentrating was impossible. Every time I opened a contract, my mind spun back to Shiloh. How could I right this wrong? And the most poignant question was, did I even want to continue this with her?

Stanton stormed in later that afternoon. "Where the fuck is the contract? We promised it would be delivered by this morning."

"Sorry. I'm finishing up my review."

"Well hurry it up before he thinks we're a bunch of incompetents and will drive his business into the ground."

"Right." He stomped out and I finished, praying there weren't any errors. The legal team was top notch, but sometimes they left things out we'd discussed with the client. It was my job to ensure that everything was correct.

Adding my e-signature, I forwarded it to Stanton. Then I dropped my forehead to the cool desk. My throbbing head was

well deserved, but I wished it would leave.

I tried Shiloh again, but no answer as expected, so I left another round of texts, begging for forgiveness. I glanced at the couch in my office and its pull was irresistible. Figuring that a short nap would help, I lay down and closed my eyes. When I woke, complete darkness filled the room. Shit, what time was it? I checked and it was almost eight. I scrambled to grab my things and go home.

Shiloh had never responded, but when I got to the house, I couldn't find her. I pounded on my brother's door, but no answer, so I went down to the kitchen. They were both there and the sour looks they gave me told me more than words.

"Where have you been?" Stanton asked.

"I fell asleep at work. Has Shiloh come back yet?"

My brother frowned. "You never spoke to her?"

"She wouldn't return my calls or texts, so no."

"Good luck then. You really fucked things up."

"Don't beat a dead horse. I am aware. I need to speak to her."

"You won't find her here. She's gone."

His words punched a fist straight to my heart. "What do you mean she's gone?"

"She came home around six, went upstairs, grabbed her things, and told us both goodbye," Stacey said.

"Goodbye? Where did she go? Her house is a mess."

"We know, but she said she'd be staying with family."

I dropped my head and stared at the floor. I'd really done it. "Fuck."

"An understatement," my sarcastic brother said.

"Landry, is Shiloh worth anything to you?" Stacey asked.

"Of course she is!"

"Then fight for her. Don't give up."

The urge to scream hit. “That’s the problem. I don’t know what I want. I thought I did, but now.” I lifted my hands.

“What changed?” Stacey asked.

My insecurities, that’s what. I didn’t want to reveal how deep my self-doubting went. Instead, I shrugged.

“Come on, Landry. You know, admitting it to yourself is the first step in fixing things.” Stanton understood, but for whatever reason, I knew I was unable to love.

Escaping my brother’s stare was impossible. When I didn’t respond, he added, “Listen, I know how inadequate you feel about being able to love someone. I was there, so I get it. Let me give you some advice. Don’t give up on yourself or her. Don’t be afraid. It only makes things worse. You’ll miss out on the best things in life.” He put his arm around his wife and pulled her against his side. Then he kissed the top of her head.

“What if I can’t? What if I try and fail?”

“Ask yourself this, What would my life be like without her? That will give you a place to start.”

Shiloh had been the single person who understood me at a time I needed it the most. Why couldn’t I see her in that light now? What was it?

“I would like that, but I really hate her job.” That was the crux of things.

“What exactly do you hate about it?” I was surprised he asked because I’d discussed this with Stacey. I figured they shared everything.

“It’s dangerous.”

“It is, and as I already told you, I wouldn’t like it if my wife had a job like that. However, I’d still be proud of what she did and figure out a way to live with it. There’s danger in everything we do. Look what happened to Dad and me.” He was referring to the car accident that took our father’s life and fucked up his leg. “Look what happened when we were in that plane crash. My attitude is when it’s your time, there’s no

bargaining chip you can use. Should we be careful in what we do? Hell yes. But you can't live life in a bubble."

He made sense. "How do I deal with my anxiety associated with it?"

"Counseling. And more counseling. It works and I'm proof of it."

"I need a name then because the counselors I've used in the past didn't help."

He walked to one of the drawers where we kept paper and pens. Then he wrote down a name and handed it to me. "You'll change. I promise."

I'd make an appointment first thing in the morning. Now I needed to get Shiloh to speak to me.

"Thanks. Any advice on how to get her to respond to my calls?"

"Do not give up on her, Landry." Stacey grinned.

"You really like her, don't you?"

"She's awesome and you two make a great pair."

We sure as hell worked magic in bed that one time. I'd love nothing more than to get her back here.

"Thanks, you two. You should go into counseling."

"You'll change. It's about control. None of us learned to deal with it growing up because our mother was so cruel. When we grew older, it was obvious we needed it. The thing is, you can't control everything. One, it's impossible. And two, you'll make yourself miserable. That therapist will teach you how to live without having to be in control of everything. The first step is to back away from things. When you believe you have to be in charge of everything, take a step back and breathe."

That sounded way too easy, but maybe it wasn't. I went to the den and tried Shiloh again. This time I left her a lengthy message, apologizing. A text followed, reiterating what the

message said. I'd continue to blow up her phone until she called or texted back.

She did neither, but I continued. It was after ten when I went to bed. I vowed to keep trying, even if it took months. Yes, I was a dick, but we had to talk. I wouldn't give up for anything.

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Nineteen



SHILOH

KATIE SNELLGROVE'S PARENTS FELL TO THEIR KNEES WHEN they arrived at the hospital and saw their daughter. Her mother was speechless as she hugged her daughter. After having worked these cases for a couple of years, my emotions were generally in check when we were lucky enough to have a rescue and subsequent reunion. But this one brought tears to my eyes. It was great to witness this type of love.

"Mr. And Mrs. Snellgrove, I'm so happy you're here. Katie needs you while she is examined by a physician to make sure she's okay."

"But I feel fine," Katie insisted.

"I know you do, but it's best we find out for sure."

Mrs. Snellgrove wrapped an arm around Katie, and I followed them into a bay. "We've requested a forensic exam to be performed, hoping to find more evidence," I explained. The doctor came in and introduced herself. Katie's mom stayed with her while I joined her father in the waiting area.

Thirty minutes had passed when Mr. Snellgrove asked, "What's taking so long?"

"You know hospitals and their paperwork. A forensic exam also takes longer. They look closely for things you wouldn't think of, like fibers on her clothes, hair, those kinds of things. Can I get you some coffee?" I offered.

“Please.”

Fred stayed while I made a run to the coffee shop in the hospital. I returned bearing three giant cups.

I sighed. “Mr. Snellgrove, I know this is asking a lot, but when they’re finished here, we’d like to take Katie to the station to ask her questions while everything is still fresh in her mind.”

“I have an idea that the ordeal will stay fresh forever.”

He was right, but descriptions dim after time. “True, but her mind is sharp and hopefully we’ll get something.”

“How did you find her?”

“A suspect told us her location.”

“Can’t you ask him?”

I scoffed. “We did. He lawyered up.”

Mr. Snellgrove shook his head and frowned, disgust was written on his face. “That shouldn’t be allowed.”

“It’s the law, sir,” Fred said.

My phone rang and dinged so many times I lost count. Fred finally asked, “You going to answer that thing?”

“Not anytime soon.”

“Man troubles?”

“Nope.” There was no longer a man in my life, so therefore no troubles. As soon as I could get back to Landry’s house, I’d grab my things and it would be adios.

Fred’s brows shot up, but he didn’t ask anything else. I didn’t offer any other information either.

When they were finished with Katie, I spoke to one of the doctors.

“As soon as we have everything processed here, we’ll get it over to you. It should be there by the end of today. One thing to note. She was sexually active and I’m not sure if it was from her past or this. She wouldn’t answer. We swabbed for sperm, so you’ll know soon.”

“Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it.”

I’d called Jerry to tell him we were on the way. The sketch artist would be ready when we arrived. We put Katie and her parents into an interrogation room, adding some chairs.

“Anyone hungry?”

“Me. I’m really hungry,” Katie said.

“What would you like?”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“Of course. You name it and it’s yours.” I’d buy her a steak dinner if that’s what she wanted.

“Can I get chicken fingers and french fries, please?”

“You sure can.” I took her parents’ order and went out to get everything. Fast-food restaurants surrounded the office, so I was back rather quickly.

I watched as Katie devoured her food and then picked off her parents’ too.

“Katie, when was the last time you ate? Before this?” I asked.

“Yesterday. Someone always brought me food right before it got dark.”

Poor child must’ve been scared to death at night. That room had one dim light and no windows. Katie’s wrists and ankles had been shackled. The purple rings around them would fade soon, but the memories wouldn’t.

The door opened and Jerry came in along with Donna, who held a laptop.

After introductions to the parents were made, Donna said, “Hi Katie, I’m Donna and with your help, I’m going to sketch the men who held you. Is that okay?”

Katie nodded her consent. “I hope I can help. It was really dim in that room, so I didn’t get a good look.”

“We know what Michael Dixon looks like, so we need descriptions of the other men.”

Donna sat next to Katie and placed the laptop on the table. After some pointed questions, she began her sketch. As she went, Katie would either nod or shake her head and Donna would change things up. She finished with the first and started on the second. With good luck, we'd get the names after the sketches ran through our program. If these two didn't have any priors, we'd be back to square one.

I tried to contain a yawn but was unsuccessful. Fred's brows went up and I excused myself. The lack of sleep had taken its toll. Fred joined me and asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah, just tired." I checked the time to see it was close to five.

"Why don't you call it a day? I'll handle things."

"You sure?"

"What, you don't think I'm competent?"

His joke had me swatting his arm.

"Get out of here, McLain. You've done a great job on this case, and I'll handle the rest tonight."

I sat in Landry's car and thought about how I should deal with things. First, I called my mom to ask if I could stay there. Then I rented a car.

I had over twenty texts from him, and that didn't include calls. Work had taken over my entire day, so I never figured out what I'd tell him. When I got to the house, I went inside and straight to my room. There were only a few things in there since I'd borrowed everything from Stacey. I was running down the stairs when I heard my name.

"Where you off to?" Stacey asked.

My expression was sheepish. She'd been so wonderful, I felt like a thief sneaking out. "Uh, I'm leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah, oh, all your clothes are hanging up or on the shelves in the closet. I don't know what I would've done without your help." I rushed my explanation.

“Where are you going?”

“To stay with family. This isn’t working between Landry and me.”

She hugged me. “I’m so sorry. I wish it had gone differently.”

“Me too, but after last night, I have zero trust in him.”

“He never came home?”

“Nope, and didn’t answer my texts or calls. Now he expects me to answer his, but I can’t just yet.”

“Oh, honey, I understand. If you need to talk, you can call me. Confidentially. I want to smack that man right now.”

“Get in line.”

She smiled. “I do know one thing. His brother is going to kill him.”

“Oh, I’ll give this to you.” I handed her the key fob to the car. “I left it out front as I didn’t know where else to park it.”

“It’s fine. I’ll have Stanton handle it. You sure you still don’t need it?”

“No, my Uber ride should be here any minute and I have a rental to drive until I get my things straightened out. The house is still a mess due to roof damage, but I can get my things out.”

Stacey grabbed one of my hands. “Please promise to keep in touch.”

“I will.” I said it with a kind smile, but I seriously doubted that would happen. Landry and I were over and torturing myself would not be a part of my agenda.

My Uber showed up and off I went. He dropped me at the car rental place, where I picked up my Honda Civic. It wasn’t a bad car but it was a far cry from that fancy Range Rover I’d used.

The next stop was my house. It was already dark and there was no electricity. How fun. I grabbed a flashlight I’d brought

from work and danced my way around the debris that was still outside. Once in the door, I went up to my room. Thankfully, it was on the opposite side of the house that took the brunt of the storm. I threw a bunch of clothes into a suitcase, not even bothering to fold them. I could come back later for more. Then I grabbed my cosmetics and other toiletries, a few pairs of shoes and dragged everything to the car out front.

Now for my parents. When I pulled into their driveway, my mom ran out, nearly yanked me out of the car, and hugged me so hard I couldn't breathe. "Mom, you're breaking my ribs," I squeaked.

"I don't care. That's what you get for not calling me these past few days."

"I'm sorry, but I've been on a case that was just overwhelming. The good news is we found the young teenager that was missing." She was still hugging me, so I wheezed the explanation.

"Oh, honey, that's fabulous."

"Urfghgl. Can you let me go now, please?"

She released me, stepped back, and stared. "You look terrible."

"Gee, thanks, Mom. Just what I wanted to hear."

"Well, darling, it's true. Have you been sleeping and taking your vitamins?"

"No and yes, in that order."

For that, I got a huge dose of the stink eye. "Shiloh McLain! What on earth is the matter with you? How many times have I told you the importance of sleep and your looks?"

Annnndddd... this is why I didn't want to stay here. I loved my mom, adored her, really. But the only thing she ever wanted to talk about was my looks. She was always sending me emails on how to look better, how to brighten my skin, and the best anti-wrinkle products to use. I didn't care about that stuff, but when I'd tell her that, all I got was a lecture.

“At least your hair looks good. But if you don’t get the correct amount of sleep for your blood type, all those beautiful waves will fall out.”

“Mom, please. I have enough stress right now. I don’t need you adding to it. Can we just go inside?”

She actually had the grace to appear shamefaced. “Come on. I’ll send Bud out to get your things. I have your old bedroom all ready for you.”

I looked toward my bedroom window and saw the tree I used to sneak out of the second-story room. An image of Landry came to mind as I recalled telling him about that. My heart had a hole in it the size of Georgia. Why did he do that to me? The hurt settled into my gut, making me queasy. Every time I thought about him staying out all night in the arms of another woman, I wanted to punch a hole in the wall and vomit.

“Come on, honey. I have dinner ready for you too.”

“Oh, Mom. I should’ve called. I ate at the station.”

My mom stopped and turned around, propping a hand on her hip. “Why’d you go and do a thing like that?”

“I was hungry?” Why else would I eat, I wanted to say.

She spun back around and stomped into the house. I guess I’d been rude for eating dinner.

Bud came out and gave me a big hug. “How’s my favorite FBI agent?”

“I hope I’m your only FBI agent.”

“You know it. Go on inside. I’ll grab your things. And Shiloh, it’s great seeing you.”

“You too, Bud. I’ve missed you.” And it was true. My bio dad never showed his face much. After he and Mom divorced, he moved across the country and started a new family. I saw him once in a blue moon. But when Mom married Bud, he was everything I dreamed a dad could be.

He carried my huge suitcase and other things upstairs then joined us in the kitchen. Mom had everything ready to go for dinner.

“I’m sad I already ate because this smells delicious.”

“Grab a plate,” Bud suggested.

I patted my belly. “I can’t. I don’t have any room.” Ice water sounded perfect, so I made a glass and sat with them while they ate.

“Tell me what’s going on in your life, sweetheart,” Mom said.

“I’ve been crazy busy with this last case and then the whole house thing.”

“If you need help, let me know,” Bud offered.

“I might take you up on that. I went there and the second floor where the bedrooms are seemed okay. They sent structural engineers in to make sure the place was stable enough to enter and they gave me their okay. The first floor in the back by the dining area is a mess. That’s where the roof was torn off and I have tree damage. I’m going to look for a place to live while it’s being repaired.”

Mom’s head popped up from getting ready to put a forkful of food into her mouth. “Don’t be silly, dear. You can stay here.”

“Oh, Mom, I really appreciate the offer, but it might be months before the place is done and I am too far from the office out here. With traffic, I’d be leaving before dawn every day and not getting home until late.”

Mom tsked. “Yeah, you’re right. Traffic is a mess these days with all the road construction.”

Bud sighed. “It never ends. When we moved here, there was no traffic and now, look at it. I hate leaving this area because of how long it takes to get anywhere.”

“Tell me about it. I’m in it every day. When we go anywhere, we never use the interstate. It takes too long.” The

traffic discussion ended and my response to Mom seemed to satisfy her. Living here would be disastrous for me.

“Tell us about your love life.” Mom winked.

“Who has time for that? Not me.” I raised my hand.

Mom frowned. “Shiloh, you have to find time. Love is the greatest thing in the world. And if you don’t settle down, I’ll never have any grandchildren. The boys are going to be bachelors forever.”

I laughed. “Who’d want to marry either of them? They both are so bossy. No woman would put up with that.”

Mom gave Bud a sly look. “Women have their ways, dear. When you find the right man, you’d be surprised what you can do.”

“Don’t listen to her, Shiloh. Evelyn thinks she’s got me wrapped around her pinkie.”

“I do, and you know it.”

I added my two cents. “You both are wrapped around each other’s pinkies.”

Bud leaned over and pecked Mom on her cheek. “Honey, I think you’re right.” It was nice to see them both still so happy together. I doubted I’d ever find the kind of love they shared.

“You two are lucky. I’m happy you found each other.”

“We are, and I’m especially lucky because I inherited a daughter who’s been the best blessing a man could ask for.”

I got up and went behind the two of them, giving them a cluster hug. I loved Bud. He was perfect for Mom.

“You’ll find your Prince Charming one day. And it’ll happen when you least expect it.” Mom patted my hand.

Unfortunately, I believe I’d both found and lost him. The brief time we’d spent together had been wonderful until... maybe... nah, I wouldn’t let myself think that way. It served no purpose except to get my hopes up, only for them to crash back to the ground.

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Twenty



LANDRY

WEEKS PASSED WITHOUT A SINGLE WORD FROM SHILOH, EVEN though I continued to call and text. One morning, I was in the kitchen when Stacey joined me.

“Any word from Shiloh lately?” she asked.

“Nothing, and I don’t know where to find her. There are construction workers at her townhome, so they’re getting things fixed, but I’ve no idea where she’s living.”

“Can you see her at work?”

“I’ve tried, and either she’s rarely there, or she has me blocked because every time I go, they say she isn’t in. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

Stacey took a drink of the coffee she held. “Hmm. Maybe I can run interference. I doubt she’d ignore my calls.”

I half cringed at the thought. Having my sister-in-law do that was a bit over the top... like asking your mom to set up a playdate. “Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather you not get involved. This is my deal and I need to handle it on my own.”

“If you change your mind...”

“I’ll let you know. Thanks for the offer, though.”

Work was a disaster. I’d blanked out on a Zoom call and Stanton was furious. I didn’t blame him. I’d never done that

before, but I'd been holed up in my office throwing pity parties for myself every day.

My admin called in, and I didn't bother answering it. Even when she knocked on the door, I ignored it. Only when Stanton charged inside without knocking could I no longer hide.

"What the hell are you doing? You missed our call today and I was left there with my pants around my ankles."

I didn't know how to respond as there wasn't anything to say. I stared back at him.

"Well? Have you nothing to say?"

"I'm sorry?" I held up my hands in surrender.

"Sorry? Sorry?" The walls vibrated from his booming voice and I flinched.

"Yes. There's really nothing else to say."

Even though Stanton was my brother, it did nothing to alleviate the tension that sprung between us. His stance reminded me of a rattlesnake getting ready to strike. When it came to business matters, there were no easing things.

"You should take a leave of absence until you pull your head out of your ass. I've been fixing your mistakes for several weeks now and I'm sick and tired of having to review every goddamn thing that comes my way. I'm doing the work of two right now. I could get one of our other execs to step in for you."

"No! Not gonna happen." If I didn't have work to take my mind off things, I'd go crazy and I told him as much.

"You're already crazy. By the looks of things, you haven't called that therapist yet, have you?"

"No." It was a hard thing to admit.

He yanked out his cell phone so fast I was shocked his pants didn't rip. His call went through, and he said, "Hi Dr. Winston. This is Stanton Baines and I'm calling for my brother, who needs an appointment." He shoved his phone into

my hand, leaving me no choice but to speak to the person on the other end. They gladly squeezed me in at the end of today. I wasn't sure why she said squeezed because my appointment would be the last one and there was no one behind me to do the squeezing.

“Why that look? You got the appointment.”

“Uh, nothing. Here.” I gave him back his phone. “I guess I should thank you.”

“Don't thank me until that head of yours stops seeing brown. I mean it, Landry. I'll fucking pull you out of here as fast as I put you in.”

He referred to when I'd been a useless asshole until my family came to me and asked me to join the business. Stanton had been in a car accident—the one that killed my father—so they really needed help. I agreed and I'm still here because it turned out, I love working here.

“I got you.”

“Do you? Because I need to know if I'll have to find someone else.”

I let out a chest full of CO₂. “I'm good. I swear I'll do better.”

His eyes pierced mine before he left. I cringed beneath his scrutiny. It was time to pull my act together. After he was gone, I stupidly realized I hadn't asked him how the teleconference went. I went to his office, but he wasn't there. I asked his admin and she said he was with Stacey. Her door was open, and I heard him shouting about my negligence.

“He's had a rough time.”

“It shouldn't interfere with work.”

“Did you have issues at work when we went through our rough patch? Because I sure did.”

“You know the answer to that.”

“Then give Landry some time.” My heart grinned. God bless my sister-in-law, who always stuck up for me.

“He’s seeing Dr. Winston this afternoon.”

“Honey, that’s fabulous. She’ll help him so much, like she did us.”

I had listened in but finally got the nerve to knock.

“Oh, hey Landry. We were just talking about you,” Stacey said.

“I can only imagine,” I said, glancing at my brother. “Can we talk?”

“Anything you say to me, you can say in front of my wife.” His mouth pinched with anger.

“I know that, but I didn’t want to bore her. It’s about the call I missed.”

After a curt nod, he kissed his wife, and we went to his office next door.

“What did I miss?”

He rattled off so many things, my head spun. “Yeah, it was a lot. I’ll have Nancy send you everything. She came in when you didn’t.” His mouth pressed together in a thin line. “You’ll have your hands full for a while. Mr. Johnstone wants to parcel everything out.”

That meant Mr. Johnstone wanted to break up his business, forcing us to buy each one separately, which equated to more than one contract and a huge pain in the ass.

When I frowned, Stanton said, “That’s why I’m so pissed off.”

My hands went up again. “I know and the only thing I can say is I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I swear.”

“Better not. You’ll be working late tonight.”

“Uh, I have that appointment.”

“And you’ll be back here afterward. Now give me five and then check your email.”

I hadn’t seen Stanton this pissed off since... I didn’t remember when.

I grabbed a mug of coffee and went back to work. The email came in and my brain whirled like a top. I'd never seen a corporation split up into so many entities. It would be impossible to do all this. I reviewed everything in the corporation and then restructured it into several entities that would make more sense. It was a sports equipment company that had teetered on bankruptcy for several years. We offered him a handsome sum for it. He wanted to divide it into sports specialties, such as golf, exercise equipment, footwear, and clothing. But then he wanted each category broken down into too many pieces. They'd never work. If we had to buy all of them this way, the only thing we'd do would be to put them back together. The golf, exercise equipment, and clothing made sense. But having a separate store for footwear didn't. And then having a children's division, a women's golf division and so on was ridiculous.

I restructured everything into something reasonable and sent it back to Stanton. A few minutes later, he was in my office again.

"I tried that, but he insisted on this crazy schematic. We both know it'll never work. My suggestion is to offer him a sum for each entity but lowball it. If he doesn't like it, then we can put something like what you have on the table with a better price."

That made sense, so I went at it and re-created it again until I was satisfied. If he accepted this, he would be crazy because it was half the price of the entire corporation as one. People surprised you, though, in business deals. If they had built the business themselves, it was their baby and they wanted to ensure the best outcomes possible.

I shot it back to Stanton, and this time, he called. "I like it. I'm going to forward it to him. It looks good, Landry. Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Had I been in on the teleconference, I might have backed up your suggestion. Anyway, let me know what he says."

It was close to the time I had to leave for my appointment, so I closed up my work and got ready to leave. I let my admin know I was out for the rest of the day.

Dr. Wilson's office wasn't too far from the office. I arrived and had to fill out paperwork. It took me a while there was so much of it. A patient left and I was called in. After the introductions, she looked at my paperwork. "I'll review this information thoroughly, but let's talk now. What's been going on with you?"

I explained how Shiloh had affected me. It wasn't easy and I kept squirming. Opening the book of Landry was complicated. When she dug into my past, it got super hairy. That's when I closed up shop on her.

"Mr. Baines, can I call you Landry?"

"Sure."

"Everything about the next few visits will be uncomfortable, but I promise it's necessary. I can't help you if I don't grasp what the real problem is."

My fingers tapped a continuous melody on my thigh. "Okay." I launched into our story. When I got to the end, she asked several questions.

"How much do you know about the danger her position imposes?"

"Not much other than what I conjure up in my head."

"Granted, it does sound daunting, but don't you think her team keeps her safe?"

"As much as possible. But... how many times do you hear about a law enforcement officer getting killed in the line of duty?"

"You make a good point, but you also have to respect her wants and needs in her career."

She scribbled on a notebook. "When was the last time you talked to her?"

“Several weeks ago, and not for lack of trying. She won’t answer any of my calls or texts.”

“I’m sorry for that. But now we have to go back.”

“Go back?”

“Yes, I need to know more about your childhood.”

My lips pressed together. Those were dark times for me, and I hated revisiting them.

“Can you tell me about your family?”

A heavy dose of sarcasm hit. “You should be aware of all that from my brother.”

She leaned closer as we sat in two chairs that faced each other. “Landry, I treat each of my patients as individuals and don’t use anything from other patients. Now if you and Stanton had made an appointment together, that would’ve been different. But you’re here as an individual and I will treat you as such.”

It made sense. Besides, with HIPAA laws, there was no sharing of information on patients. A hint of a grin appeared on my face. I was impressed with her professionalism.

I went for it. “I had shitty parents. My dad was fine, but he was never around. Mom had kid duty and sucked at it. Our nannies did the best they could, but she was the boss. If she wasn’t yelling, she was drinking. I hated life in that monstrosity of a house. Until I met Shiloh. Then everything changed because she was my escape hatch.”

“Tell me more.”

I took her up to the point where Shiloh moved and that’s where we ended the session.

“Landry, I’d like to see you once a week at the very least, but my preference is twice a week. As we get into things, we can adjust that. Are you good with that?”

“Yeah. That’s fine.”

Her admin had left for the day, so she made my next appointment.

“On your next visit, we’ll go through your paperwork.”

In retrospect, I didn’t feel awful like I thought I would. It was the opposite. Stanton was right. This therapy thing was a good idea. I should’ve done it sooner. Maybe I wouldn’t have wrecked what Shiloh and I had.

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Twenty-One



SHILOH

DIXON WAS BEHIND BARS WITHOUT BAIL. BUT THERE WAS A piece of that puzzle missing. We couldn't connect him to anything we had. We still had to review his hard drives but were waiting on IT for results on deleted files.

Fred came by and set a file on my desk. "Have you looked at these?"

"What's that?"

"DNA results from the crime scene."

"You mean that cabin? When did they come in?"

"I think last night. This was on my desk when I got in." He put his index finger on it.

I snatched it up and riffled through it. Dixon's DNA was all over it, but there were two other suspects. We'd been eyeing them for some time. "These are those guys we thought were involved in that abduction a few months ago, right?"

"Yup, the very same. Our suspicions were correct."

At the time, we didn't have any solid evidence linking them, so we couldn't get search warrants. The judge refused plus the DA said we didn't have a case. We were told they all needed more than our hunch.

"I can't believe this. We got 'em. Let's bring them in." I jumped up and headed to Jerry's office, but Fred stopped me.

“Hold your little horsies, lady.”

“Why?”

“Jerry’s not in yet. And I want to see the secrets Dixon’s computer holds. If he’s connected to them, that’ll give us more ammo for the judge.”

Fred was right. “Let’s call IT and see where they are.”

“Better yet, let’s pay them a visit.” I nodded and off we went.

We spoke with our usual contact who assured us that we’d have the results later this morning.

“Did you find anything?” I was curious to see if we even should wait.

Her sly grin told me what I wanted to know. “Let’s just say you’ll be pleased.”

I touched her arm and thanked her. They weren’t allowed to release anything to us until their supervisor signed off on it.

On the way back to our section, Fred commented, “You know, McLain, I might be getting excited about this now.”

“Right? I’m antsy though.”

“I am too, but let’s review everything we have now.”

“How much involvement do you think Dixon had in this?” I looked through all the DNA results.

“A lot. He may not have been the main guy, but he was in deep.”

Jerry came by and wanted an update. We put him off, telling him about IT.

“As soon as you two hear something, I want it.”

Our file also contained what the profilers submitted before we found Katie. Everything was lining up perfectly. When I took it in, we had tons of evidence to nail these guys right now. But what if there was someone else more important in this? That’s what we were banking on.

I went home that night to find Mom pacing the kitchen. She wrung her hands, but when she saw me, she frowned. “Where have you been? I’ve been worried since you didn’t call.”

“Mom, my job is pretty intense. I can’t call you all the time.” Cue, it was time to move.

Her hand moved to rest on her hip. “Well, that’s inconsiderate. I worry about you all the time and you can’t spare a minute to call me?”

Enter Bud, Mom’s calming effect. “What’s all the fuss about?”

Mom vented and he pulled her into his arms. “Now, honey, we talked about this. Shiloh is a grown woman and has a life of her own.” He rubbed her back and sent me a wink over her head.

“I know, but it’s so hard.”

It was time for me to say something. “Hey, I was going to tell you, but as of tomorrow, I’m going to stay with my brother.”

Bud eyed me over Mom’s head and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Mom sniffed, so I went on. “My hours are crazy, Mom, and Brady’s house is close to work. It’ll be so much more convenient.” I’d spoken to both my brothers today and Brady was the better of the two for this.

“Are you sure?” Mom asked. “I worry you’re not eating enough.”

Chuckling, I patted my stomach. “My jeans don’t agree with you.”

Mom left Bud’s embrace and hugged me. “Sweetheart, I don’t mean to make it difficult on you, but as a mom, I worry. You’ll see one day when you have kids of your own.”

That would happen when hell froze over. I kept those thoughts to myself.

We sat down to a delicious pot roast dinner. Mom was a very good cook and seemed to turn the simplest of dishes into a gourmet meal. That was another good reason for me to get out of there.

After dinner, we were all sitting around watching TV when Fred called.

“They’re in. All the IT reports.”

“I’m on my way.”

Mom stiffened. “Where are you off to?”

“The office. Important information on our suspects just came in.”

Mom frowned. “Can’t it wait?”

“No, sorry. Don’t wait up for me. I’ll be late.”

It was a pleasant ride in without all the heavy traffic to navigate through. Fred was at his desk when I arrived.

“Pull up a chair.”

We reviewed everything IT had emailed us and had our aha moment. “Do you think this is enough to bring him in?”

“Jerry needs to see this first. This is the big fish we’ve been after. No wonder we could never find him. He hid under his ring of influence.”

Fred eyed me. I aimed a thumb at my chest. “You want me to call?”

“Yeah, he likes you better than me.”

“Ha. Not true, but I’ll take the hit this time.”

Jerry answered with a salty tone. “What is it, McLain?”

“We got something huge off Dixon’s deleted files. The IT report just came in.”

“Aw, hell. Can it wait ’til tomorrow?”

“I think not.”

He huffed his response. “I’ll be in shortly.”

Since I had my phone on speaker, Fred heard. “Yeah, he definitely likes you better. He would’ve chewed me a new one for that call.”

“I would’ve gladly taken it. Let’s run a search on all files that include Alexander Wright.”

Mr. Wright had been a person of interest for quite some time but always slipped under the radar. Perhaps this time we’d landed on our gold mine. Senator Wright’s luck had run out at last.

The more we dug, the more gold we found. “This is great. Check out this message.” It clearly told Dixon what to do, where to go, and who his contacts were. “This guy is toast.”

“Let’s hope. You know how these guys always lawyer up and somehow escape untouched.”

“Not this time, Fred. I’m going to make sure of it.”

“Hey, I’m on your side, but every time we put one away, a new trafficker pops up.”

I pressed a fist to my aching chest as I thought of those poor young girls who must be frightened out of their wits. Sadness rolled over me in waves.

Jerry arrived. “This had better be worth it, you two, or I’m sending my wife after you.”

“Take a look at this.” Fred stood, giving Jerry his seat. “It’s a search we ran on Dixon’s deleted files, looking for Alexander Wright.”

Jerry scanned the files, not delving in too deep. “Wow. Right off the bat, what can you tell me?”

“He was connected to all the kidnapers of Katie Snellgrove. He was mentioned in their messages to each other. He’s the kingpin, Jerry.” I pointed to the files. “If you read each one, you’ll find it to be true. Our search for the lead guy landed us on him.”

Jerry sat straight up. “I’m going to need to dig into these. Send them over so I can start tonight. Nice work, you two. If

this reveals what I think it will, I'll ask for a warrant to search his property.”

I shifted in my chair as I tugged at my shirt. Waiting even a day might ruin our chances. “Jerry, I'm not sure we have that much time. We're weeks past Katie's rescue already. He may have dumped everything that associates him with those guys.”

Jerry crossed his arms over his chest. “If you can give me the highlights of these files, I'll use that. Otherwise, I need more than your word. You know how the system operates.”

I did. “We'll get something to you in an hour,” I promised as Fred cleared his throat.

When Jerry left, he asked, “Are you crazy?”

“We'll divvy it up and get the main points. With the two of us, we can zip right through it.”

A deep, weighted sigh echoed through his office. Then he gave in.

I went to my desk and began pouring through the files on my list. Speed reading for Wright's name brought up more than I thought. Each time it came up, I'd go through what was there very carefully, then copy and paste it into another file. At the end of the hour, I was positive we had enough for a search warrant.

I stood and stretched my cramped muscles. Then I picked up the printed docs on my way to Jerry's office.

“Here's what I found and there's plenty.” I handed him the copies. Fred came in and did the same.

Jerry scanned them and said, “If this isn't enough, we'll never catch him. I'll make the call and hopefully the warrant will be here in the morning. I hope we get a friendly judge on this. I don't want an ass chewing.”

“Let us know as soon as you find out. I'm calling it a night.” I left and went home. It was late and my parents left the lights on for me. I'd never unpacked my clothes, which was good because tomorrow I'd go to my brother's.

In the morning, I woke with a stiff neck. I didn't even remember going to sleep. I still wore my clothes from the night before.

A shower rejuvenated me. I stuffed everything back into my bag and dragged it downstairs. Bud jumped up when he saw me.

"Let me get that for you." He held out his hand for the keys and I handed them off. Then I poured a large mug of coffee. Mom sat at the table, working on a crossword puzzle.

"Long night?" she asked.

"Eh, not too bad. I slept like a rock."

She laughed. "Honey, rocks don't sleep."

"Well, you know what I mean. I didn't move all night."

"There are cinnamon rolls in the oven. Bud made them earlier."

"Yum. Are they done?"

"Yes, they're just staying warm."

I flew out of my seat to grab one or maybe two. Okay, it was two, but who was counting? I piled them on a plate and sat back down.

Bud came back and winked. "I see you found them."

"Mom clued me in," I answered with a mouthful.

"Shiloh McLain. You're not supposed to talk with food in your mouth."

"Sorry. Not sorry. These are damn good, Bud."

"Aren't they? I found the recipe on Pinterest."

I covered my mouth to prevent the food from flying out. I almost choked too. Bud on Pinterest? After swallowing, I said, "I can't believe you're on Pinterest."

"Why? They have the best ideas, projects, and recipes."

I wouldn't know about any of that. "If you say so."

On the ride to work, I chuckled over and over at the idea of my stepdad looking up stuff online.

When I got to work, another agent commented, “You’re in a happy mood today. I haven’t seen you smile like that in a while.”

“I am.” That was all he needed to know.

It was early, as I didn’t want to fight the traffic coming in. Fred wasn’t in yet and neither was Jerry. I sent a text to my brother reminding him about my moving in tonight.

What time will you be here???

Not sure. I’ll text you later to give you an update.

I got the thumbs-up emoji in response.

My computer sprang to life and I logged on, then dove into the files on Wright. My spine stiffened as determination took over. This man was going down if I had anything to do with it.

Luck hit and I found another message regarding the garage where Dixon lived. Wright told him to keep Katie in there until she could be taken to the quarry. *Drug her, but do not harm her. She needs to be perfect for the show.* Those were Wright’s exact words. My lips curled as I ground my molars. Show, my ass. That wasn’t a show, it was a sales platform. He wanted to get the highest bid possible for that young girl. I punched a fist into my palm. This bastard was evil.

Jerry walked behind me and said, “Hey.”

I jumped out of my seat, sending it back right into his groin.

“Youch! What the hell, McLain. Jumpy much?” His hand covered his crotch.

“You scared me. I didn’t hear you walk up.”

“It wasn’t like I tiptoed or anything. Jesus, you must’ve really been into that.” He pointed to my computer.

“Yeah, sorry about...” I aimed my finger at his crotch. “I found another link to Dixon on Wright. Look.”

He bent over to read. “Looks like we got him. The good news is the search warrant came through. I started thinking last night, why is he using his real name?”

“He’s not. IT uncovered it. His real name, that is. On the messaging, he went by Dark Vader. Original, huh?”

“IT linked that profile with Wright?”

“Yeah, I think through his IP address or something. You know that IT stuff is above my pay grade.”

“Mine too. Let’s assemble the team and get moving.”

We met at the vehicles, which contained the equipment necessary for the search. I groaned when I put on the Kevlar vest and adjusted the fit. Dots of perspiration formed on my forehead. I shouldn’t complain about them because they had already saved my life once. I’d been hit in the chest and the impact knocked me out, but I was fine otherwise.

The ride there took forever. My knees jumped as I rubbed my hands over the jeans I’d worn. We pulled up to his address to find it was gated. The vehicle triggered a call to the house from the keypad near the gate.

“Can I help you?”

“This is the FBI. We have a warrant to search the premises.”

“I need to contact Senator Wright.”

“No, you don’t. This warrant overrides anything Senator Wright has to say. Open the gates, or we’ll open them for you and Mr. Wright won’t like the aftermath.”

The gates slid open and we entered the property. This man lived high, like as high as Landry’s family. My jaw sagged when I got a look at the beautifully landscaped property. There were fountains and reflecting ponds. Not one but several. The long drive ended in front of a castle-like building.

One of the guys whistled. “Would you look at that? Wright built himself a palace for all his pretty little princesses.”

My hands fisted, nails biting into my palms. How many of those little girls never got to go home? How many of them were turned into drug addicts? Who knew where they'd all ended up, but I intended to find out.

A tall, older, rail-thin man stood in the open doorway. Unfortunately, we didn't have to break down the door. I was hoping for that so it would dispel some of my anger.

There were ten of us running the search. I asked the walking skeleton, "Where's Senator Wright? And where is his office?"

The senator is upstairs. He is aware you are here.

A booming voice caught our attention. "Who's in charge of this farce?" Wright stood at the top of the stairs. He was younger than I thought and quite handsome. Criminals came in all sizes and looks. It was easy to see how he could lure the girls in with his appearance. Tall, with light-brown hair, his haughty appearance oozed wealth. Prison would not suit this man at all.

We all jerked our attention to the owner of the voice. Jerry answered, "I am. Agent Jerry Baker and we have a warrant to search your property." He held up a piece of paper.

Wright descended the enormous staircase and stood in front of us, grabbing the warrant out of Jerry's hand. My shoulders tightened. The desire to snatch the warrant back had me itching to punch something.

Then Jerry said, "Detain Mr. Wright while we search."

One of the agents took his arm and walked him into the first room on the right, then pushed him into a chair. "It would benefit you, Mr. Wright, if you would stay there." Then with a nod, Jerry proceeded up the stairs. I followed, along with Fred, while the other agents searched the main floor. We assumed it would be clear and they would join us later. A man like Wright wouldn't display his dark side for everyone to see down there.

We found his office. It took some doing because it was accessed by a sliding panel off his immense bedroom. I'd never seen anything like it, even at Landry's. There was a

gigantic bed suspended from the ceiling by heavy chains. Over the bed was a domed-shaped mirror. Kinky much?

The office was filled with computer monitors. It was almost as much as our surveillance room. “I’ll hunt down the hard drives on these.” I found several. We confiscated all the data drives. He also had three laptops we grabbed. There were no file cabinets, so everything he had was digitally stored.

“Hey, this place has tons of security. We need that data too. I want to see who’s been coming and going.”

Fred let out a long whistle. “Would you look at this?”

He’d discovered another room hidden by a sliding panel. This one was larger than the office. Darkness greeted us where all kinds of BDSM paraphernalia were stored. There was a large cross against a wall with shackles chained to it. An apparatus resembling a padded bench was in the middle of the room. There was a four-poster bed with chains attached to each post. Along one of the walls hung ropes, canes, whips, and all other kinds of toys. Mr. Wright sure was a kinky fucker.

“Hey, check the corners of the room,” Fred called out. I glanced up to see cameras. “He likes to film in here.”

“I wonder if he uses this for his sex slaves.”

Jerry shrugged. It didn’t matter. We’d pull the data from those cameras too.

Fred called out again. “Look in here. This guy. He has his own server.”

I followed his voice and sure enough, there it was. The heat it generated required its own air conditioner as the room was much cooler than the kink room.

“Wait. This makes no sense. If he has his own server, how did they track him through an IP address?”

“It has to be registered somewhere. Our IT team is very good,” Jerry said.

“In other words, they hacked into it.”

Jerry waggled his brows but didn't answer. We continued our search and soon another agent joined us. "Nothing downstairs and so far, we haven't found anything up here."

"His bedroom is a treasure trove," I said.

"We should be able to get enough of what we need from there," Fred said.

"His office is over there." I flicked my head toward the other room. "We're hunting for data storage. Look anywhere possible."

Having another agent to assist in our search was helpful. By the time we finished, we had accumulated an impressive stock.

"Did anyone find anything that would belong to young girls? Jewelry, clothing, shoes, that type of thing," Jerry asked.

"No, and he's probably too smart for that," I said.

Fred agreed.

"Let's wrap it up here."

We began the process of packing and carrying things down. Every agent was enlisted for this, as there was quite a bit. IT was going to have a picnic here.

"One last thing, Jerry. We need to see where his security room is."

"I'll ask the owner."

He marched over to where Wright sat and asked. Our suspect refused to respond.

Then Fred asked, "Is there a basement here?"

It took some time, but we located a trapdoor under one of the huge Persian rugs in what I called the parlor.

Two guys went down and came out with a security man. "The place is loaded down there," the agent said.

Jerry, Fred, and I went down, and it was impressive. "There has to be another entrance to this place. Wright wouldn't have his men going up and down through that

trapdoor.” I followed my nose down a long corridor. Another flight of stairs was located at the end, and I climbed them until I stood on a landing with a door. When I opened it, it led to a small parking lot. I looked around and saw nothing, so I pulled out my phone to check the location. It was on another street adjacent to the house. The sly devil had thought of everything.

Fred showed up and I handed him my phone. “Check this out.”

“That guy is clever.”

“He sure is, but not clever enough.”

People like Alexander Wright thought they were invincible. Clearly, he wasn’t and our team was going to break him.

LATE IN THE DAY, I FINISHED MY CHECKLIST OF EVERYTHING we’d grabbed. IT was going to have to bust it on this. There were missing girls and if we had any chance in hell of getting them back, this was our best opportunity.

My phone had pinged all day, but I never checked who was calling. I wanted to finish this task. There were thirteen messages. One from my brother, telling me he wouldn’t be home until eight, but he’d left me a key in his potted plant on the front porch. Not too smart. There were two from a friend of mine, one from Mom and the rest from Landry.

Whenever I thought of him, I still wanted to chew nails. Each message I read made me angrier. Not at him, but at myself. Why couldn’t I just forget him? It had been so hard being without him. At least I was finally admitting that to myself.

I tried to concentrate but failed each time. That’s when I made my decision to confront him. Being his enemy wasn’t working and this loss of sleep had to stop. The repairs on my house were coming along, and I wanted to pay a visit there,

but afterward, I would go to Landry's. He may kick me out, but I wouldn't know if I didn't try.

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Twenty-Two



LANDRY

STILL NO RESPONSE FROM SHILOH. I WAS GETTING TO THE END of my rope. My therapist suggested I stop trying for a while. Nausea slammed into me every time I tried not to. My fingers would automatically type out a message to her. Losing her wasn't an option, but when would I give up? I couldn't go on like this forever.

It was almost dark when I got home. The first stop was the bar in the den. I poured a scotch on the rocks and flopped onto a chair. My brother came in and joined me. Soon, his wife came in with their young son, Edward.

“Come see Uncle Landry.” I held out my arms as he wobble-ran over to me, looking like a ship without a rudder. Laughing, I scooped him up. “You’re getting so big.”

He spread his tiny arms wide and repeated, “Big. Ed big.”

“Yes, you are.” I kissed his chubby cheek, and he smacked me in the face.

“Edward, no,” Stacey cried out. “Not nice.”

“Not nice.” He looked at me then and said, “Tank oo.”

“For what? Letting you smack me?”

A grin dotted with a few teeth spread across his cute face. “Yah.”

“You’re going to be trouble in the not-too-distant future,” I told him, setting him on his two bare feet. Then he took off again.

“Going to be? He already is trouble,” Stacey said. Then she gave Stanton the stink eye. “His father spoils him too much.”

Stanton waggled his brows.

“You’re going to pay in another year or two and wait until he hits his teens,” Stacey huffed.

“Stace, I’ll handle him. Don’t worry.”

“Like you handle him now. Uh-huh. We’ll see.” She crossed her arms as she stared him down. “Now go find him. He’s probably in the china cabinet.” Then we heard a crash and a cry. Edward came running back as if the devil was chasing him.

“Bad.”

“I’ll go check,” Stanton said, moving to where Edward came from. “Just a broken vase,” he called out.

Stacey rolled her eyes and mimicked him. “‘Just a broken vase.’ It was probably one of those Ming Dynasty ones your father bought your mother.”

“Aren’t those kept in that glass curio?”

“He’s a thief, so I don’t trust Edward like Stanton does.”

Stanton strolled back in, wearing a satisfied grin. “All taken care of.”

“Which vase?” Stacey asked sourly.

“The blue one. Nothing to worry about.”

Her posture sagged, knowing it wasn’t one of value. “This time. He’s going to break something worth millions one day while you sit and watch him.”

Stanton’s jaw gaped as he watched Stacey pick up Edward and stomp out of the room.

“What the hell did I do?”

I shrugged. “She thinks you spoil him and was worried he’d broken one of the priceless vases we have.”

“But I told her it wasn’t.”

“Hey, I can’t play ref here. You need to ask her yourself.”

As he headed to the stairs, a loud bang sounded from the foyer. Then we heard, “Landry, get your ass down here. Now!”

“What the hell?”

I walked into the foyer to see Shiloh standing there, eyes ablaze. “Privacy, please.” She stared at Stanton. He held up his hands and went up the steps.

“Shiloh, what’s—”

She cut me off by raising a hand, palm toward me. “You win. I’m done with this standoff. I can’t do it any longer.”

My breath hitched as my mouth dropped open. Was this real? “I... there’s no standoff.”

“Yes, there is. Or was. And it’s over. I give up. Being your enemy is not working for me.” Her hands went in the air.

Enemy? I could never consider her an enemy. There was only one thing to do, so I opened my arms. She nearly knocked me down when we collided. I wrapped her in tightly and inhaled. It was something I’d missed so much I had ached. “I’m here and you’re here. We’re all we need.” She clung to me like static electricity, and I never wanted to let her leave. “Have you eaten?”

She lifted her tearstained face and shook her head. “I’ll have someone fix you a plate.” I took her hand, and she followed behind me.

One of the cooks was in the kitchen, so I requested a plate to be brought to my room. Silently, we walked up the steps, hand in hand. I wanted to talk, to find out what went on to get her here, but I didn’t want to spoil the moment. I sat and pulled her onto my lap. “I missed you. These weeks have been awful.”

“It’s my fault.”

“No. It was all mine for saying such ridiculous things and not coming home that night. I had way too much to drink, which was my mistake.”

“If only my hard head would’ve listened to my heart, we wouldn’t have wasted all this time.”

“You’re here now.” I took her hand and stared deep into her eyes. What I had done was wrong, but I never wanted to hurt her. I had my own issues that I should have talked to her about instead of letting them fester. Still, I’d rather she looked back on our time together with regret than forget us entirely. “Can we start over and try this again? You were once my best friend and I’d like to get back there with you. I don’t want to lose what we have together.”

Her hand squeezed mine before she cupped my cheeks. “Landry Baines, I’m not leaving. Ever. You’ve been in my dreams since I left. I was an idiot not to read your messages. Ignoring you was my greatest error. Even if our time together caused a lot of hurt, it’s still a part of me that I need.” Her lips touched mine. I tucked a piece of hair behind her ear that had fallen.

A knock came. “Enter.” Her tray was delivered, so we sat while she ate.

My heart punched my ribs as I watched. “Shiloh, will you stay here?”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Why not?”

“Look what happened last time. I’d like to take it a bit slower this time.”

Part of my soul grieved, but the other part understood. “I accept that.” I didn’t blame her. Our proximity had almost destroyed what we had before. “Are you okay? Do you have somewhere to stay?”

“Yeah. I’m good. My family stepped in.”

“How’s the house coming along?”

“Slow. I can’t get there every day to keep them on track.”

“Consider it done.”

Her fork stopped midair. “No. This is my deal and I want to take care of it.”

There were many responses that came to mind. I didn’t understand why she refused my offer. “Anything you want. If you change your mind, just let me know.”

Her hand reached for mine. “Thank you. It’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but this is something I want to do.”

“Understood. How’s work? Are you busy?”

She unloaded on me... in a good way. I heard about the case and what progress they’d made.

“Now we wait on the DA with what he wants to do. It’ll take them a while to go through all the files we unloaded on them. There’s no way he won’t be charged with multiple counts of kidnapping, trafficking, and child pornography. You wouldn’t have believed what was in his house.” She went on to explain and it sounded insane. “I thought your house was crazy big, but that one was nuts. He had this stiff butler who was a walking skeleton. I don’t think the man ever ate.”

“It all sounds so creepy.”

“Oh, way beyond creepy. The paraphernalia in that kink room was over the top. It was like that sex club we went to.” Then she explained.

“Sounds like he’s hard core. I mean, if people want to do it willingly, then it’s their business, but I hope to God he didn’t take those young girls there.”

“He did. All the blood and hair samples we gathered were not his. Some of them matched those of the missing girls, including Katie Snellgrove’s.” Shiloh leaned away from the table and sighed as she patted her stomach. “I can’t eat another bite. This was delicious.”

“Glad you enjoyed it. Has your car been fixed?”

Her mouth scrunched up. “No! They keep stalling. I’m calling them tomorrow and giving them a piece of my mind.”

“Make it a piece you don’t want. I like your mind.”

She laughed.

“If you need the Range Rover again, it’s at your disposal.”

“Thanks, but my insurance is covering a rental.”

That was something at least. “Are you out of pocket on any of the repairs?”

“Not that I’m aware. The insurance company said they’d handle everything, and I have it in writing.”

I took her hand again and pulled her back into my lap. “Remind your insurance agent how long this is taking. It’s costing them money, so someone should pay a visit to check out the construction process.”

“Good idea. Thanks!” She gave me a light kiss, but I didn’t let her pull away.

“I missed your mouth, you know.”

“I missed yours.”

“There are a lot of other body parts of yours I’ve missed.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm.” I pressed my mouth to hers.

“Which ones?”

“Use your imagination.”

Her hand reached between my legs and rubbed against my cock. Fire burned through me. “Don’t play with fire unless you plan to extinguish it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m planning.” She slid off my lap and unzipped my pants. When my cock popped out, her tongue swept over it. Then she took me in deep and sucked me off. I tried to stop her, but she ignored me.

“I’m going to come if you don’t stop. Last chance.”

That spurred her on even more. I came with a groan as I emptied myself into her hot mouth. She swallowed all I had to give, then glanced up. “Mmm, dessert.”

I let out a bark of laughter. “If dessert was what you wanted, why didn’t you just say so? I would’ve obliged you earlier. And don’t tell me it tastes like crême brûlée.”

“Not exactly, but the texture is close.” I pulled her up for a kiss.

“I want to reciprocate.”

“How about a shower?”

That sounded wonderful, so we stripped and went to the bathroom. I programmed the water for one hundred two degrees, and we got in. It was sheer pleasure to bathe her, and my cock agreed. Her eager hands soaped me and brought my dick back to attention.

She coiled her arms around my neck, and I lifted her. Her long legs opened wide, and her heels dug into my ass. I backed her against the marble tile and slid inside her. Her breath quickened and she urged me on. “Harder.”

My wet body slapped against hers, but I wanted to coax an orgasm out of her. “Touch yourself for me.” She did. “Rub yourself. I want you to come while I’m inside of you.”

Watching her was my favorite fantasy come to life. Her head leaned against the tile as she massaged herself. It was so erotic I found myself coming and had to concentrate to hold back.

Finally, finally, her walls clenched me in perfect rhythm, and I let myself go. We stood together as such, under the heat of the water. It was when I pulled out that I noticed I hadn’t worn a condom. With saucer eyes, I stared at her.

“What?”

“No condom.”

“I’m on the pill, remember?” She frowned then and asked, “You haven’t been with anyone else?”

“No!”

“Not even that night you didn’t come home?”

“I explained that. I got drunk and spent the night at my best friend’s place. No women were involved. I couldn’t. You were and are the only one I want.”

Her fingers traced my lips. “I love hearing that.”

“I love saying it.”

We dried off and instead of dressing, I tugged her over to the bed.

“More?”

“Absolutely. I never got my dessert.” We climbed into bed, and I wasted zero time in spreading her wide. “Shiloh, this is mine. All mine. I own you as you own me.” Then I did my best to give her another orgasm.

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Twenty-Three



SHILOH

SPENDING THE NIGHT WITH LANDRY HADN'T BEEN ON THE agenda, but waking up in his arms was delicious. I'd missed this so much I nearly wept. Forcing the lump in my throat down, I vowed never to be so hardheaded again. True, he'd said a terrible thing, but I never gave him a chance to fix it. Why had I been so stupid?

"What are you thinking?" Landry's voice was hoarse from sleep and oh so sexy.

A smile curved my mouth. "Nothing."

We were snuggled together, spooning, but he flipped me over and his azure gaze pinned me. A tingle skipped up my spine.

"Tell me the truth. You stiffened up like a board. Shiloh, you can tell me anything. You're in the cone of safety."

His lips were inches from mine, but the words they spilled were what melted me. I was butter in his arms.

Swallowing, I forced out the words. "I was thinking about how much I'd missed this, the two of us waking up together. But then I blamed myself for being so hardheaded."

His fingers pushed my hair back. "You had every right to be that way after what I said."

“No, I should’ve at least read your texts or listened to your messages. I had dozens of opportunities, but I refused. That’s why I’m angry at myself. By the way, you have the most gorgeous eyes.”

“Nice change of topic, and thank you, but promise me not to dwell on the past. It’s over and we’ll move forward from now on.”

“Thank you for being so understanding.”

He frowned and I smoothed the crease with my finger.

“This might be too soon, but I’m going to say it regardless. I’m crazy about you. You’re my person and have been for years. If we had kept in touch, I believe we’d be married by now. What I’m saying is I love you, Shiloh. The future is our gift and I want to share it with you.”

My breath hitched as my heart kicked up a hundred notches. I took his hand and placed it on my chest. “Feel that?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s because of you. My heart is yours, Landry.”

He pressed his forehead to mine. “Forever.”

“Forever.”

That morning we made love, slowly, passionately. It was the first time I’d ever done that with a man. My past relationships had never been this deep and I wanted to curl up with this man for eternity.

Brushing my fingers through his sexy hair, I said, “I’m going to be late for work.”

“So am I, and Stanton will be pissed. I was just getting back into my groove too.”

“What do you mean?”

“After you left, my head was up my ass for weeks and work got the brunt of it. I’m good now though.”

Reluctantly, we rose, showered, and dressed. On the way out the door, he asked, “Will you be back tonight?”

“Oh, shoot. I’m meeting my brothers for dinner tonight. Why don’t you join us?”

“I don’t want to intrude on your family gathering.”

I bumped shoulders with him. “Our family gathering is nothing but catching up and eating. Please come. I want you to meet them.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes! I’m going there right after work. Six thirty at Primrose.”

“I’ll be there.”

Beaming, I gave him a peck on the lips and went to my car. On the way to work, I sang along to the music. When I got in, Fred was in the kitchen pouring coffee.

“What’s up with you, McLain? A little late today. This is my third cup of joe.”

“Then I have some catching up to do on both the caffeine and the status of Wright.”

He filled me in. IT sent us more data from his deleted files. “We’re going to nail him once and for all.”

“You know, I hate to say this, but it was impressive how he flew under the radar for so long.”

“That’s how it works. The main player always has a fall guy in line. In this case, he had several. Oh, and you know that LLC that owns Dixon’s house? It traced back to Wright.”

“I knew it!” I fist-pumped the air. This was going to be a huge takedown once we heard back from the DA. “This is the first time I want someone to plead out. Maybe we can find some of those missing girls.”

“Agreed.” We clinked coffee mugs and Fred went to his office as I went to my desk.

Jerry called me into his office. I figured it was to give me hell over being late. I was wrong.

“McLain, you’ve been here for how long now?”

“Five years.”

“And within that time frame, how many arrests have been made due to your investigative diligence?”

“Um, I’d have to count.”

“No need. I have it right here.” He pointed to his desktop. “It’s been more than your fair share. You are a valuable member of this team and it’s time for a rank change. You are now ranked GS-11. Congratulations.”

“Wow! Thanks, Jerry. This means a lot.” I reached out to shake his hand. He raised my rank by two. That was completely unexpected.

“And quite a nice salary increase to go along with it. Let’s go get some coffee.”

We walked to the kitchen, and I didn’t pay attention to how empty the place was. But when we got there, the room was packed, and a loud “Congratulations” echoed through. Then I was led to where a giant cake sat, fully decorated with the words, “Congrats to Shiloh.”

“You guys, you shouldn’t have.”

Fred announced, “That’s exactly what I said, but no one agreed.” Then he hugged me and whispered, “Congrats and well deserved.”

“Thank you.” It was humbling to see all my coworkers here. For once, I didn’t know what to say. Thankfully, someone yelled, “Cut the cake!”

I did that duty, doling out pieces to everyone. Then it was back to work.

I floated on a cloud all day and soon it was time to meet my brothers, along with Landry, for dinner. I shot him a text, letting him know I was headed there.

My brothers were already seated, and they both jumped up to hug me. We were a huggy family like that. Some people were put off by hugs, but not us.

“I hope you don’t mind, but someone else will be joining us.”

“Who?” Brady asked.

“My, uh...” I didn’t want to say boyfriend because, at this age, that was a dumb description. Lover was out of the question too.

“Oh god, you’re dating someone,” Brady said.

“I am. And he’s very special.”

“I can’t believe it. You’ve finally carved out time in your busy schedule for a man,” Brady teased.

“You should talk. When was the last time you dated anyone?”

He held up his hands in surrender. He was as busy, if not busier than me, so I usually didn’t bust him over the topic.

And then I spotted him. My brothers’ backs were facing Landry, so they didn’t see him. I waved and he came over. The meeting was nothing I’d ever expected or imagined.

I stood, saying, “Guys, I want you to meet Landry Baines.”

Brady flew out of his seat. “What the fuck!” his voice boomed, and everyone near us turned to stare. “I can’t believe this.”

“Brady, keep your voice down,” I said, anger spurting out of me.

Landry’s face paled, but he didn’t say anything. Jared sat there, saying nothing.

Then Brady hissed, “I can’t believe you’re fucking my sister! How could you?”

I froze in my shoes. And then it hit me why Brady was angry. “You two know each other?”

“Oh, hell yes, we know each other. He used to be my best friend until now.”

Landry’s hands came up. “Brady, slow down, man. One, I didn’t know she was your sister, but Shiloh and I go way back.”

“Bullshit. I would’ve known that.”

I wasn’t having this. “Brady, we became friends back when you guys teased me all the time. I never told you anything then. After we moved, Landry and I lost touch, but that’s when the three of us got close. I wouldn’t have mentioned him because by then, we’d lost contact.”

Brady stood with arms folded across his chest. “I don’t care. This guy doesn’t have a caring bone in his body when it comes to women. You’re the last person on earth I want him dating.”

I glanced up at the ceiling, waiting for patience to arrive. When it didn’t, I cast a frosty glance at Brady. “You know what? I don’t care about what you think. I’m a grown woman and can make my own decisions.”

Landry did his best to run interference. “Brady, this is different. Shiloh and I are—”

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t want to hear what you’re doing with my sister.” His teeth clamped together so fiercely we all heard it.

“Landry, let’s go. There’s no talking to him when he’s like this.”

Brady stopped us. “Wait a second, that night you stayed at my place after you drank yourself to oblivion. That was because of my sister?”

Affection glowed in Landry’s eyes as he glanced at me. “Afraid so.”

Brady grabbed his phone off the table. “I’m outa here. I can’t deal with this.” He stomped away, leaving everyone around staring.

“Sit,” my other brother said, pointing to the two chairs opposite him.

Landry and I shared a look and he nodded. We both took seats.

Jared said, “Fill me in. I want to know everything.”

I explained our relationship from childhood to when we ran into each other again. His nostrils flared when I talked about meeting up with Landry in the sex club. “It’s not what you think. I was there on an op, and he was there for...”

“Benson, a friend of mine, wouldn’t stop bugging me to go. He pestered me so much I gave in, but after we saw Shiloh, we left.”

A grin danced on my lips as I remembered. “Yes, that’s right. And then we met for dinner.” The rest was history, but I told him about our weeks apart.

“I was stupid, got drunk, and couldn’t drive. That’s the night I spent at Brady’s,” Landry explained.

Jared studied us both before nodding. “It’s pretty weird that you never knew Brady was her brother.”

“Yeah. Small world. I guess it didn’t connect with me because Brady and Shiloh don’t share the same last names. Brady never took me to his house when we were in college either, though we went to mine plenty of times.”

“Why is he so pissed off about this?” Jared asked.

I was also interested in his response. I leaned forward, eager to hear.

Landry’s mouth drew into a straight line before his hands plowed through his hair. “So, this goes back a ways, but I had a thing about getting involved with women.”

“A thing?”

I was glad Jared asked that because the same question hovered on my tongue.

“Yeah. First, I never had good role models. My father was never home, traveling for work, and my mother was, well, a

mean bitch. My childhood memories suck. Mom ran around with other men, drank, and the only time she spoke to us was when she yelled or screamed. I never wanted a life like that, and I figured avoidance was best. Consequently, the only relationships I had with women were one-night stands. That's probably why Brady is so upset."

"Understandable. I would've been upset too. And now?"

"The truth?"

"No, I want you to lie," Jared said, his mouth twitching.

"I'm in love with your sister." Landry reached for my hand. "She is everything to me and I want her in my life forever."

"Wow. Serious much?" His mouth still twitched. I waited for him to laugh.

"Jared, stop teasing. He's trying to tell you something very important to us."

"And on that note, baby sis, what are your feelings toward him?"

"The same. I'm in love with him."

Jared's posture straightened. He leaned across the table, staring at Landry. "If you ever hurt her, there will be consequences of the kind you don't want." This was a new Jared. I'd never seen him react like this.

"That won't be a problem, but you should know your sister is a very strong-willed, independent woman who can take care of herself. That's one of the reasons I love her."

"Good. That's all I need to know. You have my blessing." Then he asked, "Do Evelyn and Dad know?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for the right time. And we just got back together. After he didn't come home all night when he stayed at Brady's, I didn't give him time to explain. I refused to read his texts and take his calls."

"Damn, woman, you're a hard-ass."

"That's what I meant when I said she was strong-willed."

“That’s putting it mildly. If you two need me to run interference with Brady, I’ll be happy to help.”

“Thanks, Jared. That means a lot. I’d rather handle this on my own, though.”

“Ah, it’s just payback for all the shit I put you through when you wore braces and pigtails.”

I walked around the table and hugged him.

“Now that we’ve solved this problem, can we eat?” he asked.

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Twenty-Four



LANDRY

GOBSMACKED DIDN'T COME CLOSE TO HOW I FELT WHEN I discovered Brady was Shiloh's brother. I didn't blame him for the freak-out. He knew everything about me, and that picture wasn't very pleasant where women were concerned. I ran around like a horny teen in college, laughing about how many women I'd fucked. What an asshole. On the other hand, Brady hadn't been innocent either. There was that night when we had that threesome. At the time, it had been fun, but now it shamed and disgusted me. Thinking of Shiloh doing it with two men boiled my blood.

After dinner, we came back to my place, and she spent the night with me again. It wasn't until the wee hours of the morning that we fell asleep. My alarm jolted us awake way too early. We both had busy days, so we were up and out quickly.

At work, Stanton stopped by my office with a sly grin. "Seems you're back to normal. That must mean all is well with you and Shi."

"Shi?"

"My cute nickname for her."

I wasn't sure I liked it, but I kept that to myself. "Yeah, we're back. But listen to this." I told him about Brady.

"That is not possible."

"Yeah, it is, and he currently hates me."

“Can’t say I blame him. She’s his sister, for fuck’s sake. How did you not know?”

“First, they have different last names and second, I never visited his house during our college days.”

“Ah, it was the last names. I can understand that. You knew he had a sister though? Shiloh isn’t an everyday name.”

“True, but he never mentioned her name, or if he did, I don’t recall.”

Stanton blew out a long breath. “That’s one for the records. I hope you two can solve this issue. You and Brady have been great friends for years.”

“I hope so too, but I have to tell you, Shiloh is number one for me. If Brady doesn’t come around, then so be it.”

“You really mean that?” Stanton was skeptical about a lot of things, so I figured he’d get to this.

“I do. Imagine if you were in my shoes. Would you give Stacey up?”

“Not in a millennium. Good luck then. Oh, I almost forgot. We have a teleconference at noon today.”

“With whom?”

“Our buddy who wants his company broken up into a million pieces.”

“Right. I’ll prepare.” I pulled up the file on that company and went to work again, finalizing the best way to break up the main entity. Stanton would lowball the price if he didn’t agree with this. Once he saw the difference, I was pretty damn sure he’d go with our suggestion.

It was a great day. The teleconference went well, which was reason to celebrate. Once the client understood how much better it would work, dividing the business into units that made more sense on paper, he agreed. I was getting ready to close out my day when the phone rang. It was Brady. My gut knotted for an instant, but then I talked myself down.

“Brady.”

“Landry. We need to talk.”

“Fine. Let’s talk.”

“Not on the phone.”

“I’m headed home soon. Why don’t you meet me there?”

A long hesitation occurred on his end. “Fine. See you around six.”

I sent Shiloh a text, warning her if she came there before he did.

Thanks for the heads-up. See you soon.

The drive home was good, with no gridlock to contend with. I left my bag in the drop zone near the foyer and went to fix a drink. The bell rang soon after and I opened the door to see Brady on the front landing.

“Come on in. Can I get you a drink?”

“Sure. A Jameson, if you have it.”

I poured him a glass and we sat.

“It’s obvious why you’re here, so let’s get on with it. But first, I’d like to say a couple of things. One, I never knew Shiloh was your sister. How could I? You have a different last name and I never went home with you. Second, I’m not in this with her for a night or two. I’m in it for the long haul.”

As I spoke, he gave me a keep-your-mouth-shut glance.

“One, I don’t give a fuck. Two, you don’t seem to get my point. She’s my fucking sister. Do you know what that’s like?”

“I do have a sister, you know, and I’m pretty sure I’d be more reasonable.”

“Even if her boyfriend had shared a threesome with you?”

Brady and I were both shocked to hear, “What’s this about a threesome?” Shiloh stood in the room. Neither of us heard her enter.

I winced while Brady’s mouth contorted in a sneer. “That’s right, little sister, your lover and I shared a woman once.”

Angrily, I leaped to my feet. “For Christ’s sake, we were, what, nineteen, and in a college fraternity? Do you want me to outline all my sexual escapades? Because I will. I have nothing to hide from Shiloh.”

Shiloh came up behind me and put an arm around my waist. “Brady, this is stupid. We’re all adults now. I don’t care what Brady did during his college years. Mine weren’t so innocent either.”

Brady’s expression hardened. “Is that right? Do you know he frequents sex clubs?” he bit out.

“As a matter of fact, that’s where we met,” Shiloh answered with satisfaction in her tone.

This was not going to end well. Brady jumped up now and strode into our personal bubble. “What did you say?” He pointed his finger at Shiloh.

“That’s right. I was on an op. That’s where we reconnected.”

He stammered out his response. “I... I can’t believe my ears.”

“Believe them, Brady. And by the way, I don’t frequent sex clubs. I went one time with Benson. That was it. Didn’t care at all for the atmosphere, with the exception of running into Shiloh.”

Brady straightened his shoulders, swelled up his chest, and threw an unexpected punch at me. It took me off guard; I didn’t have time to block it. His fist connected with my jaw, snapping my head back. I didn’t go down but came very close. Shiloh shouted at him and fired back with an uppercut of her own. Brady must’ve expected me to be the one to retaliate, so he was also taken by surprise. He stumbled back, hit the coffee table, sent our drink glasses flying, and landed on the floor.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Stanton boomed.

“Just a little knock-down, drag-out. That’s all.” I massaged my bruised jaw.

Then he eyed Brady on the floor and Shiloh massaging her fist. “I’ve never seen anything like this.” Stanton shook his head.

Brady was still on the floor and suddenly howled. At first, I didn’t know if he was in pain or laughing, but when he sat up and looked at us, I figured it out. The entire situation was so crazy it was laughable.

“Okay, so who do I get to punch? Brady got me, and Shiloh got Brady. I’m sure not going to lay a hand on Shiloh.” I turned to Stanton with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t even think about it, bro.”

We all laughed again. I extended a hand to Brady, and he stood.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that, but man, Shiloh, you know how to pack a punch.”

“She’s an FBI agent, dude.” I laughed.

“I didn’t think she’d fire at me like that, though.”

Shiloh wasn’t laughing. “Anyone who lays a hand on Landry lays one on me. You might want to remember that for future reference.” Her stern tone was sobering.

“I think it’s time for me to leave.”

He walked out without a goodbye. We were still unsure of how he felt about us.

“That was weird.” Stanton shook his head, then walked out of the room.

Shiloh inspected my jaw. “Is it okay?”

“It’s fine. Nothing that a little ice won’t fix. Let me see your hand.”

“I’m good. It’ll be sore for a day, two at the most, but that’s it.”

We went to the kitchen, and I filled a baggie with ice.

“Cinnamon, I appreciate you taking up for me, but don’t do that again. If you were ever injured on account of me, I

don't know what I'd do."

"Aww, you called me Cinnamon."

"That's right. Come here." I tapped my thigh. She sat on my lap and held the bag of ice to my jaw. Then she kissed me.

"I'm sorry my brother is such an idiot."

"After today, he might come around."

"I don't want him to come around here. He's acting too crazy."

I chuckled. "Brady does have a tendency to fly off the handle, but it's short-lived. He used to get so upset with women when we were in school."

"Don't tell me." Her words gushed out. "I don't want to hear about my brother's sex life."

"Ahh, so maybe you can understand why he's so upset about us."

She shrugged. "I don't know."

What a mess we'd made without even knowing we were making it. This anger had to end, and forgiveness had to begin. It would only fester into something larger if it didn't. I wanted Shiloh to be in my life forever, but I also wanted Brady as my friend. How could I soothe their ruffled feathers?

"You look very pensive."

"We have to find a way to bring us all back together. I love you and I love Brady, so we have to make this work."

"Landry, it's not our fault he's being an ass and I'm not giving you up."

I loved those words. "No, it's not, but I do understand his point. He feels betrayed, I imagine."

She removed the ice bag to check out my jaw. "I think you'll be okay."

"Thanks, doc."

"Wanna know what I think?"

“Always.”

She flashed me a dirty little grin. “I think we should have sex and then talk about it.”

“Ahh, I see.”

She stood and grabbed my hand. We ran up the steps together and flung our clothes everywhere when we got to my room. I picked her up and tossed her onto the bed. “Do you remember that time when you told me you wouldn’t mind being dominated by me?”

A saucy grin appeared. “I do recall that.”

“Good, because domination begins now. On your knees, Cinnamon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once her perfectly round cheeks were facing me, I slapped one and then the other. “Spread your knees wider.” She did as I told her. “Beautiful.” I reached under her and slid a finger along her slit. With the other hand, I slapped her ass again. I repeated this until she was dripping with need. Grabbing her hair, I pulled back her head and slid my glossy finger into her mouth. “Taste how sweet.” She sucked on my finger and my dick twitched. I pulled her close to me and pushed inside her.

Her deep moans hardened my cock even more. My fingers sank into the creamy flesh of her cheeks and squeezed right before administering another slap. She flinched and I did it again.

“Don’t stop.”

“Beg.”

“Please, don’t stop.”

That was enough for me to deliver more stinging slaps, and soon, I felt her tiny muscles quiver against my cock. She milked me until I was drained.

I pulled my gleaming cock out of her, then rolled her onto her back. Spreading her wide, my mouth dove down and sucked on her little nub. She begged me to stop, but I didn’t.

Her body was paradise as I glanced across the landscape of it between her luscious thighs. Her nipples were pointed, and I squeezed one, and then the other, as I ruthlessly sucked her clit.

She came with a jolt, clenching her thighs against my head. As she orgasmed, I pinched her nipples. Her back arched into my hand. When her spasms ceased, so did my mouth. Giving to her was as good as getting it.

“You’re killing me,” she said breathlessly.

“My plan. To pleasure you until you’re limp.”

“Consider it done.”

“You’re a good sub.”

“Oh, and how would you know?”

“You enjoyed my spanking. That’s how.”

I crawled up the length of her body and kissed her.

“What...don’t tell me you’re like our current suspect and into the BDSM lifestyle?”

“To be honest, some of that stuff sounds like fun to me.”

She rose up onto an elbow. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“Maybe. Only the light stuff, not the hard core. Maybe toys and floggers. I could never whip you. I wouldn’t want to hurt you or mar your perfect skin. Mind you, I’ve never done it, so maybe I’d be terrible at it.”

“I don’t know. You’re a great ass slapper.” She snickered at her little comment.

“Thank you. You’re my first slappee. Is this conversation weird or not?”

“Not. I think it’s great to talk about this stuff.”

“What else would you like to discuss since we’re on the subject?”

“My handcuffs.” She held out her wrists.

“I don’t want to bruise that beautiful skin.”

She nuzzled my cheek with her nose. “You don’t have to tighten them.”

“Aren’t they uncomfortable anyway?”

“You’ll have to ask me after you try. I’ve never worn them.”

“Okay. Let me get everything straight. Slapping, maybe a little flogging, and handcuffs. Anything else, ma’am?”

“Not that I can think of right now but give me a day or so.”

My dick regained consciousness after this talk. A vision of her being tied to the bedposts, on her knees, with her mouthwatering ass in the air sparked my lust. I turned her to her other side, pulled her close and lifted one leg just enough to push inside. I slid my finger along her slit and settled on her nub.

“Oh, oh, yessss,” she hissed. She pressed my finger down and massaged herself to a climax. That was my cue to increase the rhythm in order to finish. I pumped hard and fast and unloaded into her. It was the perfect ending to a crazy night.

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Twenty-Five



SHILOH

A WEEK PASSED WITH NO WORD FROM BRADY. LANDRY WAS worried and I understood. They'd been best friends for a long time. I'd asked my parents if they knew Landry.

Mom said no, but she knew the name. They'd never met, and I wondered why Brady had never brought him home.

I finally worked up the courage to find out. That evening, after work, I drove straight to my brother's. It didn't take long for him to respond to my incessant pounding on the door.

"What the hell, Shiloh? Give me a minute to answer."

I shoved past him and went inside. "I wanna know something. Why didn't you ever bring Landry home when you were in college?"

A flushed look came over his face, accompanied by a shrug.

"You know what I mean," she said.

"Okay, alright. I was humiliated."

"Humiliated? Why?"

"Landry lived in that magnificent mansion and our house was tiny in comparison."

"So? What does that matter?"

Brady's cheeks puffed out. "It doesn't now. But back then, I was young, stupid, and impressionable. I figured if he saw where we lived, he would abandon our friendship. I know now that he's a much better person than that."

My eye twitched, so I gently rubbed it. "Well, damn. Landry isn't like that at all. And... if he had been, then his friendship would've been worthless anyway."

A groan left Brady. "I know that now. But as I said, I was young and stupid. Benson had a fine home. Not like Landry's, but out of the three of us, I was the low man. That would be emphasized even more if I'd brought them home."

"Fine. I'll give you a pass if you give us one. Neither of us knew about you two. Therefore, we don't deserve to be treated poorly by you. And by the way, I wasn't so innocent in college either. You can't hold that against Landry."

"You're right. Big brother gave me hell for acting like such an idiot."

"He's right. You acted like a first-class idiot and asshole."

He walked to the counter and ruffled some papers that sat there. "I know, but honestly, I need some time to get through this. It was a shock to see the two of you together."

"Landry loves you, you know. He wants the two of you to work things out. But I've got to say that he's extremely important to me."

Brady rubbed his jaw. "Oh, I figured that out when your fist connected with my jaw."

"We're on the same page then?"

"Not quite, but I'm getting there."

"Okay. I have to go. See you soon. Sooner if you come to your senses."

I drove to Landry's, thinking of everything Brady said. I understood why he needed more time. I still couldn't believe how crazy it was that Brady and Landry were best friends. Hopefully, they'd get there again.

When I stepped into the den, Landry's eyes widened as he jumped up to greet me. I relayed the events of my visit with Brady, and his grin widened with delight. He pulled me into a warm embrace and whispered in my ear, "I'm so proud of you."

"Why?"

"Because you took the first steps and that's not easy. Thank you for doing that."

I kissed him and smiled.

He snapped his fingers and said, "My nieces called today and they want to come out to ride on Saturday. Are you in for that?"

"Seriously? I am totally in."

"You sure? They're a bit crazy."

"I love crazy. Besides, they can't be that bad."

"No, they're not bad at all. They just come up with stuff that'll have your mind spinning."

"Even better."

"Great. I'll let my sister know. She'll be driving them out. She can't ride now because she's pregnant again. Her husband has put a stop to her getting up on a horse."

We went into the den, where I kicked off my shoes. Then I curled up on the sofa, which was the most comfortable piece of furniture I'd ever sat on. Landry poured us some wine. He handed me the glass as I asked, "Pregnant again? Doesn't she have a little baby?"

"Uh, yeah. She has a four-month-old and just found out they're going to have another. Not too sure they were expecting that surprise. Her husband is very protective and doesn't want her to ride. Ravina takes riding to the extremes, though she's the best rider I know."

"Why is she so aggressive?"

"To her credit, she really isn't. It's just that she's so good, nothing deters her. She's excellent and likes to jump her horse."

If my crazy mother had been on top of things, Ravina could've competed in the Olympics."

"Wow. What happened?"

"My mother refused to allow it and my dad had no backbone and wouldn't stand up to her. Ravina was crushed."

"Why wouldn't your mother allow it?"

Landry shrugged. "I guess she was too wrapped up in having affairs. Who knows?"

That must've been terrible for his sister. I can't imagine a mother being that selfish. How did they get through their younger years?

As if he read my mind, he said, "You know you were a huge part of my salvation back then. All the interactions we had with our mother were nothing but her screaming at us."

"I'm so sorry."

"I am too. I think about the relationships my siblings have with their kids and my mother missed out on all that."

Back then, I knew things weren't good for him at home, but I was also too wrapped up in my own issues to comprehend the depth of his anguish. Even though he said I helped, I don't see how. "I should've been more help to you back then."

"You listened and were exactly what I needed. Like now. I suppose some things never change."

"I'd like to think they're better now."

He took my hand. "They're much better since I found you again."

His hand pulled me to my feet, and we walked to the kitchen to eat dinner.

As we sat, he asked about my work.

"Busy. Now that the arrest has happened, our work ramps up. We need as much evidence as possible to get him locked away. By the way, I've been meaning to tell you. Jerry finally

said you could ride along on one of our ops, but you'd have to stay in your own car.”

He frowned as he stared at me. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

His answer threw me a curve. I figured he’d want to see what I did so he wouldn’t be so anxious about it. “The reasoning behind it is for you to see that I’m safe. You’d wear a listening device so you could hear all of our interactions.”

“I’ll think about it. The idea of you posing as a vulnerable teen makes my anxiety level notch up. Being there might make it worse.”

“If you’re not comfortable with it, it’s okay.” I didn’t want to put him in that position if he didn’t want to be there.

“I wish they’d hire more women to play that role.”

This was a conversation I wanted to avoid. We’d reached the point where even though he wasn’t happy with what I did, he accepted it. I was excellent at going undercover and loved it. If he could only see or hear what went on, maybe he’d feel better about things. I prayed he’d change his mind.

Twenty-Six



LANDRY

ON SATURDAY MORNING, SHILOH AND I DRESSED FOR THE ride. She didn't have any boots, so I recommended sneakers.

"Will these work?" She held up a pair in her hands.

"Those will be fine." I went into the closet and emerged in my riding gear.

"Wow, don't you look sexy." She waggles her brows.

"You don't remember this from our teen years?"

She blinked. "You still fit into those?"

The room resounded with my bellowing laugh. "Oh, hell no. I've grown at least six inches in height, not to mention the rest of me. I only meant they're the same, only larger sized."

She tugged on a pair of jeans as she said, "That's a relief. I thought if you still wore the same size, I had some serious dieting to do."

"Not in a million years. Your body is pure perfection."

"Thanks, but my jeans are a little tight."

"And you look magnificent in them. You ready?"

Our first stop was the kitchen for some muffins, and then I asked Sally to make us up a picnic basket for four.

“You taking those young girls for a ride today?” Sally asked.

“Yes, ma’am, and they eat like crazy when we stop at the lake.”

“I’ll get y’all fixed up then.”

Shiloh glanced up and said, “She’s the best.”

“Don’t I know it.”

We were still munching on our breakfast and sipping coffee when I heard the pounding of feet and yelling.

“Uncle Landry, we’re here.” Two young girls burst into the kitchen. One had blonde curls and the other had brunette ones.

When they spotted Shiloh, they skidded to a halt.

“Who’s she?” Easton, the blonde, asked.

“She’s my girlfriend.” Landry grinned.

“I didn’t know you got a girlfriend! How come?”

“Because I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Oh.” Then she looked at Juliette and said, “Uncle Landry’s got a new girlfriend.”

Juliette was a little more shy than Easton, so she only nodded. Then I heard my sister.

“Hey, you two forgot your helmets.” Her jaw sagged when she saw Shiloh.

“Ravina, this is my girlfriend, Shiloh. Shiloh, my sister, Ravina.”

“Well, I’ll be. I thought I’d never see the day.” Then she went up to Shiloh and hugged her. “Thank you!”

Shiloh appeared confused. “For what?”

“For taking him off our hands.” She nudged Shiloh with a shoulder.

Then Easton hollered, “Aunt Ravina, she’s pretty, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Thank you,” Shiloh said, a smile playing at her mouth.

Ravina grabbed a muffin and stuffed it into her mouth. “Don’t give me that look. I’m pregnant and breastfeeding, so I’m starving all the time.”

Shiloh paled at her comment.

Ravina caught it and said, “Yeah, I didn’t think I could get pregnant if I breastfed. Stupid me.”

“Wow.” My usually verbose girlfriend had nothing else to say on the subject.

“Is Gabriel keeping little Gabe?”

“He is, so I get a break while you all ride.”

“Uncle Landry, let’s go!” Easton said.

Ravina handed the girls their helmets and we headed for the stables. I knew what was coming before we even got there. Easton grabbed Shiloh’s hand and dragged her behind the building to inspect the pile of manure. When they got back, Shiloh was laughing.

“Uncle Landry, how come the pile of poop shrunk?” Easton asked.

“Hmm. I supposed the gardeners are using it.”

“What for?”

“To make the flowers grow.”

“No way. Poop stinks, but flowers smell good.”

“I know, but that’s how it works.”

“Yuck.” She pinched her nose with Juliette doing the same. Shiloh was still laughing at them. Then she scampered to her horse, Rowdy. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his nose. Juliette had finally gotten a horse of her own, which she’d named Rudy. We’d laughed at that as it was as close to the name Rowdy as you could get.

All the horses were saddled, and I helped Shiloh mount Misty.

“I used to ride that horse all the time until I got Rudy. She’s real nice,” Juliette told me. “She won’t throw you off or anything.”

“That’s good because I’m not used to riding at all.”

We rode out to the trail with me in the lead. That made the girls ride slower than usual, which they complained about.

“Only until we get to the lake. You can ride faster after lunch.”

“Ohhh-kay,” Easton grumbled.

When we arrived at the lake, the girls dismounted and ran to the dock.

“Don’t jump in!”

“We won’t.”

I explained to Shiloh, “We usually go swimming, but not today. I want them to ride longer, and I’d like to teach you a few things when we get home.”

Shiloh helped me set up our picnic and the girls skipped back. We sat down to Sally’s sandwiches, potato salad, and chocolate cookies. The girls were raring to go when we finished, so off we went. I led us to the back edge of the property where Shiloh exclaimed, “My trees are gone!”

“Yeah, they took them down years ago.”

“How could they?”

“I suppose they wanted to plant other things but never did. I miss them. The rumor is they’re going to sell off and subdivide it.”

“No! They can’t.”

“We hope not either. We don’t want an entire neighborhood back there.”

Then I remembered something. We tried to buy the land a few years ago, but the owner wasn’t interested. Maybe they would be now. I kept this to myself because I didn’t want Shiloh to be disappointed. I’d discuss this with Stanton.

We rode back to the house with the girls in the lead. I remained close enough to be sure the girls were safe, but I didn't neglect Shiloh either. When we arrived at the stables, they wasted no time dismounting and racing back toward the house. I lingered behind to put Shiloh in the riding arena so I could demonstrate a few maneuvers to her.

Learning how to properly trot was my goal, although practicing was imperative. "Loosen your body and sit deep in the saddle. Open your thighs wide so you can activate your groin muscles."

Shiloh laughed. "Are we talking about trotting or having sex?"

I chuckled along with her. "Right? It does sound like sex but trust me on this. You want to move with the horse and not against him. Tightening your thighs will only make you bounce."

"Got it. Loosen thighs but open them and use my groin muscles. Anything else?"

"Yes, engage your abs. Your core helps with this too." She followed my instructions. "Better. Now find the one-two rhythm of the horse. Sitting deep in the saddle helps you connect with her hind legs."

"This is harder than I thought."

"It's like riding a bike. Once you get the hang of it, it becomes muscle memory."

I led the horse around the riding ring but noticed her arms were all over the place. "Keep your arms soft and low. Holding the reins all over the place confuses the horse."

She relaxed and looked much better. I kept giving her little tips to help and she began getting better at it. After about fifteen minutes, I called it a day. "We'll start coming down here after work and practicing. It takes a while to develop the right muscles for this, but you're on your way."

"Good, because my ass is sore."

“That’s normal. It’s because you bounced too much today. After you master the trot, that won’t happen and the more you ride, the more conditioned you get.”

I helped her dismount and led Misty back to the stables where a groom took her.

“Let’s go see what those girls have gotten into.”

“Easton is sure a chatterbox.”

“So is Juliette after she gets to know you. She’s Ravina’s stepdaughter. Her husband’s ex didn’t expose her to much, so it’s taken some time for her to come out of her shell.”

“Aww, I’m glad she’s coming along. Why do parents do that to kids?”

“You’re asking me? I have no idea. But after a few more visits with Juliette, you won’t be able to shut her up.”

“They told me about skinny dipping in the lake.”

“Ravina takes them. They love it. We swim with suits when I take them.”

“I figured as much. But they sure love the skinny dipping. They said they can’t wait until Ravina can ride again.”

We walked in the back door of the kitchen and the girls were chatting with Sally and Ravina. When they saw us, Easton asked, “Aunt Shiloh, does your butt hurt?”

“Yes! It’s killing me.”

The girls both laughed. “You should’ve seen Uncle Stanton when he went with us. His butt hurt for a whole year!”

“It did not,” Ravina said. “It only hurt for a few days.”

Easton crossed her arms. “Well, he sure complained a lot.”

Shiloh said, “I’ll try not to complain, but I’m not sure I want to sit for a while.”

Shiloh’s phone rang and she stepped away to answer. When she returned, the frown she wore told me something was up.

“What is it?”

“I have to go into the office. One of our suspects made bail, so we have to make sure all our evidence is up to par.”

This must not be good for her to be called in on her day off. “Call me if you need anything.”

She nodded, then left. Waiting to hear from her wouldn't be good.

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Twenty-Seven



SHILOH

FRED WAS ALREADY AT HIS DESK WORKING WHEN I ARRIVED.
“What’s going on?”

“Our favorite senator is claiming we obtained everything illegally.”

My gut rolled even though it was BS. Alexander Wright had friends in high places. Could he have possibly made our evidence disappear? I asked Fred.

“That’s what I’m reviewing now. We have printouts of everything, but the boss wants us to verify it to make sure we didn’t grab anything we weren’t supposed to.”

“Like what? We had a search warrant which makes that legal.”

Fred shrugged. “Who the hell knows? My guess is he’s going to claim we took things from his work computer. Government stuff for his eyes only. The boss said this order came from Washington. I’m running a check on these dates, and can you start with the ones after?”

“Sure, but that pisses me off. If he had that kind of information on his home computers, then it’s his fault, not ours.” I went to my cubby and booted up my computer. Positive this was a delaying tactic, I began pouring through documents for the umpteenth time. This guy was a huge pain

in my ass. We should've figured he'd pull something like this. The only consolation was we had solid proof.

Hours later, I stood and stretched. I winced at the pain in my neck and back. Having been stuck in the same spot for too long had anesthetized my behind. That was a lot better than the soreness I was feeling before.

Coffee was essential to keep me alert, so I walked toward the kitchen, stopping by Fred's office on the way. "How's it going?"

"I want to put a needle in my eye." He rubbed his eye. "I'd like to strangle our precious senator right now. He's guilty as fuck but is making us go through this. It's a huge waste of our time, not to mention taxpayer's dollars. As a senator, you'd think he'd be concerned about that."

"You're joking, right? He only cares about saving his neck. This guy is an absolute slimeball."

Fred stood and agreed. "You headed to the kitchen?"

"Yeah, I need caffeine."

He joined me on my short journey. We analyzed our suspect on the way. By the time we had our coffee in hand, we hated Wright even more. The gall this man had was unreal. But then again, why had we expected anything different? He had no moral compass and didn't give a damn about selling young girls into human slavery.

"Hey Fred, the blood analysis from Wright's kink room should give us plenty of ammo since we found those matches."

"Yeah, but they haven't tested all of it yet since there was so much."

"True. That room lit up like a carnival after we hit everything with Luminol. I don't know how his attorney thinks he can get away with this."

"Especially that positive match on Katie Snellgrove. That's one down. It would be great to get matches on all the missing girls, but I'm still not convinced he abducted them all."

“Maybe we can get him chirping a little. He might be connected to the other traffickers.” I didn’t hold much hope for that though, as they usually competed with each other.

“Fingers crossed.” Fred held up his hand, emphasizing his statement. “If he pleads out, we may get our information.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.” Even with a plea bargain, this guy would get a minimum of twenty-five years. Messing with kids was a monstrous no-no.

My belly gave out a huge grumble and I realized how hungry I was. “You haven’t eaten, have you?”

“That’s a big no. Sounds like you’re hungry too.”

“Let’s order takeout.” I opened a delivery app on my phone, and we decided on Asian. Our food arrived about thirty minutes later, killing the room with its delicious aromas. My mouth watered in response. We hung out in the kitchen to gobble up the feast. With a mouthful of pad kee mao, I asked, “Why is Thai food so good?”

Fred shrugged and answered, “No idea, but I love it. Wish the wife did, but it’s a no go with her.”

“No! I can’t imagine not eating this ever!”

“Yeah, she won’t eat anything Asian, including sushi.”

“Wow, what a shame.”

“Tell me. I’m lucky I get to eat it at work. She says it’s too spicy. We went out one time to a Thai place and she mistakenly ate a red chile pepper. That was the end of Thai for her. It was pretty funny though. She drank three glasses of ice water trying to get the burn to subside.”

I chuckled because the same thing had happened to me. I loved spicy food, but that pepper took it to another level as flames seared my mouth. It felt like my mouth was torched for hours. “I can relate to that. I’m not opposed to getting it any time.”

“I guess it’s back to the grind.” I followed him out of the kitchen as we went back to work.

After three hours, the burning sensation in my eyes hadn't been quenched, even with eye drops. I'd been staring at the monitor for so long I doubted anything could help. I needed to buy some blue blockers for times like these.

Finally, finally, I was done. I gathered a great amount of information that supported us. I hit print and went to the printer to grab everything. On the way, I spoke with Fred. He was wrapping up too. "Should we put all the docs on the boss's desk or just let him know where to find them?"

"I'm creating a doc to email everything. Why don't you do the same?"

That final task didn't take long as I'd created files on everything, so it was only a matter of emailing them. I finished up, shut down my computer and told Fred goodbye. On my way out, I called Landry.

"Hey, Cinnamon, everything good?"

"Yup. I'm leaving now, so I should be home shortly."

"I'll be there. I'm headed home from running errands. Anything you want to do tonight?"

"Yeah. Close my eyes. They're on fire."

"You got it."

It was almost dark when I got home. Exhaustion had me all but dragging my body out of the car. I hadn't even had time to check on my townhouse. Landry opened the door for me, and we went directly to the den. I toed off my shoes and sank onto the couch.

"I went to your townhouse today since I figured you wouldn't make it."

I sat up. "Really? You did that?"

"Of course. It wasn't a huge deal. Anyway, they're moving along. They were actually working on a Saturday. It looks like you may be a couple of weeks out."

"That's great." A heavy weight pressed on my chest as I considered the prospect of packing up my things and moving.

I'd enjoyed living here with Landry and the prospect of not waking up next to him every day left my stomach in a cold knot.

"Shiloh," he said, taking hold of my hand. "I don't want you to leave."

"You don't?"

"No! I don't want to live here without you."

"Then move in with me."

"I was thinking more along the lines of you staying here. You could rent your townhouse, make a little cash on the side."

That would be nice, but what if we didn't work out in the end?

"If you rented and we didn't work, you could always move back. I doubt that will be a problem, but if that makes you happy, then do it. Or you could just sell."

I'd perked up when he said that. We were on the same page. "I like the renting idea. Are you sure about this?"

"I don't do things unless I'm sure of them and I'm very sure of us."

I flung my arms around his neck. "I was dreading leaving here. This is what I want too."

"Then you'll stay. Oh, I also checked on your car. They haven't even started working on it. You should call your insurance company to let them know."

That was a great idea. I'd do it on Monday morning. "Thank you for helping with this stuff."

"Anytime. Now what would you like for dinner, and can I get you a glass of wine?"

"Anything and please."

He went and poured me a glass and then disappeared, only to return to let me know that Sally had the night off. "Guess we'll order in then."

I wasn't a picky eater, so that was perfectly fine by me. We decided on pizza, of all things. "Hey, let's watch a movie."

"Sounds good."

"You pick because I may fall asleep during it."

"I have a better idea. We'll both pick."

We ended up with a murder mystery. Landry laughed as I complained about all the plot holes. "That would never happen. And you don't collect evidence like that." Most TV shows didn't do a bad job of portraying law enforcement work, but this movie was bad. Landry was the one to suggest a change and we ended up watching one of those crime reality shows. It turned out to be much more accurate than the movie.

"You should be a movie consultant," Landry said out of the blue.

"I'm not sure I can. Besides, I wouldn't know how to get started."

"I could help you with that. Make a few phone calls."

"Maybe when I retire. I still love what I do." I thought about that and realized how much it was true. Getting the bad guys off the street was a passion of mine and I intended to keep at it for the foreseeable future.

"That's what matters most."

"Have you thought any more about riding along with us on one of our stings?"

"Only if it's not a dangerous one."

They were all dangerous, but we took every precaution possible. I decided to keep that tidbit to myself.

Twenty-Eight



LANDRY

The following week, Baines Corporation was contacted by the local animal welfare group about being a sponsor to their upcoming benefit gala. Stanton and I were on board, so he had his admin respond.

Stanton was in my office explaining it. “Stacey will love this. You know how much she loves animals.”

“I know Shiloh will too. She hates to hear about abused animals.”

“Same for Stacey. I’ll call Tristian and English. You handle Ravina.”

When I called Ravina, she was excited about it. “Maybe by being a sponsor this year, next year they’ll hire me to help coordinate. I wouldn’t charge them as it’s a worthy charity.”

“I’ll take a pic of the request letter. It has all the board members’ names on it.”

“Thanks, bro. How are things with Shiloh?”

“Great. Thanks for asking.”

“Do you two want to come over for dinner soon? I can ask Tristian and English so they can meet her.”

“That would be great. I’ll run it by her, but I’m sure she’ll want to meet everyone.”

I texted my sister the letter and then called Shiloh to let her know.

After I explained, she asked, “Um, did you bother to read the names of the board members?”

I hadn’t but told her about Ravina’s interest in helping next year.

“Read them, Landry.”

I picked up the letter and scanned it. Near the bottom was Brady’s name. Then I laughed. “Well, he’s putting our relationship to good use.”

“He is at that. Maybe if he sees how eager you are to help, he’ll lighten up.”

“Let’s hope.” Then I told her about Ravina’s dinner suggestion.

“I’d love that. I’ve wanted to see Ravina again and meet the rest of your family.”

“Hey, I wonder if she’d mind if we asked Brady. He knows my family.” The idea hit and it would show him how much Shiloh was already a part of my family.

“That would be awesome.”

“I’ll call her.”

“Great. I’ll see you later.”

I didn’t have to call Ravina back. She beat me to it and told me to come on Saturday at six thirty.

“Hey, can I invite Brady?”

“Sure. I didn’t think you two were getting along.”

“We’re not, but maybe this olive branch will help.”

“I hope so.”

I told her we’d bring dessert. I’d ask Sally to make something special.

SATURDAY EVENING, WE PULLED INTO RAVINA’S DRIVEWAY.

“I love this area,” Shiloh said.

“I do too, and it works well for them as the girls can be close. My brother lives a block away.”

She mentioned something when a golf cart drove by.

“Everyone here owns one. The area has that cool shopping center, and most people take their carts over.”

“That’s so convenient.”

“They all love it.”

When Ravina answered the door, she didn’t greet me but pulled Shiloh in for a hug. “I’m so excited you’re here.”

“Thanks for inviting us.”

“Where’s your brother?”

“He’s driving separately but should be here soon.”

My brother-in-law came in and Ravina introduced him to Shiloh. Tristian, English, and their clan came in right behind us. I hugged English and introduced them to Shiloh. Easton ran between us all, looking for Juliette.

“Upstairs,” Ravina called out to her, and she raced up the steps. The two girls returned, with Juliette dressed in a princess outfit.

“Mommy, can we go home to get one of my princess dresses?”

“Not tonight.”

“Pleeeaaase,” she begged.

“I’ll take her,” I said. I was a sucker for that child. Tristian tossed me his keys. “One dress only, Easton.”

“Yes, sir.”

It only took us a few minutes and we were back, princess gown and tiara in hand. Easton ran upstairs to change and returned dressed as Snow White.

Brady had arrived while I was gone. When I noticed him, I said, “We’re glad you could make it. By the way, I didn’t

know you were on the board for the animal welfare league.”

“Thanks for the invite, and yeah, I’ve been on it for two years now. I saw you’re a sponsor this year.”

“Yeah. I want you to put us to work. You know Ravina is an event planner, so she could be a great asset.”

“I’ll mention that at the board meeting we have this week. I’m sure they’ll be grateful for her offer.”

Dinner was great and Sally’s dessert, a huge chocolate cake, was an enormous hit. The little ones loved it. Easton and Juliette had chocolate all over their teeth and Jameson, Tristian’s son, looked like he’d rolled around in it. Even Edward wore his chocolate like a badge of honor, much to Stacey’s dismay.

“I’ll never get that out of his shirt. That’s the last time he’s wearing white.”

“Aunt Stacey, why don’t you just buy him clothes that look dirty? Then you won’t have to worry about it,” Easton suggested.

“Great idea.”

It was the first time in my life I wondered if I’d ever be a father. I’d never thought of it because I was convinced that role wasn’t for me. Seeing these kids and how much fun they were put a new spin on parenthood. My siblings raved about how much they loved it so maybe I’d be missing out. This was a topic Shiloh and I never discussed. For that matter, we’d never discussed marriage, either. Maybe it was time to change that. I’d been gazing at her, and she caught me. Her brows lifted, but I only shook my head.

The ladies stood to clear the table, but I wanted to help too. I picked up the plates of those next to me and went to the kitchen. Ravina was already by the sink, so I stacked the plates next to her.

She was rinsing and placing them in the dishwasher. “Hey, bro, domestication agrees with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’ve settled into this life with Shiloh. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.” I threw my arm over her shoulders. “It seems we’ve all found our happy places and I think we deserve it.”

“We do and you’re right. Things also seem to be better between you and Brady.”

“A work in progress. I told him about your wanting to be involved in the fundraiser. They have a board meeting this week, and he’s going to mention it.”

“I appreciate that. I’d love to help, and Juliette could learn about taking care of animals. We’ve been talking about getting a dog, but I worry that all the care will fall on me. With the new baby and one on the way, I don’t think I could handle it.”

Seeing how full her hands were, I didn’t know how she handled things as they were. “Maybe you should wait a bit.”

She laughed and that’s when Shiloh and English came in. “What’s so funny?” Shiloh wanted to know.

Ravina told her about them wanting a dog.

“A dog? With the baby and one on the way?” Shiloh stared at her like she was crazy.

English said, “You can borrow ours. He’s finally out of his slipper-eating stage.”

“That’s exactly why Juliette wants one. She loves your little guy.”

“Walter is sweet, but that first year I wanted to kill him.”

“I remember. He almost destroyed your backyard.” He was so funny. He actually pulled up shrubs that Tristian had spent thousands on. “Tristian wanted me to take him. Can you imagine him tearing up the courtyard?”

English laughed. “Stanton would’ve killed him.”

“Who would Stanton have killed?” Stacy asked as she joined us.

“Walter.”

“Why? He’s the sweetest dog ever.”

“Now he is. But when he was a puppy, he was a terror and ruined all kinds of things.”

“I can’t imagine. He’s so cute. I’ve been thinking about getting a dog.”

“You’d better run that by Stanton first. He’s not too keen on having the backyard messed with.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Landry.”

With that little smirk she wore, I wouldn’t put it past her to get one without consulting my brother. Stacey had her own mind about things she wanted.

We finished cleaning up the dishes and everyone moved outside to the massive porch. It was a beautiful night with perfect weather.

Soon, the little girls were yawning, so English said, “I think it’s time to go, or someone will be asleep.”

“I know what you mean,” Ravina said.

We gathered our things and on the way to the car, Brady said, “Thanks for tonight. It was great seeing your family again. I’m not quite there yet with you two, but I’m getting there.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s fine. I’m hoping that working together on the gala will help.”

He nodded and left.

“That was nice,” Shiloh said as we drove away.

“Yeah, it was. We need to do more of that.”

“So does my family. I can’t remember the last time we all had dinner together.”

“Maybe we should invite them over. Do you think they’d like that?”

“I know my mom would love to meet the guy I’m living with.”

“Then next weekend. I’ll let Sally know. What do they like to eat?”

“Anything. My mom is an old-fashioned cook, but none of us are picky eaters.”

Later, after we’d had a steamy romp between the sheets, I said, “I’d like to talk to you about something.”

“Is that why you were staring at me during dessert?”

“Yeah. How do you feel about having children?”

Dead silence greeted my question.

“I guess you’re not too keen on them.”

She sat up. “No, that’s not it. I’ve never thought about having them.”

“Never?”

“No.”

I sat up and turned so I could look at her. “I never thought I’d be in a position to think about it, but after seeing how much fun the kids had, it got me wondering.”

“I take it you want them, then?”

I cupped her cheek and said, “Only with you.”

Her hand covered mine as a smile lit up her face. I pulled her into my lap and kissed her. “Not until after we’re married, of course. I haven’t officially asked you, but when I do, what will you say?”

Twenty-Nine



SHILOH

Marriage had never been something I'd dwelled upon. Even as a young girl, when most of my friends talked about wearing a fancy wedding dress and finding their Prince Charming, I only thought about shooting bad people.

After I became an FBI agent, my life was so consumed with the job that I never gave marriage a thought. I rarely went out on dates either, until Landry. Finding the right man hadn't been a priority for me. I had my own life, my own career, and was perfectly happy. Or so I thought. Then Landry pranced into my world and rearranged everything. Was I in love with him? Absolutely. I didn't want any other man except him. Did that mean marriage, though? I expected my belly to twist with angst or at least give me heartburn at the idea, but it hadn't.

"Yes. I'll marry you when you propose."

Landry stared at me for a second and then smiled. "You're the love of my life, you know. I don't think I've told you."

I was rooted to the spot, unable to move or look away. My eyes gobbled him up, absorbing every detail, committing every inch of him to my memory. I had never seen a smile so perfect. It was the icing on the cake of perfection that this man was and made my heart sprout wings.

I knew in that moment that something had profoundly changed in me, something I would never be able to shake or forget. From then on, I was utterly and irrevocably in love. "I love you too. More than I can say."

“If you’d say yes, I’d elope with you tomorrow.”

“Honestly, I’d love that.”

“Let’s do it then!” His excitement was contagious until I thought about work.

“I can’t. I have to close out our end of the case before I can go anywhere.”

“Then tell me when you’re ready. I can go anytime.”

“It’s what I’d love, but my mother would strangle me.”

“You know what? I’ll let you decide. We can do anything at all. You might want to talk to Stacey and Ravina. Even English. They all had weddings here in the courtyard that were wonderful. I’m sure Ravina would love to plan it for you. I’m also fine with eloping. The marriage ball is in your court.”

A luxurious, over-the-top ceremony just wasn’t my style. I blew out a long sigh. “Let me discuss it with my mom. If she gets super butt hurt by us eloping, then maybe we can do something with only family here.”

“Sounds perfect either way.”

We talked about various things before we both collapsed into a deep slumber. The next morning, I woke up to a lovely note on Landry’s pillow.

I didn’t want to disturb you, but I woke early, so I’m in the gym working out. It’s upstairs and you’re more than welcome to meet me there. When I finish, I’m heading to the kitchen. I’ll check on you when I’m done. By the way, you’re gorgeous when you’re asleep.

Love, L

I reread the thing several times then pressed the sheet of paper to my chest. Was this really happening? I never imagined a life like this. Who would’ve thought that all those years ago, when we became friends, we’d end up getting married? My mom was going to die when she heard. With that thought, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and called her.

“Hey sweetie. What’s going on?”

“Landry and I want to invite you, Bud, and the guys to dinner next Saturday. Are you free?”

“We are. I’m excited to meet your new man.”

I told her about Brady’s reaction. “I think he’s getting over the shock.”

“I hope so. You wouldn’t date just any man, so I’m sure your Landry is very special.”

“I happen to think so. Come over around five thirty. We can have appetizers and I’ll show you around.”

“Thank you, honey. We look forward to it.”

I texted Jared and Brady to invite them. Jared hit me back, immediately accepting the invitation. Brady did a few minutes later, saying yes too. Oh, that made me so happy. We’d have the entire family here.

The bedroom door swung open to reveal Landry carrying a large mug and a tall glass. The glass held a chocolate protein shake, and the mug was filled with steaming coffee. I sipped it, thanking him. “You’re so thoughtful. How did you know this is exactly what I needed?”

“Because I know you, Cinnamon.” Then he went back out and came in with a bag filled with cinnamon muffins.

I stuffed one into my mouth and took a large bite. “I don’t care how many of these I eat, every time I eat one is like a new culinary experience.” I hummed my pleasure.

“That’s how I feel when we make love. Every time is new and different.”

I gulped down my muffin bite as heat spread between my thighs. “Is that an invitation?”

“I need to shower first. Want to join me?”

“Let me finish off this muffin.”

“I’d like to do that honor, but not with the muffin in your hand.” He wagged his brows.

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, MY PARENTS ARRIVED FOR DINNER. They were reintroduced to Landry, as they'd met him when he and Brady were in college.

Then I took them around for a tour. "Their property abuts ours where we used to live." We walked out the back and then to the stables. "Landry's been teaching me to ride."

"Just be careful. Horses are big."

"I know, Mom."

After the full-blown tour, I introduced them to Sally, and we went back to the den where Landry waited. Brady and Jared had arrived, so we had drinks and appetizers.

Brady and Landry seemed on friendlier terms than ever, which loosened the knots in my stomach. I was worried that the awful sensation would prevent me from eating and missing one of Sally's meals would've been a shame.

It was nearly six thirty when we were called to dinner. Jared raised a brow at the formality. I laughed to myself because we were not formal in any way.

We all took our seats as the first course was delivered. It was a lovely seafood bisque that everyone raved about. Next came our salads. They were delivered as if we were in a restaurant. Then the main course, which was beef tenderloin, scalloped potatoes, and mixed roasted vegetables. Everything was perfect. Mom wouldn't stop raving at how delicious everything was.

Finally, dessert came in the form of our own chocolate soufflés. Oh, my, it was unreal. My belly was so happy that I even licked the spoon until there wasn't any more chocolate on it.

"This meal was fantastic. I've never eaten anything so good," Bud said. Then he winked at Mom. "Except for your cooking, Evelyn." He always knew the right thing to say. I rubbed my belly in response, as it was full and satisfied. We all

rose and moved to the den so the table could be cleared. As long as I'd been staying here, I'd never seen the dining room used. Maybe because it was too formal. I wondered if Stanton and Landry had ever considered getting less formal furniture in there.

Landry got everyone an after-dinner drink. He served port, which I'd grown fond of. I'd never tried it until I moved here, but now I knew why it was so popular. It was delicious.

Everyone else loved it too.

"I've never had port before. I really like this," Mom said.

She'd change her mind if she ever found out how expensive it was. Mom wasn't cheap, but she was budget conscious.

Brady and Jared were the first ones to leave. I excused myself to go to the bathroom. When I came back, I knew something was up. Mom and Bud wore conspiratorial grins while Landry beamed. Then Mom jumped up and said, "Come on, Bud, it's time to leave these lovebirds to themselves."

Lovebirds? What the hell was going on? After we walked them to their car, I asked Landry. All he did was kiss me for an answer.

Thirty



LANDRY

I WASN'T SURE WHAT CAME OVER ME, BUT WHEN SHILOH LEFT to use the restroom, I asked Bud and Evelyn if I could have their daughter's hand in marriage. Shiloh and I hadn't discussed this, so I prayed it didn't piss her off. But with the family there for dinner and everyone getting along, I figured it would be an appropriate time.

“What in the world is going on?” she asked.

I took her arm and guided her back to the den. “Don't be pissed.”

“Why would I be pissed?”

“I asked your parents for their permission to marry you.”

“You asked... wow! That's the sweetest thing ever!” She ran and practically knocked me on my ass when her arms went around me. A wave of comfort ran through me when I saw the joy radiating from her. “Hey, I am a Southern gentleman at heart.”

“Yes, you are. I knew that but you took it ten thousand steps further. Thank you for doing that.”

“I believe it helps to start out on the right foot with your future in-laws. Brady seemed more relaxed tonight too.”

“Jared has been giving him hell about it.”

I winced at her words. “I hope not too much. It was a shock to him and it’s not something you just forget about.”

She had a devilish grin when she asked, “Were you two really that bad?”

A knot twisted in my gut as I opened and closed my mouth, searching for the right words. Lying wasn’t an option. I looked her in the eye, steeled myself against her judgment, and spoke the truth, even though it was ugly.

“Yes, we were. As much as I hate it now, we bragged about it. If there was a party, we were there. And if we went, we ended up with a woman. That’s how Brady knew. Back then, I hated everything about myself. It was a constant battle until I went to therapy after I graduated. I didn’t feel worthy of anything until I understood why. That’s when I slowly changed, but it wasn’t until you that I wanted to put the past behind me and lock it away forever.”

“I’m sorry things were that bad for you.”

“Don’t be. It’s over and done and I’ve moved on... with you by my side. Nothing could possibly be better.” I moved to kiss her, but her phone dinged.

She heaved a deep sigh and averted her gaze as her eyebrows knit together in a guilty frown. Her gaze finally settled on me, eyes wide with regret. “I’m so sorry. It’s Fred at work. He wants me to come in.”

My lips pressed together as I digested this. I knew this was the life she had chosen, and I would never stand in her way. After a moment of hesitation, I forced a small nod and gave her a supportive smile. “Go on. He wouldn’t have texted you if it wasn’t important. What did he say?”

“Only that some information had come in on our trafficking case and we should have a look at it.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Do you want to? It will be boring.”

“I don’t mind. Let me call one of the drivers to take us since we’ve been drinking.”

When the sedan pulled around the circle, we got in the car and I gave the driver instructions to her office. It was a pleasant drive without the hassles of traffic. Her partner Fred was already there. We were introduced, made some small talk, and then she had me sit in the kitchen while she and Fred reviewed the information. I'd brought along my laptop to get some work done while I waited.

The clock on the wall ticked away the minutes as I waited for her return. When she finally walked into the room at eleven o'clock, she slumped into a chair beside me and ran her fingers over her forehead before letting out an exhausted sigh. The stress of the night was etched on her face.

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse than bad. We both always thought there was a missing piece of our puzzle with our big suspect. Remember how I told you about him? Unfortunately, we found that piece. It's not good. It's someone from the local police... a guy who's been on the job for over fifteen years. His prints were found in two places where Katie Snellgrove had been held. That linked him to her abduction. Our IT team dug a whole lot deeper and found large deposits made into his checking account from an LLC. IT traced them and found they came from our guy. Another link to the trafficking. The amounts of money he earned were exorbitant. Cops don't make that kind of money, even if you're the chief or police commissioner."

I stood and massaged her shoulders and neck, which were tightly strung. "The good news is that you found the missing piece. He may have a lot of information for you."

"True, and he's smart enough to know that if he talks, his sentence will be reduced. Cops in prison are never a good thing."

"Man, I wouldn't want to be him. Does he know?"

"Not yet. We're now waiting on a search warrant and want to order discovery on his accounts going back five years. We're hoping to get that by Monday."

Fred came by to let Shiloh know he was leaving. “See you Monday and hope tomorrow is a little more relaxing.”

“Same for you. See you,” she said.

We gathered our things and walked out behind him, where the driver had waited for us. Shiloh was quiet on the ride home. When I took a quick peek at her, her eyes were unblinking, and her mouth was drawn in a tight line. She was deep in thought, processing what had just happened.

“It’s bad when a fellow law enforcement officer breaks the law, isn’t it?”

“More than I can say. He swore an oath to serve and protect, but look what he’s done. This is so awful, doing this to young girls. Fred said he has two daughters too. Didn’t he stop to think, what if that happened to his girls? I can’t stomach the thought.”

She was visibly shaken by this, so I wanted her to talk about it, free her mind of it. “Did you know him?”

“No. There was no way I would have unless we crossed paths on a case, which we didn’t.”

“I guess that makes it better. At least it wasn’t someone you worked with.”

Another long sigh eased out of her. “You’re right. If that had been the case, I’d want to punch his lights out. I still feel like that, but not as bad.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.”

She turned to look at me. “I’d love to pick your brain about our high-profile suspect, but I can’t share that information.”

“You can trust me with anything.”

“It’s not that. It goes against every one of our rules and protocols.”

“Understood. Unless your guy is connected to our business in some way, I doubt I’d know him. My family has always stayed clear of the famous and also politicians. They approach us all the time for money, but we refuse.” My father made that

decision long ago and we've stuck to it. Politics can end up being a dirty game and we didn't want to get involved with that.

"That's wise."

"My father was very shrewd in his business dealings. Listen, if you ever need an ear to vent to, I'm here for you, Cinnamon."

"Don't worry. I'll be taking you up on that a lot."

She reached out with a trembling hand, her fingers cold. I brushed my thumb over her knuckles, and she gave me a weak smile. "Thank you. This job can be so draining sometimes," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and make all the ugly things disappear, but instead I simply said, "You can always lean on me when you're feeling down about it."

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Thirty-One



SHILOH

MONDAY MORNING BROUGHT A WAVE OF CHAOS, PHONE CALLS, and tense glances as the news about the corrupt cop swiftly made its way around the office. Desks were abuzz with gossip as colleagues shared what little information they had about the scandal. There was an endless stream of coworkers stopping Fred and me, asking all kinds of questions we couldn't answer. Jerry finally called a meeting to inform everyone of what we knew.

The good news was that no one here seemed to have had any contact with him. More questions circulated in the room, but we still didn't have answers.

Later that morning, the search warrant was granted, and Jerry assembled a team to go.

The cop's wife was at home and when we handed her the warrant, she looked like a bolt of electricity hit her.

"What's this about?" She pressed us for answers. "I'm a cop's wife, so I know more than the average person."

Jerry went to her and said, "You might want to give your husband a call."

"Bobby? What has he done?"

"Ma'am, you should ask him."

My heart went out to her. There were family pictures displayed everywhere in the house... on the walls, the tables, dressers, and so on. They looked like a happy, all-American family. His daughters appeared to be in their teens, but who knew with the way kids dressed these days. What had gotten into him to commit such heinous crimes?

We were still grabbing what we hoped would be more evidence when Robert Whittaker stormed into the house. “What’s this all about?”

His frantic motions had us all concerned. He was on duty and armed. We didn’t know what to expect out of him.

“Have a seat so we can talk,” Jerry said.

“I can talk standing up just fine, thank you.” His angry glare would’ve shrunk any other man but not Jerry.

He aimed his own glare back at Whittaker and said, “We have reason to believe you’re involved in a sex trafficking scheme.”

“What?” His shout resounded around the room.

“That’s right. We have strong evidence to indicate it.” Jerry wasn’t backing down.

“Bobby, what’s this all about?”

“Laney, please go into the kitchen.”

“But—”

His arm shot out, finger pointing. “In the kitchen, now!” She flinched at her husband’s command. When she’d vacated the room, he turned to Jerry and said, “I want to know exactly what you think you know about me.”

“Your name has been associated with Alexander Wright’s and your fingerprints were found all over his cabin where we picked up Katie Snellgrove. Your prints were also all over the sex room in his house. We are currently analyzing all the blood samples we obtained.”

I watched closely for any reactions, and they were telling. His eyes widened with disbelief as his shoulders slumped in

defeat. A drop of sweat trickled down his temple as his face paled. He must've thought Wright had those sites scrubbed of any evidence, but a police officer should've known better about the blood. He'd gotten careless and now he'd pay the price.

"You may want to have a seat while we search," Jerry said.

This time, there was no argument from him. He collapsed into a chair and said nothing. His poor wife finally came out of the kitchen and pinned him with a glare. "Bobby, what's happening?"

No answer.

"Bobby?"

He turned a broken gaze on her.

"Bobby, what did you do?"

"It was all for the girls, so we could send them to college wherever they wanted to go. You know my salary would never be able to cover that."

I wanted to barge into this conversation and let him know exactly what I thought. The money he'd gotten far surpassed any college education. This man was now a millionaire at the expense of others' lives. His wife caught my disgusted look and raised a brow. I only shook my head and moved on with the search.

We gathered two computers and all the files he had in a cabinet that weren't related to his personal things. It was quite a bit, but my guess was that everything we needed would be discovered on his computers.

Later that afternoon, Whittaker showed up, ready to talk. He brought an attorney with him, and Jerry took them into an interrogation room. Several hours later, they emerged. Whittaker was cuffed and taken to jail. He'd remain there until a judge would decide whether he was eligible for bail. My heart sank again as I thought of his poor wife. He claimed she was not involved in any way.

I was so over this case. It had gutted me too many times and I was more than ready to put these criminals behind bars forever. It was a good thing we were nearing the end. Closing this case would be a cause for celebration.

That night, I mentioned it to Landry.

“I have a perfect idea. Let’s figure out if you want to elope. If so, we can go on vacation somewhere and get married.”

The idea of heading somewhere relaxing intrigued me. Getting married did too. All I wanted was to get settled in one place. “Let me talk to my mom. Maybe she’d settle for something like a reception for us after we get back.”

We were seated on my favorite couch. Landry scooted over and pulled me against him. “That would be great. Ravina would love to handle it, and we could do it here. I can have her show you pictures of English and Tristian’s and Stacey and Stanton’s receptions. She had the courtyard transformed into a fairy-tale setting. It was amazing.”

“I’d love that. Did Ravina have their wedding here too?”

“No, they were married up at our mountain house. That’s also an option. She has pictures of it, I’m sure. We can do anything you want. It’s your choice.”

“Can you talk to her about it? If I had something to show my mom, that would help. And doing it this way would be much less stressful too.”

Landry didn’t wait to call Ravina. He did it right then and told her what he needed couldn’t be shared with anyone except Gabriel, her husband.

She said she’d email us everything we needed right away. When her message came through, it contained a link to her website where everything was. She also sent a few photos, but I became engrossed in her photo gallery on her site. It was incredible. I’d have to tell Bud to check it out too, because it was much better than anything I’d seen on Pinterest.

That idea had me chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

When I told him, he laughed as well. “You never talked about your stepdad being a Pinterest fan.”

“I didn’t know until recently. He also grabs recipes off there.”

The pictures on the website drew me in so much I began to doubt eloping. A long sigh fluttered through my lips.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. Checking all this out makes me wonder.”

“About?”

“Whether or not I want the whole shebang.”

“You mean not eloping?”

“Yeah.” Everything looked absolutely surreal and something any woman would dream about, except for me. I had never given thought to this, but looking at these gorgeous photos made me uncertain.

“You can have it. Anything you want.”

“Would you be okay with that?”

“Shiloh, I’m okay with anything that makes you happy. Pleasing you in every way is my goal.”

My dreamy thoughts turned dirty. “You know what would make me happy right now?”

“What’s that?”

“Having your dirty talking mouth doing dirty things to me.”

Landry stood and said, “Climb aboard, Cinnamon.”

I hopped onto his back, and he carried me upstairs, piggyback style. When we got to our bedroom, he didn’t even take all my clothes off. Instead, he yanked down my pants and destroyed another pair of my underwear. Then his mouth claimed me, and every other thought flew out of my head, and I only focused on his attention to me.

Landry was deliberate. He didn’t just go for it. He paid attention to every single part of me between my thighs.

Initially, he was gentle, but his ministrations grew more fierce as I chased my orgasm. When that moment happened, I pulled him closer, my fingers clutching his hair.

He glanced up with a triumphant grin. “Your cunt is perfect in every way. And now I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk without limping.”

He flipped me over and whipped off my shirt and bra. “You have such beautiful tits. Every time I look at them, I want to suck your nipples.” His mouth targeted one and then the other breast. My fingers fisted the duvet as desire raged, burning inside of me. My body turned feverish for this man. He stood and got rid of his clothes, then he crawled over me, lifted my leg and entered me. He slid in to the hilt, then rocked gently, back and forth. Usually, sex was rough between us, but this time he held one of my hands over my head and leaned on his elbow. Each time he pushed inside, he was slow and deliberate.

“Your pussy is mine. All mine. Forever.”

The corners of my mouth turned up. “Yes, sir.”

“Who owns you, Shiloh?”

“You do. Always.”

“That’s right, Cinnamon.”

Then his pace increased as he thrust deep and soon we both climaxed.

Afterward, he said, “I think we should get married here, then honeymoon somewhere just to relax by a turquoise sea with umbrella drinks in our hands.”

“Yes! That sounds wonderful.”

“So, you want a wedding then?”

“I, uh, yes. I want something small for close friends and family only. How does that suit you?”

“Cinnamon, if you wanted a thousand people, that would be fine with me.”

“This is only one of the reasons I adore you.” I pulled him in for a kiss.

“Hmm, what are the others?”

“Your honesty, integrity, willingness to always help me, offer advice, suggestions, your love for me, and your stupendous cock.”

“My stupendous cock?”

“Mmm hmm. It’s very talented and my lady bits adore it.”

His serious expression threw me for a minute until he said, “Your mind-blowing pussy has me addicted.”

“Is that so? You can’t possibly be addicted to it as much as I’m addicted to your trouser trout.”

“Trout? Is that all?”

“How about whale-like wiener?”

He laughed so hard a snort came out.

“Okay, you win with the analogies. I can’t come close to that one. But in all honesty, I feel the same way as you. And I also love that you take me as I am, flaws and all.”

My fingers twisted strands of his hair. As I listened to him, my heart clanged a loud tune against my chest. “You’re not flawed at all.”

“I am, but you don’t seem to see it. I don’t deserve you, but I promise to walk by your side in every way possible.”

And then I melted like the snow in spring.

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Thirty-Two



SHILOH

THREE WEEKS LATER, WE FINALLY WRAPPED UP THE CASE. THE only thing left for us was court, which I wasn't involved in. Jerry would handle that part of it. Fred and I went out for drinks after work that night to celebrate. The rest of the crew was also there at their favorite watering hole.

When they saw Fred and me walking in, a huge cheer went up. And then came the comments.

“About time you show your face in here.”

“Glad you could pull away from your boyfriend for us.”

“I can't believe you finally came to your senses.”

The ribbing went on and on, and they eventually gave up. It was all in good fun, but then the shots started flowing.

At first, it was vodka. We all toasted to a job well done. Then it turned to tequila. At first, I balked, but after plenty of goading, I succumbed. After my third shot, I was all in and rapidly approaching the drunk-as-a-skunk stage.

The bar had an old jukebox and we started dancing, even though there was no dance floor. We created our own, and even the usually sedate Fred was up there, owning the floor. He moved his legs in such an erratic way I doubled over and slapped my knee at his antics. Soon, we were all imitating him, looking like the biggest bunch of drunk dorks known to man.

Then I stood on a table and shouted, “I’m in love with Landry Baines.”

They all stopped to stare at me. Then a cheer went up, with another round in order. This one was on me.

Lots of backslapping and hugs ensued, along with more drinking. I tried to play pool, but my cue stick kept scraping the felt, so they made me quit.

One of my coworkers, Lisa, came up to me at the bar. “So, Landry Baines, huh? You finally bit the dirt with him.”

“Yeah, I bit it all right.”

“So?”

“So what?” The tequila haze had hit my brain.

“You know, is he gonna put a ring on it?” She pointed to my finger.

My brows waggled, or at least I thought they did.

“Got something in your eye?”

“No! I’m fine. I think. Anyway, yes, he’s gonna put a ring on it.” Then I pouted.

“What’s wrong?”

“He wants to buy me a big ole fancy diamond and I want something plain.”

She shoved my shoulder with hers, and I nearly fell over. “What’d you do that for?” I asked.

“Girl, are you crazy? Let the man buy you what he wants. He’s loaded, isn’t he?”

“I think so.” I frowned because we never talked about money. His money, that is.

“Oh, come on. Those Baines are rich. I mean super-duper extra rich.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard. I don’t really care about that.”

“Say what? You really are crazy. A girl would give anything to have a guy with that kind of wealth.”

My hand waved through the air, and I nearly slapped her face. “It’s a bonus for sure, but I’d rather have a solid relationship, you know? I look at my mom and stepdad and see how happy they are. They’re not poor by any means, but not wealthy either. The thing is, they’re happy. Money doesn’t necessarily give you that.”

Lisa propped her elbow on the bar and rested her chin in a hand. “I suppose you’re right. Happiness is key. You know what? You’re really smart.”

I howled. I wasn’t smart. It was knowing what you wanted that counted.

This conversation had turned too serious, so I grabbed her hand and shouted, “Let’s dance!”

We skipped over to our homemade dance floor and did the deed. It was so much fun I’d lost track of time and the number of shots I’d had. All I knew was everything was turning fuzzy.

People started leaving, headed home and waiting for their rides. None of us were able to drive. We were all too far gone.

“Wanna share a ride?” Lisa asked.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll call Landry.”

“I’m so jealous.” She hugged me and went outside with the others.

I dug through my purse to find my phone. Then I called Landry.

“Where are you?”

I giggled at his question. “I’m in a bar dive. I mean dive bar.” After more giggling, I told him where to pick me up.

Many of the people had left, with their rides showing up. A few of us still waited when my knight in a shiny sports car pulled up.

I hopped in and said, “Hey!”

“Hey you. It looks like someone had a great time.”

“You should’ve seen Fred dancing. It was sooo funny.”

“Jesus, you smell like the bottom of a liquor bottle.”

“The tequila made me do it.” Then I spotted an empty parking lot. “Pull over!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just stop.”

He wheeled in, the car rolled to a stop, and I leaped out. “Let’s dance. Turn on the music!” I hollered.

He got out and urged me to get back into the car, but I wasn’t having it. I locked my hands behind his neck and pulled him closer. “I missed you today.”

“I think you had way too much fun to miss me.”

I blinked several times because I was looking at more than one Landry. “Are you a twin?”

“No, why?”

“Because there are two of you here.”

“Oh, my spicy Cinnamon, you’re going to have a bad headache in the morning.” He gave in to a couple of dances, but then weariness struck.

“I’m tired.” I yawned.

“I think if a match met your breath, an explosion would occur.”

“Sorry.” I covered my mouth with a hand.

“Don’t be. It’s the price you pay for having fun. Let’s go.”

He helped me into the car as all my energy fled. I leaned my head back and the next thing I knew, the blazing sun was beating up my eyelids.

“Ugh, my head.”

No one answered, so I opened one eye, but just a slit. Landry was gone, but the window shades were up, hence the brightness. My hand reached for the remote to lower them but landed on a piece of paper instead.

I didn't want to wake you because I'm sure you have a bell ringer of a headache. I left some water, juice, and ibuprofen for you. Take them all and go back to sleep.

Love, L

I craned my neck to find the items and hastily took the pills and drank the fluids. Then I slammed back down to the bed and fell back asleep. I had no idea what time it was.

Hours later, I woke to Landry shaking me.

“What time is it?”

“Noon.”

“What?” I sat up, groaned, and promptly fell back to the bed. “My head,” I whined.

He laughed. “Told ya. The ibuprofen didn't help?”

“Nooooo.”

“You need food.”

“No, I can't eat.”

“I'll be right back.”

When he did, he carried a bottle of Gatorade. I sipped it and slowly began to feel better.

“Why did I drink so much?”

“It's a question we all ask the next morning after a night like that. The good news is you'll feel better soon.”

“Promise?” I sounded like a toddler.

“Promise.”

Hours later, he'd been right. I finally came around after spending most of the afternoon in bed. Landry came to check on me when I'd dragged my body into the shower.

“Glad you're up.”

“Ayyy!” My scream echoed through the bathroom. “You scared me!”

“Sorry, I thought you heard me enter.”

“Nooo, I didn’t hear anything.”

He pressed his face against the glass shower door like a little kid would do, and it cracked me up.

“There’s my girl. She’s finally back.”

“Yeah. Wanna join me?”

He didn’t answer but got rid of the clothes he wore and stepped into the steaming water with me. His mouth crashed onto mine, heating my blood and all things between my thighs. Let the sexcapade begin!

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Thirty-Three



LANDRY

SHILOH AND I WENT RING HUNTING LAST WEEK. SHE GAVE ME a couple of ideas of what she wanted. I tried to talk her into something more extravagant, but she insisted they were too gaudy. I went back to the jewelry store the following day and bought what I hoped she liked. It was slightly larger than what she'd picked out, but I added a couple of diamond eternity rings for her wedding bands. Then I bought her diamond earrings as a wedding gift. If she didn't want a big diamond, I would pepper her with smaller ones.

The night of her immense hangover, I figured it was time to officially ask her to be my wife. I scrutinized her as we ate dinner together in our room and was still astounded we were together and that we would soon be husband and wife.

She caught me gazing at her. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie. I'm an FBI agent and can see through it."

"Fine. Every time I look at you, I'm blown away by how gorgeous you are and how lucky I am."

She swallowed, and I watched her throat work. Her mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing came out until she said, "Wow. That wasn't what I expected." I adored how her cheeks took on a pink hue.

“It’s true, though. Your eyes are incredibly expressive, but you also have the best poker face I’ve ever seen.”

Her fork aimed my way. “Now that took lots of practice. When I was in training, that was my downfall. I’d stand in front of the mirror and watch myself. It’s funny now when I think of it, but it helped me master it.”

“And your mouth. It’s so sexy, one look and I’m gone.”

She pressed a hand to the center of her chest.

“If you haven’t figured it out by now, you’re my world. Love is like a storm. It doesn’t walk in gently, but rather it explodes into your heart and sweeps you away. That’s what you’ve done to me. You’re my storm, Cinnamon.” I got up and went down on one knee next to her. “Shiloh, will you marry me? Be the storm in my life that never leaves?”

I studied her as I spoke and watched her eyes glisten with unshed tears. Then one finally bubbled out and fell gracefully down her cheek. I brushed it away and reached for her hand. Then I slipped on the ring. She leaped up and crashed into me, knocking us both backward to the floor.

“Yes, yes, yes, Landry. I’ll marry you.” Then she showered me with kisses until I took hold of her head, cupping both cheeks and kissing her back. We rolled on the floor and then laughed.

“Oh my god!” She held her hand out and stared at her ring. “This is bigger than what I showed you!”

I shrugged. She deserved more than one carat.

“Look how it sparkles! It’s beautiful.”

“I hope you like it.”

“It’s the most beautiful ring in the world. I never imagined having one like this. Thank you.”

“And the solitaire is okay?”

“It’s exactly what I wanted.” Her lips touched mine again.

“So, have you thought about dates?” I rolled her over so I was on top.

“Now that the case is over, any time.”

“Then let’s call Ravina and see what she can do.”

My phone was in my pocket, so I pulled it out and called my sister.

“Hey, what’s up?” she answered.

“How long would it take to plan a wedding here?”

“Shut up!”

She was on speaker, and her response set Shiloh into a fit of laughter.

“Hallelujah! My baby brother is getting hitched!” Her yell could’ve woken the dead.

“That’s right. We want to do it here. What do you think?”

“I think it’s perfect. Let me check on my caterers, florists, and so on. Can I let you know on Monday?”

“Sure, but do you think you can swing this in four weeks? We only want very close friends and family.”

“Maybe six is more like it. I can let you know on Monday. The only drawback would be a photographer. They usually book up way in advance. You can see if Tristian would want to, just in case that’s an issue.”

“I was going to call him next.”

“Um, you better let Stanton and Stacy know first.”

“Great idea. Let’s talk Monday.”

“Hey, how about I bring the girls out tomorrow for a ride and you can tell them?”

One glance at Shiloh told me it was fine. Then I thought about her parents. We needed to pay them a visit too.

“Make it late morning and it’ll be a shorter ride. We need to visit Shiloh’s parents.”

When the call was done, we went to tell Stanton. He and Stacey were downstairs in the den.

“We have news,” I began. “We’re getting married.”

“What? That’s fabulous,” Stacey said.

“Congrats, baby bro. It’s about time you joined the married ranks.”

“It took the right woman, you know.”

“I could’ve told you she was the right woman from the start.” My brother always had a comeback.

“Really? And how did you come by that?”

His response was accompanied by a shrug. “Easy. You’d never brought any other woman here. You’re just like me. When Shiloh showed up, not for a night, but with a suitcase, it was a done deal.”

He was right. I should’ve known that from the beginning, but my dumb ass didn’t pay close enough attention to the details. And everything is usually in the details.

Shiloh laughed. “You told me once that women never came home with you. You didn’t allow it.”

“Except you.” Then I kissed her until Stacey said, “Ahem. Remember that conversation we had a while back when you commented about Stanton and me kissing all the time?”

I cringed because I did remember. I gave her hell for too much PDA. “Yeah, I do, and you were right.”

Stanton’s gaze ping-ponged between us. “Are you going to enlighten Shiloh and me?”

“He told me we were overboard with us kissing all the time. I told him that his opinion would change when he found a woman he loved. Of course, he thought it was a bunch of BS.”

“And what do you think now?” Stanton asked, smirking.

My answer was to kiss Shiloh. When we stopped, Stacey asked, “Is that a ring I see?”

Shiloh held out her hand. “Isn’t it perfect?”

“It is. Look at that sparkle. I almost need sunglasses.” Stanton rolled his eyes at his wife’s response. Then he

mumbled, “Women.”

“What? It is super sparkly.” Stacey elbowed him in the ribs.

By this time, we’d sat down and I decided to call Tristian and English.

He answered like we all did. “Hey bro. What’s up?”

“I wanted to let you know that Shiloh and I are getting married.”

“That’s great! Congratulations.” Then he called out to English and told her the news.

“I have a question. We’re going to do this fast—close friends and family only. Ravina is going to work on it for us, but in case she can’t find a photographer that’s available, do you know anyone?”

“Absolutely and he’s the best.”

“Who?” I chuckled, thinking he would say himself. But he surprised me with his answer.

“My father-in-law. Beck will do it. And probably won’t charge you.”

I’d forgotten that English’s father was a professional photographer and known worldwide for his amazing work. “No, I wouldn’t allow that.”

“You can work out the details with him, but he’s the best. He taught me almost everything I know.”

English yelled in the background, “He did teach you everything you know.”

I chuckled. “Thanks. I’ll tell Ravina when we talk tomorrow. She’s bringing the girls out to ride.”

“I heard already. Easton is running around here yelling, ‘giddyap’ already.”

I loved that kid. “I’ll keep you posted on everything.”

THE NEXT MORNING, THE TWO GIRLS ARRIVED, SHOUTING OUR names. “Uncle Landry, Aunt Shiloh, where are you?” Their voices echoed throughout the first story. It amazed me how loud two little girls could be.

“In the kitchen. Where else?”

They ran into the room and Easton hollered, “Aunt Shiloh, we wanna see your ring.” Juliette echoed her question.

Shiloh held out her hand as the girls ogled it. “It’s so sparkly,” Juliette said.

Easton replied in a dreamy voice, “I hope my prince gives me one like that one day.”

“Don’t you worry. If he doesn’t, I’ll arrest him.”

“Really? He’ll go to prince jail?”

“He sure will until he promises to buy you a nice ring.”

The girls liked Shiloh’s promise. They hopped around the kitchen and when Ravina came in, Easton said, “Guess what, Aunt Ravina? If my prince doesn’t give me a sparkly ring like Uncle Landry gave Aunt Shiloh, she’ll arrest him and send him to prince jail.”

Ravina pressed her lips together at first. It held back her laugh, but her eyes danced with mirth. “She will?”

“That’s what she said,” Juliette said.

“That’s good.”

“I know. We both want sparkly rings, don’t we, Juliette?” Juliette bobbed her head up and down, sending dark curls bouncing.

“I’m sure you’ll get what you want,” Ravina said. Under her breath, she added, “You always do. So, let’s see this bling my brother put on your finger.”

Shiloh held out her hand and Ravina said, “Wow! That diamond is unreal.”

Shiloh glowed. “Isn’t it? He did good.”

“You didn’t pick it out?”

“No. We shopped together, so he knew what I wanted, but I didn’t pick this one out.”

Ravina nudged me with her shoulder. “Nice work.”

“Thanks.” I turned to the girls and asked, “You ready to go?” They were so cute in their riding outfits.

“Uncle Landry, we were born ready.” Easton stood with a hand on her hip and Ravina cracked up.

“I believe they were,” she said.

“Then let’s get a move on. We’ll be back by noon.”

Shiloh and Easton told us to have a great ride.

“Why isn’t Aunt Shiloh going?” Juliette asked on the walk to the stables.

“She wants to talk to Ravina about wedding plans.”

Easton clapped her hands. “Oh, I do hope we get to be her bridesmaids.”

“I’ll mention that to her.”

We mounted the saddled horses and took off. I’d give them a harder ride today since Shiloh wasn’t with us. She’d gotten much better but wasn’t at the girls’ level yet. We took a different trail today, one that was a shorter ride through the property. It was the one I used to ride to meet Shiloh back in the day.

We made it to the fence when Easton asked, “Uncle Landry, what is that man doing?”

It was a man surveying the adjacent property. Shit, were they selling? I hope it wasn’t to a builder. We’d end up with a subdivision behind us. I’d forgotten to talk to Stanton about buying the property, but he would hear about this as soon as we got home.

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Thirty-Four



SHILOH

RAVINA AND I STUCK OUR HEADS TOGETHER AS WE CHECKED out everything we could do for the wedding.

“I’ve seen a lot of photos in your gallery that I love.”

“Show me.”

I picked out the ones with all the fairy lights. What girl wouldn’t want that at her wedding?

“Ooh, that was from Stacey and Stanton’s wedding. I can do that for you.”

“Can you add a flower arbor for us to stand under?”

She opened up a different file and went to another picture. “Like this?”

“That’s exactly what I had in mind. I love that!”

“You got it. Anything else?”

“No, from the layout here”—I pointed to a different photo —“this will be perfect.”

“Easy peasy.” Then she told me about how she ended up with this business.

“It all happened after Stacey and Stanton’s wedding. I directed everything, along with the events planner. I gave her all my ideas and approvals. It turned out so perfect. I also did

that for Tristian and English. Stacey was the one who first encouraged me, and here I am.”

“That’s a great success story. They should feature you in that magazine for Atlanta’s young entrepreneurs.”

She shrugged. “I don’t do it for the money, obviously. I still help with marketing at the company, too.”

“You’re a busy woman. What are you going to do when your baby arrives?”

“Hire an extra nanny.” Her laugh rang throughout the den, where we’d plopped ourselves. “I adore my kids and would do anything in the world for them, but I’m not a stay-at-home mother. I would go crazy.”

“I get it. It wouldn’t be for me either.”

“Do you think you and Landry will have kids?”

Her question threw me into orbit. It was something we needed to discuss more. “Not right away. Maybe after we’ve acclimated to marriage.”

She nodded and went on adding things on her notepad. “Okay, what about dress shopping?”

“Shoot. I haven’t even thought about that.”

She chuckled. “You are an unusual bride-to-be. Most people I work with already have their dress.”

“Hmm. I was never one to dream about getting married.”

“You are different. Don’t worry. I have connections with some bridal boutiques. You’ll have to buy off the rack as there won’t be time to order anything if we’re talking six weeks, but that can work out really well. We should probably go next week though.”

Next week. Good thing work had slowed somewhat. “How about Monday?”

“Works for me.”

“Do you mind if my mom comes along?”

“Good god, no. If you didn’t invite her, she’d probably shoot you.”

“You’re right.”

“I’ll contact my three favorite shops to make sure we have appointments. I’ll text you on Monday.”

All these details made my head swim. “Ravina, I have no idea what I’d do without you. I wouldn’t know where to begin with all this.”

We reviewed my favorite flowers and then moved on to the food. “Why don’t you and Landry do that? I’m not picky and would be fine with Cheez Whiz.”

She covered her ears, saying, “My ears, my ears. Cheez Whiz at a wedding I plan will not be happening.”

“That’s what I mean.” Then for fun, I added, “How about chips and salsa?”

“Um, NO!”

I chortled at that. “It was a joke.”

“We’ll be doing something along the lines of seafood, beef tenderloin, caviar and blinis, maybe some sushi.”

“Wow, you’re going all out.”

She showed me a picture of the tables laden with food from Stanton and Stacey’s wedding. “Yours will be more like this. It’s your wedding, so we only want top notch.”

Then it dawned on me my parents would be paying for this. “How much will all this cost? My parents don’t have a whole lot of money.”

“First off, they won’t be paying for it. Landry will. Second, my services are free, so you’ll only be charged for the caterer’s services, food, and flowers. Oh, the band too.” Then she paused a moment. “Maybe Gabriel can help.”

“How will your husband help with this?”

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“He’s a musician and that’s how we met. When his band played at Stacey and Stanton’s wedding.”

“Stop!”

“Yup. Back then, he was a major asshole, but he finally came around. Maybe he can check to see if his old band can play or someone else even.”

“You really are connected in this business. You know everyone.”

“Only because they’re either family or my spouse.”

“That doesn’t matter as long as they help.”

“True. When I first started, English set up my website.”

“English did? It’s fantastic.”

“It’s what she does.”

This family was very talented. I wouldn’t bring much to the table in that area.

Ravina started asking questions about invitations. We reviewed a number of options, and I picked a couple.

“Then this one. I like it the best. Plain and understated, yet elegant. Now all I need is your invitation list. Don’t worry about Landry’s. With a few exceptions, I have it.”

That wouldn’t take me long as I’d only invite my family and coworkers. It would probably amount to forty people at the most.

We wrapped everything up about the time Landry and the girls came in. “How was it?”

He wore a frown, so I wondered what was up. “The ride was great. I need to speak to Stanton for a minute.” Then he disappeared.

Ravina stood, grabbed her computer and notepad, and went to the kitchen with me following.

The girls were guzzling down water, and on their way out, they grabbed some cookies. They both hugged me goodbye as they left. Ravina promised to call me the following day.

I was still in the kitchen when Landry returned.

“What’s up?”

“I saw a surveyor on your old property while we were riding. I wanted to let Stanton know because the last thing we need back there is a subdivision.”

“Yikes. That wouldn’t be good.”

“No, it wouldn’t. He’s going to check on it tomorrow. Let me wash the horse odor off and change, and then we can go. Do your parents know we’re coming?”

“No, I thought we could surprise them.”

We drove to their house and when we got there, Bud was watching a baseball game on TV and Mom was in the kitchen cooking.

Mom hugged me tightly. “What a nice surprise. What brings you this way?”

I could not stop grinning. I glanced at Landry, and he was doing the same. “Well, we have news.”

“News?” Bud asked.

Landry took over from here. “Your beautiful daughter said yes! There’s going to be a wedding.”

I held out my hand and Mom’s eyes widened, and her brows shot north of the continent. “Oh, Shiloh. That’s utterly beautiful.”

“Isn’t it? He has good taste.” I winked at Landry.

“Let’s all have a glass of wine.” I inwardly cringed as I knew Mom’s taste in wine wasn’t even up to mine, let alone Landry’s. But my fiancé was kind and gracious.

“Here’s to the bride and groom-to-be,” Bud said, raising his glass.

“Well, now we have lots and lots of planning to do.”

“Mom, let’s sit.” Then I explained to her the way things were with Ravina. Her crestfallen expression and the way her eyes glistened had me second-guessing everything.

Luckily, Landry came to the rescue. “I’m sure Ravina would welcome your input, and I want to let you both know the reception is part of my wedding gift to Shiloh. She wanted small and intimate and I’m afraid it’s a bit larger than we first anticipated.”

“Mom, can you create a list? I really want to keep it as small as possible.”

“Honey, the only people I want there are your brothers and my sister. Bud? What about you?”

“My brother is all I want there. Oh, and can we invite John and Mary Lou?” They lived next door to Mom and Bud.

“Sure. Mom, can you go dress shopping with Ravina and me tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Now that we had everything settled, we made small talk. Mom reminded me of registering for gifts.

“I’ll do that tonight with Landry.”

Mom took my hand and pulled me behind her. “I want you to try something on.”

We went upstairs to one of the empty bedrooms. She went into the closet and pulled out an enormous box. It was sealed, and I had no idea what was coming. When it was opened, I saw white lace. “Mom? Is this your wedding gown?”

“Yes, from when I married your father.” I was eager to see it, so I grabbed it. “Be careful. It’s been in here since my mom had it cleaned and stored.”

I pulled the special paper away they’d wrapped it in and unveiled silk and lace. Carefully, I lifted it up as Mom helped. “Oh, my goodness. It’s still beautiful,” she said.

And it really was. It wasn’t over the top like so many gowns I’d seen from back then. It was sleeveless, with a V-neck. Tiny lace flowers had been sewn into the bodice, which tapered to the waist. Then it flowed down from there, nothing but layers of elegant silk. The sheer Watteau train was embellished with the same lace flowers that were on the

bodice. “Oh, Mom, I love it!” I’d only seen pictures of it in the past and those were put away after my dad left. “Can I try it on?”

“Of course.”

I stripped off my clothes and she helped me get into the dress. The cool thing was the train detached at the shoulders, so it was easy to put on. I looked in the mirror and sighed. The dress was a little big in the bust but otherwise was perfect. “Mom, you had some big bazoombas back then.”

“Still do, if you haven’t noticed.” We both cackled.

“Can I wear it?”

“I’d be honored.”

“I don’t think I’d find anything else I love this much.”

She hugged me tightly, squeezing the air out of me. “You look beautiful in it.” When she stepped back from me, tears were in her eyes. “I can’t believe my baby girl is getting married.”

“Honestly, I can’t either.”

“You picked a good man, honey.”

“I know.” My heart smiled along as I said the words. Landry was the best and he owned my heart.

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Thirty-Five



LANDRY

THINGS WERE IN MOTION FOR THE WEDDING, AS IT WAS ONLY two weeks away. Shiloh had given me free rein for the honeymoon. I wanted something relaxing where we wouldn't be on the go go go.

Taking everyone's suggestions into consideration, it came down to a tiki hut over the ocean in the Maldives or a yacht cruising around French Polynesia. I wanted our every desire to be completely catered to, so I opted for the Maldives. We could do a yacht cruise next year.

After everything was planned, I told Shiloh what she needed to pack. We were seated in the kitchen, sipping coffee and eating breakfast. She tried to guess where we were going.

"It's the Caribbean, isn't it?"

"I'm not saying. You wanted to be surprised."

"Will I need anything dressy?"

"No, just nice casual. You can bring lots of bathing suits, though."

"Hmm, it's Hawaii, isn't it?"

"Do you want to know because I'll tell you?"

She bit her lower lip as her fingers thrummed the tabletop. "No, I don't want to know. I want to be surprised."

I nudged her. “Then stop asking questions because even if you guess it, I won’t tell you.”

“Okay, but one more question. What time do we leave?”

“At ten in the morning, but not the morning after the wedding. I wanted to make sure we weren’t tired or hungover.”

“Oooh, great idea! I love that. So, the morning after, we can sleep in late?”

“I wasn’t thinking about sleeping. I had other things on my mind.”

“You did, huh?”

I sidled my chair closer to her and spoke softly in her ear. “Uh-huh. We’ll be spending the entire day in bed. You, me, your tight little cunt, and my happy whale-like wiener. I’ll be fucking you all day long. You can sleep, but I can’t guarantee how much.”

She shivered and turned to me. Her saucy grin put a smile on my own face. “I’ll be ready, willing, and able, Moby Dick.”

“Moby Dick?”

“You just said you had a whale-like wiener.”

“Ahh, nice one. Don’t forget to have your handcuffs handy.”

Her brows perked up and she pressed her lips together. “Yes, sir.”

I put my finger under her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Now finish up here as we need to get moving.” It was a workday, and I had a pile of to-dos to complete before we left.

She rose, poured her coffee into a to-go cup, grabbed another cinnamon muffin and said, “I’m ready.”

We drove in together and I dropped her off at work. “Don’t forget, you close on your condo tomorrow.” She’d put it on the market, and it sold in two days. The interior was completely redone, and it looked wonderful. After she’d notified the insurance company about how long it was taking to make the

repairs on that and her car, things got cracking. The added pressure put a fire under everyone's butts. When the condo was completed, she listed it and the only thing left was closing.

"I talked with the attorney yesterday and all I have to do is go and sign the documents and bring all the keys. Everything else will be done electronically, which is nice."

She'd owned the condo for four years and made a tidy profit on it. I wanted her to take the earnings and invest them. Her portfolio could become a nice nest egg if she did, not that she needed it. But Shiloh was independent, and I didn't want to destroy that aspect of her. Having your own money gave one a sense of security and freedom.

As we drove, I reached for her hand. When we were together, I had this undeniable urge to touch her. Anywhere. "Any word on the Katie Snellgrove case and your high-profile suspect?"

"Right! I forgot to tell you. There was so much evidence, from DNA obtained from hair and blood to fingerprints to incriminating emails and on the dark web, it would take a miracle for him to walk. Also, his lackeys gave everything up when they pled out. Four of them were interrogated and their stories matched without any of them knowing what was going on."

"That pleased you, I'm sure."

"You have no idea. It was stressful at times, going through all the data we found. And then, with that local cop being involved. He sang enough to put Wright away."

"Good thing it's done because now you can enjoy our day and honeymoon much more."

On my last day of work before the big event, Stanton came into my office bearing a huge manila envelope. He handed it to me and said, "Happy wedding."

"What is this?"

"Open it and see."

“Should I wait so Shiloh can see it?”

He shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

“I’ll take it home and we’ll open it together.”

He left, and I waited for Shiloh to arrive home after I did. She announced her arrival with a bang. I ran to the foyer to see she’d dropped her briefcase as she swore. When she eyed me, she said, “No, you can’t look!”

She carried a huge white bag that must’ve contained her wedding gown.

“I’m putting this upstairs in the closet where I used to stay, but you can’t see it. It’s bad luck.”

Not knowing much about this wedding stuff, I only nodded and waited for her to return. I sat in the den when she came in. The manilla envelope was on the coffee table. After she poured herself a glass of wine, she said, “I had my final dress fitting today. Mom and Ravina were there, and we all cried.”

“Why?”

She punched my bicep. “Because, silly, I looked so glorious.” Then she cackled.

“I’m sure you’ll be the most gorgeous bride in the history of weddings.”

“Oh, cut it out.” Then she saw the huge envelope and asked, “What’s that?”

“No idea. It’s from Stanton for both of us, so I waited to open it.”

“Go on, then.”

Inside the envelope was a file. I pulled it out and a sticky note was stuck on the outside. *Congrats, and hope your marriage is everything you both want.*

Upon opening the folder, it didn’t hit me what it was. Shiloh was the one that aahed first. “Good lord, it’s the closing statement and deed to some property.”

I inspected it to find it was the property that bordered ours. “This is the property your parents owned.” Then it made sense. “There will be no subdividing that property as long as we both live.”

“I can’t believe Stanton gave this to us.”

We didn’t hear them enter, but Stanton clarified. “It’s from both of us. We knew how important this acreage was to you both, so we figured you deserved to own it.”

“Thank you to both of you,” I said as Shiloh nodded.

Shiloh brushed a thumb under her eyes. “This is such an incredible gift. Thank you. I don’t know what else to say.” A hand pressed to her chest.

Stacey sat next to Shiloh. “You’ve already said it and it pleases me to see how much it means to you.” Shiloh turned to her and threw her arms around her in a giant hug.

“First thing we should do is plant some trees,” I suggested, looking at Shiloh. Her nod encouraged me further. “And add a fence surrounding it and open up our current fence in the back.”

An idea bulldozed its way into my head and the wheels started spinning.

“What’s that secretive smile all about?” my brother asked.

“You’ll see. I have a plan that will be a great use for that piece of land.”

Later that night, when we were preparing for bed, Shiloh was brushing her teeth and said, “I have some things to do on Saturday. What are your plans?” It was Wednesday, so I was going to have to work quickly on this.

“Mom and I are going to Ravina’s to finalize everything. We got a substantial number of responses on the RSVPs, so we want to make sure everything is set.”

“Okay. Don’t make plans for Saturday night though. I have a surprise for you.”

“Ooh, a surprise? What kind?”

By now, she'd finished her dental care, so I pulled her to me and said, "If I tell you, it won't be a surprise. You don't like surprises, do you?"

"I love them, but it's in my nature to be inquisitive." And that she was.

THE FIRST THING I DID ON THURSDAY MORNING WAS TO CALL the nursery we used for our landscaping and order a dozen trees to be planted. I chose a variety of maples, oaks, and others. I paid extra to have them in the ground by Friday. Then I called a local outdoor equipment company and ordered a yurt to be set up. It would have a nice comfortable bed, a wooden floor, and a screen at the top to watch the starlit sky. It even had a porta-potty with water attached. I prayed it didn't rain. The yurt will be set up and fully equipped on Friday. I wanted it set close to the trees but not so close our views would be obstructed. Finally, I called Sally to ask her to prepare a nice four-course dinner. One of the staff could drive it out to us on one of the Rangers. I ordered champagne, wine, sparkling and still waters to go along with it.

"Ooh, Mr. Landry, your lady is going to love this. I'll cook up something special for sure."

"Thanks, Sally, you're the best."

All the plans were in place. Now it was a matter of execution and weather.

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Thirty-Six



SHILOH

ON SATURDAY MORNING, I LEFT FOR RAVINA'S, PROMISING Landry I'd be home by five at the latest. Mom would meet me there since she lived too far out of the way for me to pick her up.

Mom was already seated at the dining room table, checking everything. Ravina greeted me with a large mug of joe, knowing I'd want one.

"Ravina, I'm so impressed with your skills. You have organized everything like magic," Mom said.

"Thank you. This is something I love to do. So, let's review. The caterer is set to arrive at four to set up the tables the way he wants. He's requested several banquet tables, so those will be waiting on him.

"We have everything set for the florist. The arbor will be outside, where you wanted it, Shiloh. They will arrive at noon to start their work. The arbor will take some time since they're entwining flowers all over it. Your bouquet, along with the girls' and your mom's, will be waiting. Also, I requested two flower crowns for the girls, and they're going to love them. They'll look adorable in their dresses that sort of match yours."

I was so excited to see them walk down the aisle. The courtyard was huge, allowing us to have a platform for the

band, a bar at both ends, and room for tables for the guests to sit. It was accessible from the side of the house, so guests would be funneled in that way. There was also an entrance in the back that led to a bathroom, but we'd also hired two of those fancy porta toilets that were air-conditioned if it was hot out. Those would be set up on the side, near the wide entrance to the back. There was plenty of room there, and we wouldn't have them in our faces.

A low brick wall bordered the entire courtyard and the flowers that were planted there were in full bloom. Hydrangeas, roses, and many other varietals dotted the beds. The florist was using some of the hydrangeas in our bouquets as they were gorgeous.

Ravina went on to say, "A platform for dancing will be set up in front of the band. We don't want anyone tripping on the bricks out there. Servers will be carrying around trays of appetizers." She pulled up a schematic showing me where everything would be. "We put the arbor at the far right end and chairs will be set there that can be removed after the ceremony. What do you think so far?"

"It's unbelievable. Mom, what about you?"

The corners of her mouth curved into a smile. "I can't wait to see my baby walk down the aisle on my husband's arm. You're going to look so beautiful." She'd cried when we went for my final dress fitting, so I was pretty darn sure she'd do it at the wedding.

"Thanks, Mom. Ravina, with that in mind, I have a question. Will there be some sort of aisle I walk down?"

"Yes! You'll walk around the house from the front so no one sees you. Then up the side and all the way to the arbor. The girls will have tossed rose petals on the white runner just before you come."

"And will Jameson carry the ring?"

Ravina laughed. "Not really. We'll only tie a fake on because you know Jameson. He'll probably want to fling that pillow around."

That was a relief. “Thank God. I started thinking about that yesterday.”

“We got you covered. Okay, so the ceremony begins at six thirty. Your hair and makeup crew will arrive at one. They’re doing your mom first, then you, then the girls last, so their hair stays styled. They’ll be running around, so I asked for braids if that’s okay with you.”

“I love braids. Won’t you be getting yours done too?”

“Nope. I won’t have time with directing everyone. I’ll fix my own, but I’ll get dressed here when I’m done.”

Ravina was so pretty she didn’t need makeup. Her thick mane of hair could handle any style, so I was good with that.

“Wow, I can’t believe it’s only a week away!” Excitement raced through me.

“I can’t wait to officially welcome you to the family.”

Mom sat there, not saying a thing.

“Mom? Are you good with this?”

“I just can’t believe my baby is getting married.” She dabbed the corners of her eyes.

Good Lord, she’d hounded me the last few years to find a decent man. Now she was crying over it. “Ravina, make sure the makeup people have waterproof mascara, eyeliner, and so on. I don’t want Mom’s face streaked with black when she sees me.”

“Oh, hush. I’ll rein it in but give your mom a right to express her emotions.”

“I will and do, but I want you to look stunning on my wedding day.”

We finished up with the plans and I checked the time. It was only three, so I was good.

“Shiloh, where did you put your gown?” Ravina asked.

“It’s hanging in the closet of the spare bedroom in Landry’s wing.”

“Good. There’s a steamer somewhere at the house. I’ll check with Sally in case we need to straighten out some wrinkles.”

That hadn’t crossed my mind. “Good idea.” I pushed to my feet. “Since we’re done, I’m going to head home. You both know where to find me.” I hugged Mom and Ravina. “Thank you for everything.”

“It’s been fun. I love doing this, you know.”

I didn’t know how she managed, especially with a seven-year-old, a four-month-old, and being pregnant on top of it all. I hoped I was that efficient if Landry and I ever had kids.

Landry wasn’t anywhere to be found when I got home, so I decided to go to the gym and do my workout. I’d been making good use of it the last four weeks and saw a difference in my butt and legs. When I finished, I took another shower to rinse the sweat off. By that time, my lover boy was home. It was around four thirty.

“I’m starving,” I told him. I hadn’t eaten lunch.

“I’ll run down and grab a snack for you. We have dinner plans tonight, so don’t eat a full-blown lunch.” He disappeared through the doorway and returned with a protein bar and water.

“What do I need to wear?”

“What you have on is fine.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see in a little bit.”

Then I remembered. “Oh, this is my surprise.”

Landry’s smile told it all.

“Ooh, I can’t wait.”

“I’m going to shower and we’re leaving at five.”

When the clock struck five, we walked to the garage, and he pointed to one of the Rangers. “I promise you’re going to love this.”

“Okay. I believe you.” I did. Landry wouldn’t take me to some dump. But when he put a blindfold on me, I stiffened. As an FBI agent, being blindfolded and not knowing where we were going wasn’t something I was particularly fond of.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe and we’re not going far.”

My spine relaxed a bit, but not all the way. He cranked up the Ranger and told me to hold on as he placed my hand on one of the safety handles. Off we went. It must’ve been ten minutes later when we stopped and turned off the vehicle. He took my hand, and we walked maybe twenty or thirty steps. Then he removed the blindfold, and I was transplanted into a fairy tale. My hands went directly to my mouth as I said, “Oh, my, gosh. This is amazing.” Then I was in his arms, looking over his shoulder at all the trees and the tent that was there.

“I hope you love it because we’re spending the night out here.”

“In the tent?”

“It’s a yurt. Go inside and take a look.”

It was beautiful. A large bed stood in the center of a wooded floor. “What’s that?” I pointed to a white machine that looked like a dehumidifier.

“That’s an air conditioner if it gets too hot in here.”

An air conditioner? In a tent? “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Nope. This is glamping, baby. Nothing but the best for you.”

We heard a rumbling in the distance. “That’ll be our champagne and strawberries.”

Landry grabbed two folding chairs from inside the yurt, along with a table to put between us. By the time he set everything up, our champagne and strawberries were delivered.

“Have a seat, my lady.”

I did and he poured us both flutes of the bubbly and we ate strawberries as we sipped. The bubbles tickled my nose, and I

laughed. “This is delicious.”

“One week from today, you’re going to be Mrs. Baines.”

“Yes, I am. We will celebrate it in an awesome way. The plans are amazing. I can’t believe how Ravina pulled it all together.”

“She’s magical that way. But I can’t wait to see you in your gown.”

“Mom cried today just thinking about it.”

We chatted for about an hour and around seven, we heard another rumbling Ranger. When it arrived, there were two men who pulled everything out, including another table to dine at, along with some different chairs. The table was set with a white tablecloth, napkins and silverware. Then plates were set down. Our first course was soup. It turned out to be lobster bisque and was the best I’d ever had. Next came a lovely mixed-green salad. Our main course was swordfish, served over a bed of lemon-wine-butter pasta with capers. It was absolutely delicious.

“I don’t think food can get any better than this,” I said. “Did Sally create this?”

“She did.”

“She’s fabulous.”

Our empty plates were removed, and a chocolate lava cake was set down. It was so good I wanted to lick my plate, but I’d eaten way too much.

“I’ll be starving the next week so my dress fits. Eating like this is dangerous.”

When the sun fully set and darkness descended around us, Landry turned on the lights that had been strung on the surrounding trees. There were also lights inside the yurt. I hadn’t noticed the generator several hundred feet away. When it turned on, I jumped. “What’s that?”

“It’s our power source.”

“That’s good.”

“You’ll get used to the noise.”

I wasn’t that noisy. It reminded me of a sleep machine. “Is there a way to run it continuously?”

“No, why?”

“To make it white noise.”

“Don’t worry, babe. I’ve already got our sleep machine ready to go. You’ll never hear it turning off and on.”

That night, under the star-filled sky, we lay in bed, talking about our future together. Having kids wasn’t a priority yet, but we would get on that train in a year or two. We discussed whether we wanted to stay in the main house or build one of our own. I asked if the house I’d lived in out here was still there.

“It is, but it’s not in good condition. It needs to be torn down as it stayed empty for years.”

“What about building something out here?” These were the best and the worst years of my life. It would be like hitting the jackpot to return here.

“You’d really want to?”

“Why not? It would close the crummier chapters of both of our lives, and we could begin fresh.”

He looked pensive as he digested what I said. “That idea totally appeals to me. After our honeymoon, we could get plans drawn up. There are probably architects the company has worked with, so I can check with Stanton. We need to think about what we want.”

“I’ve only lived in small homes, so that will be your task.”

He pulled me closer. “No, I need your input. How many bedrooms? Where do we want the laundry room? What do we want in the kitchen? These are all things we need to discuss.”

He was right. I hadn’t thought about it because I’d never built a house before. “Okay, I get it. We should probably look at some designs. I love Ravina’s and English’s homes. Maybe

we could do a spin-off of those. Take the best of both and have it designed.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.”

“Now that we have that puzzle solved, I have a request,” I whispered into his ear, and it wasn’t long before we were both naked and I was writhing on the bed, whimpering out an orgasm. His dirty mouth made me come three times before he thrust inside and wrung one more climax out of me. I was limp from exhaustion but extremely satisfied.

“Sleep, Cinnamon. Morning will be here too soon.” He pressed his lips to mine, and I was soon asleep.

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Thirty-Seven



LANDRY

At six thirty on Saturday, I walked down the aisle with my brother Stanton after Shiloh's mother was seated. I waited for my bride to appear, but first, my nephew, Jameson, came down, swinging that tiny pillow. Good thing my brother had the wedding rings in his pockets.

Next came Juliette, wearing a beaming smile for the world to see. She was adorable with her halo of flowers and white lacy dress. When she got to the front, she ran up to me and hugged me, then went to sit with her father.

Easton was up now, practically skipping down the aisle. She haphazardly tossed the lavender-colored hydrangea petals out of the white basket she carried onto the white runner. Juliette was supposed to do that too, but just swung the basket they were in. When Easton reached me, she blew me a kiss and skipped to her mom, who was in the second row.

Fred walked down next. It had been a huge joke around Shiloh's office that he was going to be a bridesmaid. They joked about how he'd have to wear a dress. Apparently, his wife had gone out and bought him one from a consignment store. She made him put it on and sent a picture of it to Shiloh. Shiloh had framed it and it sat on one of the tables with the rest of the photos. Lucky for him, he wore a suit without a tie, like Stanton and I did.

The music changed and all eyes were on the entrance as my bride appeared. My heart swelled with anticipation

as the moment was finally here. She emerged from the side of the house and made her grand entrance, being escorted by Bud. His smile was broad, illuminating his face as he beamed with pride. Every second that passed felt like an eternity as my eyes feasted on my beautiful bride-to-be. When she reached me, I let loose a deep breath and could barely contain the joy that filled me. Her ivory gown shimmered in the sunlight streaming through the trees, and the delicate veil framed her face like a halo of glimmering stars. She placed her soft hand in mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me, and all I could manage to say was, “Wow. You’ve just blown me away.”

Our minister welcomed us and began to recite the traditional wedding ceremony, but all I wanted to do was sweep my bride into my arms and kiss her.

The words flew by me as the only thing on my mind was how beautiful my bride was. I never imagined she would affect me so. I was finally able to pull her into my arms and kiss her, but not as long as I wanted. The love I had for this woman had tiptoed into my life but turned into a wind with the force of a gale. It didn’t seep into my bones but rather knocked me off my feet. I smiled as we turned to walk down the aisle and greet all our guests.

“I never imagined you would look this way. I knew you would be beautiful, but this... Shiloh, you’re every man’s dream.”

“I don’t want to be every man’s dream. I only want to be yours.”

I beamed with pride at her statement.

Ravina led us to a place to stand near the bar so we could greet our guests. Afterward, we danced our first dance as a married couple. By then, food was passed around by servers and tables were laden with the main courses that included lobster tails, shrimp, crab claws, beef tenderloin, pork tenderloin, freshly made sushi and Thai food, an assortment of roasted vegetables, and too many other things to count.

After we greeted the guests, my siblings, their spouses, along with Shiloh's brothers surrounded us. Then the many toasts began. Shiloh's coworkers dragged her off and did the same. Alcohol flowed freely as people ate and danced. We'd arranged for transportation for everyone so no one had to drive home under the influence.

The rowdiest bunch were the FBI agents. They shouted, busted moves, and did shots, all in the name of my bride. I stood and observed, laughing at the whole group.

That was when Brady came up to me. "Hey, I know how much you love her. Congratulations, man. I hope you two have the best of everything."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot." Then I man-hugged him. "I didn't ever want to lose you as a friend."

"Same here. Looks like we're family now."

"We've always been family. The only difference is now it's official."

SHILOH

I never dreamed of having a wedding like this, but in marrying Landry, I got it anyway. It was enchanting. The courtyard had been transformed by Ravina and it resembled a magical place. Ravina had used thousands of fairy lights and placed them in the best spots. Not only were the trees and shrubs dotted with them, but they illuminated all the tables as they were wrapped around the greenery that was used to decorate them. They'd been stuffed into glass lanterns, hurricane lamps, large votive containers and even on the tables with the food. I'd never seen anything this extraordinary. The courtyard was now a mystical land.

We danced, and Landry and I had the most amazing time. "I'm so happy!"

He laughed. "I can tell. I take it you're glad we had us a wedding then."

“Yessss! And I’m glad we had champagne, and food, and everything. And thank you for my diamond earrings and necklace. You shouldn’t have.”

“Babe, you’re worth every cent I spent on them. Anything you want, it’s yours.”

I leaned close so only he could hear. “The only thing left I want is to have your baby.”

He cast a shocked glance at me when his eyes opened wide. “I thought we were going to wait.”

“We are, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want it.”

“I pray for a little baby girl who looks exactly like her mommy. And I pray her mommy teaches her to climb trees like an expert.”

I kissed him briefly. “Then I’d better get cracking because I’m out of practice.”

We stayed until Ravina kicked us out. “If you don’t leave, neither will any of the guests.”

“Oops.” I laughed as my husband took me away. We got up to our room and found a plate of fresh fruit, cheese, and water waiting. I guzzled a bottle and crash-landed on the bed. Landry tried to get me up, but it was a worthless cause. I conked out and woke up in the morning, still wearing my gown.

Epilogue



SHILOH—THREE MONTHS LATER

The honeymoon was a fantasy as we stayed in one of those over-the-water bungalows in the Maldives. I'd never even heard of those islands before then. Landry spoiled me, indulging my every whim, and it continued after we got home.

Our house plans were being finalized by the architect. We were finally at the tweaking point, making minor changes here and there. Construction would begin next month with a six-month window until completion. Landry hired a decorator, as my talents in that area only extended to comforters and duvets. In other words, I was useless. We furnished her with a list of our likes and dislikes, giving her free rein on everything. It was exciting and it would be wonderful to watch the progress. With Landry on it, I would only have to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Living with Landry was a dream. We were happier than I thought possible, but we were still in the honeymoon stage. The thing about Landry was he was attentive but knew when to back off. He didn't smother me or make demands I wasn't able to give. Our conversations were lively and intellectual, and he showed a huge interest in my work. Maybe it was because he'd finally gotten used to what I did, or his exposure to it made him more comfortable. Whatever it was, I loved coming home at night and bouncing ideas off him.

His business also fascinated me. I'd never known much about mergers and acquisitions but had learned an immense

amount from him since our wedding. These conversations were stimulating, and I looked forward to them daily.

The trafficking court cases came to trial and all the suspects were convicted. Even though my presence there wasn't necessary, I wanted to witness Alexander Wright go down. Not to disappoint, the arrogant man shouted at the judge, threatening everyone on the jury and in the courtroom. The judge charged him with contempt for his outrageous behavior. Suffice it to say, he no longer had a political career, as he'd be spending the rest of his life in prison. I chortled in glee at his downfall.

The best news of all was when his coconspirators pled out, they had given us information on where the girls had been taken. We were able to rescue some of them, but not all. The ones we couldn't had been transported out of the country and their trails dried up. We turned everything over to the DHS, which in turn, handed it off to a committee in the private sector that did nothing but search for children who'd been trafficked. I prayed they would somehow be found. Sadly, only a low percentage of them were ever found. This made me more resolute in working hard on this. Jerry asked me, since I was so committed if I wanted to be transferred to Homeland Security since they had an entire division dedicated to human trafficking. It wasn't a decision I could make overnight as I loved my team and snaring child pornographers. In the end, I stayed in my position.

Six months to the day after we were married, we found out I was pregnant. I stopped taking the pill as my doctor had suggested because it generally took three to six months to conceive. That wasn't true for us. Maybe it was due to our robust sex drives. Landry's dirty mouth encouraged our nightly sessions, and I wasn't complaining.

As the first grandchild on my side of the family, you can only imagine my mother's joy. If she didn't stop buying green and yellow baby clothes because she didn't believe in blue even though we were having a boy, we'd need to add on to our new house that wasn't even quite finished.

Mercifully, the house would be completed in a few weeks. We'd be moved in and settled by the time Baby Baines showed up.

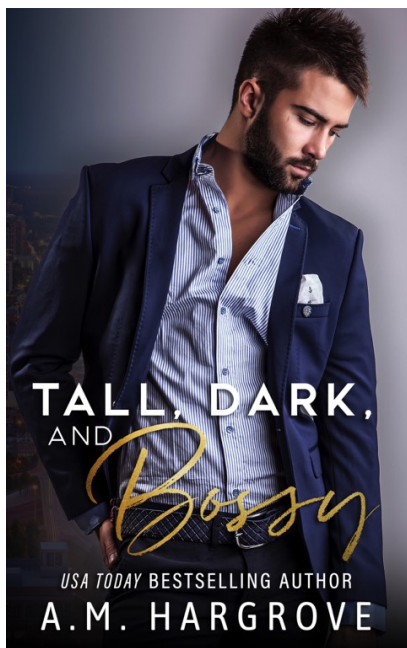
This journey of ours had been quite a crazy ride, but I was thankful that I finally caved and came back to Landry. To be blunt, life would suck without my tall, dark, and dirty husband.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed the Baines Family Novels, and Tall, Dark, and Dirty. If you could be so kind as to leave a review, I would great appreciate it.

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HAVE YOU READ TALL, DARK, AND BOSSY YET? IF NOT, you can [download it here.](#)



The first time I met sexy **Stanton Baines**, I nearly swallowed my tongue.

But that was *before* he opened his mouth and directed his insolent comments at me.

Not one to back down from a clash, I fired right back.

From then on, Stanton pursued me with a vengeance.

The first thing I learned was he discarded women like gum wrappers.

Second, the control freak thought he could dominate me.

That billionaire might be the boss of everybody else, but he was never going to be *my* boss.

Nor was I going to be one of *his* crumpled-up gum wrappers.

My heart had been trampled on enough.

Mr. Baines *would not* be adding his shoe prints to it.

Except he didn't give up.

The more I sassed, the more he chased.

After he had me wrapped around his pinkie, he left ... as in poofed right out of the country without so much as a farewell.

I figured we were over.

Boy was I ever wrong.

I had completely underestimated the man and that asshole was about to bring me to my knees ... unless I did it to him first.

Tall, Dark, and Bossy is the first novel in the *Baines Family Novels*. It is a complete **stand-alone** with a happily ever after. If you enjoy hate-to-love spicy romances with heated banter and surprises, then download this book today!

5 Stars ... I freaking loved this story. It was a whirlwind of drama, spice, and suspense that I couldn't put down. Sarah, Goodreads

5 Stars ... Loved the chemistry ... the push and pull was entertaining and addictive. Amy—Book Addict's review

5 Stars ... READ THIS BOOK! You won't be disappointed. Jessi, Goodreads

Have you read **Tall, Dark, and Dreamy** yet? If not, you can **download it here**.

He's tall, sexy...and a total prick. Sign me up.

Helper. Problem-solver. It's who I am—and what I do.

When I meet the sexy, rugged, and totally irresistible British guitarist, everything goes into overdrive.



I want him—possibly **crave** him— and I’m hellbent on fixing his glaring issue.

There’s only one small problem.

Gabriel Knight wants nothing to do with me or any other woman, nor is he interested in my savvy solutions to his agony.

The more I try; the grumpier he gets.

As his neighbor, his acquaintance, and his drooling

fan, I refuse to give up.

Except tall, dark, and dreamy’s past has made him bitter toward the opposite sex.

And who can blame him?

His ex-wife won’t allow him to see his daughter.

If he would get on board with my plan, that problem could be resolved.

And then he would discover what I’ve known all along: we’re going to be explosive in the bedroom.

Now, he just needs to succumb to my fixer role.

THIS IS THE SECOND BOOK IN THE **BILLIONAIRE BAINES Family** novels. It is a **complete stand-alone** with an **HEA**. If you like your books with spicy bedroom scenes, some comic relief, and fun banter, then grab this one today!

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About A.M. Hargrove



READER, WRITER, DARK CHOCOLATE LOVER, ICE CREAM Worshipper, Coffee Drinker, Lover of Grey Goose (and an extra dirty martini), Puppy Lover, and if you're ever around her for more than five minutes, you'll find out she's a talker.

A.M. Hargrove divides her time between the upstate and the coast of South Carolina where she pursues her dream career of writing. If she could change anything in the world, she would make chocolate and ice cream a part of the USDA food groups. Annie writes romance in several genres, including adult, new adult, and young adult. Her books usually include lots of suspense and thrills and she sometimes ventures into the paranormal, sci-fi and fantasy blend.

If you would like to hear more about what's going on in her world, please subscribe to her mailing list at

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You can also join her private reader group—[Hargrove's Hangout & Hellions](#)— on Facebook if you're up to some shenanigans!

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