

TALL, DARK,  
AND

*Dreaming*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.M. HARGROVE



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**Tall, Dark, and Dreamy**

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**Helper. Problem-solver. Situation savior.**

**It's who I am—and what I do.**

**But 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 everything he's facing.**

**There's only one small problem.**

**Gabriel Knight wants nothing to do with me or my savvy solutions to his agony.**

**The more I try; the worse he gets.**

**As his neighbor, his acquaintance, and his drooling fan, I'm not giving up.**

**Tall, dark, and dreamy just needs to get on board and know what I've known all along: we're going to be explosive in the bedroom for years to come.**

**Now, he just needs to succumb to everything I want.**

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!

*He's tall, sexy...and a total prick. Sign me up.*

There is no friend as loyal as a book.

— ERNEST HEMMINGWAY

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# One



RAVINA

SO FAR, MY BROTHER'S WEDDING RECEPTION WAS PERFECT. The weather had cooperated, and the event planner had gone above and beyond with the decorations, with my help, of course. It looked like something right out of the pages of a magazine. My sister-in-law, Stacey, and I gave our stamps of approval before the festivities began. We'd gone to get ready afterward, and I hadn't stayed to see the band set up when they'd arrived. What a mistake that had been.

When I returned, they were already strumming some tunes, but I didn't pay much attention then either. They were focusing on instrumentals until after my brother, Stanton, and his wife, Stacey, renewed their vows. When that was done, they cranked back up only this time, they added the vocals. That's when I took my first notice of him—the lead guitarist and singer of the band. His husky voice snatched my attention, but my first glimpse of him put me in a man trance.

They were currently playing a slow, sexy song as my tongue flopped to the floor. The man oozed seduction and desire. He was strikingly handsome, with his dark, broody looks and hooded eyes. His arms were ink covered, and man were they ever sexy. Maybe it was because he was ripped, and those tats emphasized his biceps even more. Whatever it was, I was in hot, steamy lust.



I found a spot close to the platform where they were playing and made no secret about ogling the man. My other sister-in-law, English, came over and elbowed me.

“Looks like you found something of interest up there.”

“Have you looked at him? The vocalist? He’s perfect.”

She cackled, then put a finger in the air. “Mark this down as one for the books because Ravina, I’ve never seen you act like this.”

I glanced at her. “That’s only because I’ve never seen any man who looks as delicious as him. Check out his mouth.” His full lips had grabbed my attention too. “I’m sure he knows his way around a woman’s body.”

“Ravina! You are smitten!”

“No, I’m in L-U-S-T!”

She chortled, very loud, and it must’ve caught his attention because he glanced over at us. That was the first time I got a good look at his eyes, and I melted. “Green. Deep sea green. Like right before a storm.”

“Huh?” English apparently hadn’t seen them.

“His eyes. Didn’t you see? They’re gorgeous.” I patted my chest as my heart was about to explode into a gallop. I was positive my ribs would be bruised from the internal hammering they were receiving.

“You really do have it bad for the man. I can’t wait to tell Tristian.”

“Don’t you dare! He’ll tell Stanton and Stanton will flip.”

Tristian was English’s husband and my other brother.

“Why?”

“Look at him! He’s not wearing the required suit, not to mention his ink!” My brother was so uptight sometimes and when it came to the men I was interested in, he was especially so.

English laughed again. “We can tell Stacey and she can break it to him.”

I bumped her with my hip. “If you haven’t noticed, there isn’t anything to tell. I don’t even know the hottie’s name.”

“Humph. That’s easy enough.” She walked closer to the stage and when the song ended, she approached said hottie. After a brief exchange, she came back with a grin. “His name is Gabriel Knight and he’s single.”

Jeez, the girl had balls. I’d never do something as bold as that. “Gabriel Knight, huh? Maybe I can get him to open up a bit, har har har.”

“I’m sure you can. I’m warning you though. He’s not very friendly, but there is a bonus.”

“A bonus?”

“He must be from the UK because he has a very sexy accent.”

“No! English, are you serious?”

“Dead serious. You should’ve heard him.”

I fanned myself as the thought of him talking dirty to me in said accent ran through my filthy mind.

“Aunt Ravina, will you dance with me?” My niece, Easton, English’s daughter, came up to me, grabbing my hand. This child owned me. By that I meant my heart was completely hers and there wasn’t a chance I’d say no to her. Dancing would also be a good distraction.

“Sure, princess, let’s go!”

We trotted out on the floor, but I got scolded more than once for not paying attention to her. “Why do you keep looking at that singing man?”

“I’m not.” I denied the question. The last thing I needed was for her to be blabbing it to everyone.

“Yes, you are. I saw you. Do you think he’s cute or something?”

“Easton, why would you ask me that?”

She shrugged. “I guess cuz the girls at school do that when they think a boy is cute.”

“I think he’s a good guitar player.”

“I want to play the guitar.”

“You do? You never told me that before.”

We twirled around and she said, “Cuz I never thought about it. Do you think I could?”

“I think you can do anything you set your mind to.”

“Okay. I’m gonna ask Mommy for a guitar for my birthday.” Pretty sure English was going to strangle me for this. At least it wasn’t a set of drums.

Next, she had me doing the bunny hop and then the chicken dance. I looked like the biggest dork not to mention ridiculous too. So much for making a good impression on the man. When the song ended, my youngest brother, Landry, came up and stole Easton away. The two of them danced and I observed them from the side of the floor. Easton laughed as Landry picked her up and spun around in circles. She was the cutest thing in the world.

I turned my attention back to Gabriel Knight. His name sounded more like that of an English lord than a guitarist and vocalist. I was lost in gawking at him when a voice pulled me away from my fantasy of him lying naked in bed.

“Don’t you dare get any ideas,” Stanton said.

“Ideas about what?” I played dumb.

“Come on, Ravina. The puddle of drool on the floor tells me you’re hooked on the man, but he’s not your type.”

“My type? And what exactly is my type?” Anger dusted my tone.

He scoffed. “Not someone who plays in a band.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. For anyone else but you.”

My brows shot up. “My, aren’t you the elitist?”

“No, but I understand your lifestyle and a dude who plays the guitar at weddings couldn’t support that in a million years.”

I poked him in the chest. “He wouldn’t have to. I have my own money, you know. Besides, aren’t you jumping to conclusions?”

“I’m only slowing the roll before it picks up momentum.”

“Stanton, you are not the boss of me. Ever. So, get out of my way.” I shoved him aside and stomped over to one of the bars to get a glass of wine.

Tristian was there and after one look he asked, “What’s got your panties in a wad?”

“Stanton.”

“What’d he do now?”

It was common family knowledge that Stanton bossed everyone around. Or tried to anyway. “Never mind. He’s just being his arrogant, bossy self.”

Tristian laughed. “Some things never change.”

“You’re wrong. Stacey does a good job with him. Too bad the rest of us are screwed.”

My brother guffawed at that. And then an idea struck. “Tristian, what would you say if I moved out of here? You know, got my own place.”

One shoulder rose. “It’s not my choice, but yours. I did it, so how can I tell you not to? You’re a grown woman, Ravina, and can make your own decisions.”

He was right. It was time for me to get the hell out of Dodge and set myself up in my own home. I’d never lived on my own before. Even in college, my father’s people surrounded me. At times, it was suffocating. It was time for me to spread my wings. I’d find a place in a secure building with an extra bedroom for my niece.

“That’s quite a smile you have,” Tristian said.

“Thanks for noticing. I’ve made up my mind. I’m moving out of this house. And the sooner the better.”

## Two



RAVINA

THE QUESTION WAS, SHOULD I BREAK IT TO STANTON TONIGHT or wait until the morning? It was his special day, so I decided to tell him the following day. I wandered over to one of the food tables where I spied Stacey filling a plate.

“Hey, the party is a great success,” I said.

“I think so too, mostly thanks to you.”

“I did nothing but hire the event planner.”

“Ravina, you also helped with everything. You have a great eye for this type of thing. You should start your own business.”

I picked up a plate and put some food on it as I was starving. “You know something? I’ve actually thought about it. I love doing events. It’s fun.”

Stacey tapped my arm. “Then do it! You’d be a smashing success. You could set up social media accounts with pictures from the events here and people would go crazy.”

She was right. “Yeah, and I have lots of connections from events we’ve done over the years. Just like for tonight. I knew who to contact for what. The event planner actually asked *me* for ideas.”

“See! You’d be a hit. You should go for it. Most people wouldn’t know where to begin, but not you.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s time to leave the Baines Corporation and strike out on my own. I have all that PR experience too.”

“Exactly! I can help you with any legal issues or creating an LLC. And English could help set up a website and create beautiful graphics for you. Get Tristian to take some photos for you and voilà, you’re there!”

“You sound more excited than me.” I chuckled.

“Imagine how much fun it would be working for yourself.”

“You mean being away from that bossy brother of mine?”

“You hit the nail on the head. I remember a time when...” her voice trailed off as her finger tapped her temple.

“I’m sure you do. Damn, he can be such a jerk.”

“Yeah, but now he’s my jerk to do what I want with.”

“Stop! He’s my brother and I just can’t!”

She put her arm around me. “Don’t worry, sister. I wouldn’t get into details with you.”

“Thank you!” I finished adding food to my plate and we searched for a table to claim. Soon, Stanton found us.

“I looked all over for you.” He was on the edge of asserting the boss role again.

“I was starving. I couldn’t wait any longer. Sorry,” Stacey said.

“Not a problem. I just got a bit worried when I couldn’t find you. I even ran up to check on the baby, but you weren’t there.”

My sarcastic tongue came out. “I was wondering why you’re so out of breath. Maybe you should work out more.”

His gaze shot over to me and he frowned. “Okay, marathon woman. Maybe I don’t have all that extra time like you do.”

He was right. He was busy with the company and his family. I wouldn’t bend though.

“Running doesn’t take much time. Thirty minutes a day and you’re done.”

“Is that a challenge?” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. I knew that pose and he wasn’t happy with me.

“Not at all. Besides, you’d lose. I run an hour a day.”

“*I run an hour a day,*” he mimicked. “Just wait until you have a family and then make that statement.”

I stabbed my fork into a piece of tenderloin and shoved it into my mouth. Yeah, I was still pissed at him. He knew exactly how to push the wrong buttons, which was another reason I needed to move away from here.

“Stanton, leave your sister alone,” Stacey scolded.

“Why do women always stick together?” he asked.

I answered, “Because we’re smart.” Then I continued eating. “By the way, the food is delicious.”

“I know. See. Another reason for your new project,” Stacey said.

“What new project?” Stanton asked.

“Nothing, as of yet. Perhaps you’ll find out soon,” I teased. He hated to be kept in the dark about anything so this would drive him crazy. My inner self pumped her fist into the air.

The music stopped and I glanced up to see the manly smokeshow leave the stage and go to the bar. He downed a glass of water and then asked for another.

“Stop staring at him,” Stanton said.

“I can stare at whomever I please.”

“You’re embarrassing the family.”

“Stanton, that’s ridiculous. Why don’t you worry about yourself and your family, and I’ll take care of me.” I dabbed my mouth with a napkin and rose to my feet. Then I walked over to the bar where hotalicious, a.k.a. tall, dark, and dreamy, was. Unfortunately, when I was almost there, he grabbed his



glass of water, turned and slammed right into me. It caught me completely off guard and I fell smack-dab on my ass. His expression told me how horrified he was.

Those gorgeous, strong arms reached down and set me on my feet.

“I’m terribly sorry. I... I apologize,” he said, stumbling for words. Now I understood what English had meant. His voice was over the top hot, with that British accent.

As usual, my brain went to mush. This happened a lot when I was around an attractive man. “Um, yeah, uh, it’s fine.”

“Are you okay?” He reached down and brushed a hand over the bottom of my dress. “Turn around. I want to make sure you’re not dirty.”

I wanted to say, oh, I’m dirty all right. But I kept my mouth shut. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll go and check it out in the bathroom.”

“You sure? I mean, it was my bloody fault after all.”

“It’s fine. Really.”

“Yeah, then I should get back. My mates up there are waiting for me.”

It was a shame we had to end this. I’d love for his hands to brush all the dirty off me, but he was here working. “No worries, then.”

I eyed his ass as he sauntered to the stage. His jeans were molded to it, and it was so perfect I wanted to sink my fingers into it. Then I thought about it. Maybe it was best for me just to forget him. Yeah, he was man porn all right, but where would that get me? I was better off moving on and forgetting him. After all, he might have a girlfriend already.

By the end of the night, my feet ached from dancing along with the hideously high heels I’d chosen to wear. I put on some flip flops and limped upstairs. I’d stashed them near the bathrooms but forgot about them. Gabriel Knight had taken up too much of my memory. I needed to erase him from my hard

drive because there was zero possibility of ever seeing him again. Even if I did, it would result in nothing.

Easton spent the night and we changed into our jammies and watched TV for a while. When her breathing softened to that of sleep, I went to my own room and crashed.

In the morning, I opened my laptop and began a search for a new place to live. The company had a location service they used, but Stanton handled it and I wanted him to have nothing to do with my choices.

There were plenty of options available, so I made several appointments. Then I showered and went down to breakfast. I was hoping to avoid everyone, but as luck would have it, they were all in the kitchen, jabbering about the night before. Easton was munching on a muffin while everyone else drank coffee. I made my decision to tell everyone then.

After I fixed my cup of coffee, I turned to everyone and said, "I have an announcement to make. I'm moving out and am going to start my own business."

Stanton spit out his coffee and that was that.

# Three



GABRIEL

THE RECEPTION WE'D PLAYED A WEEK AGO WAS HUGE AND absurdly fancy. We normally didn't do those types of functions, but it was the most we'd ever gotten paid for a gig, so I'd agreed to it.

Whoever owned the estate was rolling in the dough. I wish I had gone inside to inspect their artwork. They could've been potential buyers for me.

After my third cup of caffeine, I went into my studio, which was actually a third bedroom, to paint. I had a gallery showing next month and there were a few paintings that needed to be finished. I was working on a mountain scene but it was an abstract, which was my current favorite thing. I used a blade instead of a brush to create the effects I desired. These types of paintings had taken off in popularity. Sales had been great and I could barely keep up with the work coming in.

The guys in the band were pissed at me because I'd turned down several gigs. I was burning the candle at both ends as it were and playing until two or three in the morning wasn't cutting it anymore. It was getting to the point where I'd have to choose between art and the band. Art was extremely lucrative, but music was my first love. However, the money rolling in would make an excellent point with my stubborn father and it also put me financially ahead, considering I was pursuing a lawsuit against the mother of my child.

That story was a long and painful one, but I had vowed to my daughter I would see her as much as possible. Her mother had made it increasingly difficult, moving to Texas on top of it all. I stared at the portrait of her I'd painted the last time she was here. It was almost two years ago when she was four and she'd changed so much since then. If it weren't for the limited times we chatted on FaceTime, and the pictures I snapped during our talks, I would have no idea what she looked like.

When I mentioned to her mother I would be willing to move, the woman told me if I did, she'd move again. She refused to be near me and was making it as difficult as possible for me to see Juliette. The weirdest thing was I had no idea why either. I'd never done anything to her, and when I asked, she'd never given me a reasonable answer. It constantly gutted me as I wanted to see my little girl.

Anger infused my strokes as I applied the hues with a vengeance. The colors turned out darker than I'd initially wanted, but they worked. It reminded me of a winter storm. The thing I loved about painting was it took me out of my world, making me forget the issues I faced, even if it was for only a few hours.

Several hours later, my stomach growled. I checked the time to see it was nearly five in the afternoon and I hadn't eaten yet. No wonder it had objected so loudly.

I put my blade and acrylics away, cleaned everything up for the day and went to fix something to eat. When I opened up the refrigerator, I was faced with an empty box. Damn, I hadn't gone to the store in how long? Time to remedy that.

This was the one thing I abhorred—grocery shopping. However, I also hated ordering takeout all the time. I stocked up when possible so I didn't have to do it too much.

When I came home, I grabbed the cart in the parking garage and loaded it up. I left the elevator, wheeled in my stash, and put everything away. Then I returned the cart to the parking garage. As I was waiting on the elevator, a woman strolled up with a wheeled suitcase.

“Hey.” She gave me a brilliant smile, which I wasn’t in the mood for.

I nodded in return. Small talk was bollocks in my opinion. She was silent until the doors opened and we walked on. Then she pushed the button of the same floor I lived on. “What floor?” she asked.

“You already got it.”

She glanced at me and then asked, “Hey, do you by any chance play in a band?”

“Yup.” I wasn’t one to be very talkative to strangers.

“Did you play a wedding out at the Baines estate?”

I finally turned to her and took a long look. I remembered her then. She was the one who stared at me like I was her last meal, the one I knocked on her arse.

“Um, yeah.”

She grinned. “I’m Ravina Baines. It was my brother’s reception.” She held out her hand.

I didn’t take it, hoping she’d get the hint. Last thing I needed was a busybody neighbor. I offered up a grimace in return and dipped my head, saying, “Gabriel Knight.”

Her hand dropped as her brows knitted. At least she didn’t continue to babble, like most women did. I’d had enough of that with my ex.

The elevator dinged, indicating we’d arrived at our floor. She rolled her suitcase off and wouldn’t you know, headed in the same direction as my apartment. I followed her. She didn’t stop until she was right across the hall from me.

“I’m new here. Just moving in today. Well, actually, my furniture and things won’t arrive until tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh.” I unlocked my door and went inside, figuring that was the end of our little talk.

I was wrong. A few minutes later, a knock came on the door. I vacillated over not answering it, but when I glanced

through the peephole, it was my new neighbor. Great. She knew I was here so I couldn't hide for long.

Swinging the door wide, I said, "Yeah," in a not very friendly tone.

She squinted. "Did I do something to offend you?"

"Nope. I'm just busy." I went to close the door, but her hand stopped me.

"You dropped this and I wanted to give it to you." She handed me a folded picture of my daughter that I carried with me all the time.

"Thanks."

"Hey, you wouldn't by any chance want to go and grab a bite to eat? I haven't bought a thing to eat yet and I was headed out."

"No. I have work to do."

"Okay." She smiled and I noticed her looks for the first time. I never paid attention to women because after my awful experience with my ex, I knew they were more trouble than they were worth. But Ravina Baines was stunning. I'd never seen eyes so brilliantly blue on a human before and I found myself getting lost in them.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Fine, just fine. Have a nice dinner," I snapped as I shut the door in her face. It was rude, yeah, but the last thing I needed was a gorgeous neighbor poking her nose into my life.

# Four



RAVINA

GABRIEL KNIGHT WAS AN ASS. I WAS NICE TO HIM, EVEN returned that picture he'd dropped, and all I got in return was a door slammed in my face. He could kiss my ass as far as I was concerned.

I went to dinner alone, which was something that didn't bother me. When I got back and walked toward my condo, I scowled at his door. What had I ever done to the man? I'd barely spoken a dozen words to him, but his offensive behavior was uncalled for.

He was permanently crossed off my list and I hoped the rest of the neighbors here weren't as unfriendly as he was.

The following morning, the movers arrived, bright and early. They'd packed everything the previous day, which was only the contents of my bedroom. I'd been horrified at the enormity of the contents in my closet. It could easily fill every closet here. I needed to pare down my clothing, or at least have English and Stacey come over to see what they wanted. How did it ever get this bad? Yes, I loved to shop, but there weren't enough days in the year for me to wear all this stuff.

As the movers brought in those portable, cardboard boxes that contained my hanging clothes, Mr. Jack Ass opened his door.

"What's all the racket about out here?" he shouted.

“Excuse me?”

“The noise. It sounds like a truck is driving down the hall.” If he frowned any harder, the man would need some cosmetic fillers soon.

“I hardly think they’re making that much noise.”

“Oh, really? Try listening to it from in here.”

“Sorry, but they have to move my things in. They won’t be here all day.” Jack Ass looked as though he wanted to punch a hole in the wall. Too bad the man was still sexy, in all his anger. And then a thought hit me. “Why are you in such a bad mood all the time?” I asked.

His mouth made some movement, as though he tried to answer me, but instead he turned and slammed the door. I guess that was the only way he knew how to shut it.

“He’s a friendly sort,” one of the movers said.

“Tell me about it. He’s a grump times a million. He must have a pinecone stuffed up his ass.” The guy cracked up, but then Jack’s door opened and he said, “I heard that.”

“Heard what?” I asked, innocently.

“What you said about the pinecone.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.” I pressed my lips together in order not to laugh. “I do know something though. If you keep frowning like that, you’ll need a plastic surgeon by next year.”

He growled something and slammed the door again.

I glanced at the mover who was now walking back out of my apartment and said, “Mr. Grump doesn’t care much for me.”

“His loss, your gain.”

I smiled. “Thank you, that’s very kind.”

“You’re the kind one. I can’t imagine anyone not liking you.”

“Wow, you are really nice.”



“Nope, just honest. By the way, how many pairs of shoes do you own?”

“What? Are there too many?” I played innocent.

He laughed. “Why do women love shoes so much?”

“Because we’re always trying to find comfortable ones that look good too.”

“Yeah, I’m glad I don’t have to wear those things. I tell that to my wife all the time.” He went to the elevator for another load.

Jack Ass’s door swung open again. He carried a backpack and wore that scowl I’d gotten used to.

“Going somewhere?” I asked.

“None of your damn business.”

He turned to walk away and I stuck out my tongue. It was going to be entertaining needling the man every chance I got. He needed it too. Someone had to make him see what an incredible douche he was.

After the movers left, the furniture arrived. I’d bought it last week and set the delivery date for today. They brought all the living room items in first, then the dining room, and finally the bedrooms.

I planned to decorate the guest room with all kinds of cute things for Easton. I met with a decorator who’d given me some excellent ideas. She was stopping by tomorrow so we could finalize our plans and I was super excited.

After all that was done, I unpacked the kitchen boxes, which the movers had brought in. I needed a plan to figure out where to put everything. Once I had that established, I put everything away.

By the end of the day, I was too exhausted to go grocery shopping, so I ordered in. When the food arrived, I went to grab it and who should be standing in the hall. He was going to ruin a perfectly good meal.

“Thank God all that racket has stopped,” he grumbled.

“Wh-what?” He was impossible.

“Your movers. I hope they’re finished.”

“Yup, for the most part.” I grabbed the bag of food and went to shut the door, only his words stopped me.

“Sorry I was so brusque earlier.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’d say you were a wanker.” I slammed my door so he didn’t have a chance to respond. Tit for tat on that one.

I didn’t get two steps in before there was a pounding on the door. Gee, I wondered who that could be. No doubt, Jack Ass didn’t like my comment. I opened the door to him jumping right into the conversation.

“I’m not a wanker. You have no idea what’s going on in my life.”

“You know something? That’s true, but you have no idea what’s going on in mine and you’re rude.”

I made to shut the door, but his hand stopped me. “Move your hand.”

“No, I need to explain.”

“Actions speak louder than words. I don’t think you do.”

“Let me rephrase that. I *want* to explain.”

My glare pierced holes in him. I finally said, “You have one minute.”

He plowed his fingers through his hair and began. “That picture you gave me. It’s my daughter. It’s one of the few I have.”

“Where is she?”

“No idea. I haven’t seen her in two years.”

“Whoa. You haven’t seen your daughter in two years? What the hell did you do to her?”

# Five



GABRIEL

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER THAN TO HAVE OPENED MY BIG mouth. With a comment like that, I'd never tell her a damn thing again.

My eyes narrowed and I shook my head. "Nothing, not that you need to know. I should've expected you to assume the worst."

I turned away but her hand landed on my arm.

"Not so fast, mister. You're going to blurt that out to me and then just leave?"

"What do you expect? My autobiography? Because if so, you can forget it," I snarled.

"No wonder she left. With an attitude like yours, I don't blame her." Her door slammed in my face.

Not to be deterred, I loudly said, "Didn't expect you to. All women stick together anyway, yeah? It doesn't matter what happened."

The door swung back open to a slanted head, but she said nothing. I granted her a not-so-friendly grin. "Thought so. I know exactly how you think." All women were the same.

"Really? Tell you what then. Don't bother talking to me if you already know how I think, mind reader." The door slammed in my face again. Guess I deserved that. I got a move

on as I was late as it was for our gig. We were playing at a local pub. It was one we played at a lot and had a steady following.

The guys had almost everything set up when I arrived.

“‘Bout time you showed up. We were beginning to wonder,” Jeff, our bass player, said.

“Sorry. I had an altercation with a neighbor.”

“What else is new? Can’t you be nice to people for a change? That shitty attitude of yours has gotten mighty old, dude.”

I ignored him. What did he know anyway? He was just a guy who had zero problems in the world.

My guitar was tuned, and I strummed it in preparation while the rest of the band did the same. Once we were ready, I grabbed the mic and welcomed everyone.

“If you’re new to us, we play a blend of music from alt-rock, to country, to classic rock, and pretty much everything in between. Hope you enjoy the show tonight.”

And we started off the set with one of our favorite tunes, an old Led Zeppelin melody.

The night swiftly passed as this was one of my favorite things to do. I lost myself in the music as I sang. My guitar became an extension of me. I’d played since I was a young boy and was lucky to find this group of guys when I moved here. They were looking for a lead guitarist and singer and I fit their bill. We got along well, other than my art interfering these days.

We took our break and I headed to the bar for my usual water. I made it a rule long ago not to drink alcohol when I played. It was dehydrating and then I’d feel like hell the following morning.

After the break, we opened the next set with some of Darius Rucker’s country music. This always got the crowd going. The place had filled up and there wasn’t an empty table or seat anywhere. Some of the people had gotten up and

danced on the tiny space in front of the stage, which was also small.

And then it happened. I glanced at the crowd, and *she* was here. My neighbor. How did she know I'd be playing here tonight? My current halfway good mood instantly soured. This set was planned for dancing music, but I now wanted to switch to metal. That wouldn't happen though, because the rest of the guys would think I'd lost it, but dammit, this was my time and space. She shouldn't be here.

Except I watched her as she danced. Her head was thrown back and her arms were up in the air as she moved her sexy body. I never would've noticed it if not for this. Damn, the woman was fit. How had I missed that? Only a blind fool could've done that. My bloody head had been up my arse for far too long.

A rush of dirty thoughts plowed into me...thoughts about what I wanted to do to her. We were singing "I'm Going Straight To Hell" and I probably would for what I was thinking. Christ, I needed to pull my damn head out of the gutter. Good thing I had tight jeans on to conceal my chub. How long had it been since eyeing a woman gave me one of those? I almost missed a chord in my riff. Fuck. I had to stop being a cock-up. I closed my eyes to focus on the music, but all I saw were her lush tits and fit arse, and I was gone.

The song finally ended, and I leaned over to Jeff and asked him to handle this one so I could use the loo. It was empty, lucky for me, so I locked the door and manhandled things. Maybe that would help my sex-starved body. The fact that I accomplished this in less than sixty seconds told me I needed a woman more often. But not my snarky neighbor. That would create a set of complications I did not need.

I returned to the stage before the band even finished the song. Then I plucked the guitar strings for the next song and things turned out better for the rest of the night. It was late when we finished our final set and I put my guitar in the case before getting my usual glasses of water. As I was guzzling the first, I heard my name.

“Gabriel. Hey, you were fantastic. I love your band. Y’all are really talented. I know we got off on the wrong foot—”

I cut her off. I didn’t want or need this conversation right now. “Thanks,” I grumbled. Ravina stood there, perhaps waiting for me to say something else. Instead, I grabbed the second glass of water and excused myself, leaving her standing there. I was needed on stage to help break everything down, since I’d gotten here so late.

I helped the guys pack it all up and load it into the van. The rest of them headed to the bar for a drink, but not me. I was knackered and needed to catch some sleep. When I got home, I was getting on the lift in the parking garage when I heard my name. Christ, was this going to be my life from now on? If so, I may have to consider moving.

“Gabriel! Hold it, please.” She ran to the elevator, calling out my name. “I looked for you after you did your packing up thing. My sister-in-law was there, and I was going to introduce you to her again, but you disappeared.”

“Yeah.” That was all I gave her. The lift doors opened, and we both walked into the steel box.

“I told her what I knew about your daughter.”

I grimaced. “What you knew? You know nothing about the situation,” I snarled at her.

Only she still acted like we were having a pleasant conversation. “Right, but I know you haven’t seen her, so I told Stacey and was going to introduce you two.”

“To what end?” My tone was clipped. I was tired and now pissed. I had an early morning to finish my paintings and didn’t need some busybody neighbor poking into my business.

“To help, of course. Cheer up. She’s an attorney and excellent at what she does.”

“I’m sure she is, but I’m not interested. And mind your own damn business. If I need your help, I’ll ask for it.” The doors swished open, and I didn’t wait for her to exit first. I grabbed my guitar and rushed out. The last thing I wanted or

needed right now was a long conversation about Juliette and Jane. All I wanted was sleep.

I punched the code into the lock before she could say anything else. Ravina Baines was going to be a major problem. I just knew it.

## *Six*



RAVINA

BOY DID HE HAVE HIS UNDERWEAR IN A WAD. HE WAS WORSE than I'd expected. I thought he might be grateful to me for trying to help, but no. He threw it back in my face and displayed that offensive temper of his. Or maybe my breath was really terrible. After all, he took off like his ass was on fire. I did eat some wings and fries, but jeez, he acted like I had the plague. Gabriel was certainly testy. The first place I headed was the bathroom to give my teeth a good scrubbing. Then I texted Stacy.

Me: Was my breath bad tonight?

Stacey: Haha! No, why? :-)

Me: I saw Gabriel and he ran away from me like I had the contagions or something. Thought maybe I had skunk breath.

Stacey: TBH, I didn't get that close or kiss you so...

Me: Ok, just checking. Nite.

Stacey: Nite. Don't worry about it. I'm sure you didn't have skunk breath. LOL

Hmm, I wondered why his mood was always so sour. I knew about his daughter, but he seemed to take it out on me. I did slam the door in his face, but I was pleasant at the pub and tried to make up for it. All I wanted to do was help the guy out. Okay, on a scale of one to ten, he was a fifty, but that didn't mean I shouldn't talk to him. My luck with men had



never been great. For whatever reason, they made me very uncomfortable, and then I usually ended up speaking my mind too loudly or doing something completely embarrassing and running them off.

When I was in college, I did the dumbest things around them and usually ended up giggling nervously. After being around me for five minutes, they'd take off and I'd never see them again.

As I tried to fall asleep, the only image in my brain was Gabriel strumming his guitar. I'm not sure what time sleep eventually hit me, but I woke up cranky.

My decorator was dropping by to help me hang artwork and arrange furniture later this morning. I needed an attitude adjustment before she arrived. After my shower I felt a tiny bit better, so I went to make some coffee. I took it fully loaded with cream and sugar, but I'd forgotten to buy sugar.

“Dammit! Now what?”

Everyone always borrowed a cup of sugar from their neighbor, so I walked across the hall and knocked on the door.

It opened to reveal a very sexy Gabriel. His hair was a mess, and he wore faded, ripped jeans without a shirt. I stared at him like a love-struck teenager.

“What now?” Exasperation dripped from his words.

“Er, sorry to bother you. Do you have some sugar I could borrow? I promise to pay it back ASAP.” I held up an empty coffee cup.

He grabbed the cup and left the door wide open, so I stepped inside. That's when I got my first look at his place, and I sucked in my breath. Paintings were everywhere...on the walls, against the walls, and there were dozens of them.

“Holy crap. You're GTK!” I shouted it in excitement because he was my favorite artist. I owned six of his paintings. Stacey had turned me on to him after she'd discovered him at an art fair.

“Yup.” He handed me the cup filled with sugar.

“I love you. Er, I mean, your work. I own you and so does my sister-in-law. I mean your paintings.” Good grief, I sounded like the village idiot.

He only stood there with one brow arched. He didn’t give a damn about my love for his art. Figured. It didn’t deter me. “Want to see the ones I own?”

He stared for a second and then after a brisk nod, he said, “Sure.” He closed the door behind him and followed me over to my place.

“A decorator is coming over later to help me hang them. See?” I pointed to the collection. They were leaning against the wall in the dining area.

“That’s my earlier stuff. I’m into more abstract work now.”

“Can I look? I’ll buy. So will Stacey. We adore you.”

“Nothing I have is currently for sale. I’m preparing for a gallery showing so all my inventory is going there. I’m in a rush to finish some things.”

“When is the showing?”

“Three weeks from Saturday,” he responded curtly. Then he told me which gallery after I prodded him.

“We’ll be there. We can buy what we like then. I’ll plan to be there early because your work will sell like hotcakes.”

He shrugged, most likely because he didn’t believe me. That made sense as I knew nothing about the art market, but I had a great eye, and his work was gorgeous. “I’ve been into art ever since I can remember, and you have serious talent. Your color schemes are perfect. Hey, do you ever do portraits?”

“No... I’ve only painted my daughter.”

“Could I commission you to do my niece?”

“I said I don’t do them.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure it would be gorgeous.” To have him paint a portrait of Easton would be amazing. “It would be really special. She’s an amazing kid and I adore her. I would love one.”

He crosses his arms as his lips pressed into a thin line. "Like I said, I don't do portraits."

"Well, if you ever change your mind."

"I won't."

Spinning, I went for the door to let him out. I was done trying to make conversation with this monumental prick. I held up the cup and said, "Thanks for the sugar."

I walked to the kitchen to get my coffee as he left. After he was gone, I sighed. I wish I had perfected the art of talking to men like many women did. I always sounded so awkward, except when I was ordering them around.

I mixed up my coffee and called Stacey. When she answered I said, "You won't believe this!"

"You don't have skunk breath after all?"

"No! Gabriel is GTK!"

"GTK as in the artist?"

"Yes! Can you believe it?"

"No! That guy has it all, doesn't he? A talented musician and artist." He-he. "I bet he has moves between the sheets too."

"Yeah, well I'll never find out about that. I had to borrow some sugar from him is how I found out. I tried to wheedle a conversation out of him, but he's a colossal dick."

"Sugar, huh?" She chortled. "That's a convenient one."

"Stacey, seriously. I forgot to buy it at the store and was desperate for coffee. Anyway, when I went inside his apartment, tons of his work was everywhere. He's having a showing at that gallery in downtown Roswell. You know... that one we love so much? We have to go!"

I heard my brother mumbling something in the background. "Did I wake y'all up?"

"Um, not quite. But yes, we'll go. I'll call you later."

She ended the call, and I was pretty sure I'd interrupted something and it wasn't sleep. When you didn't have a man in your life, you didn't think about those things. Maybe someday. A girl could only dream.

# Seven



GABRIEL

TODAY WAS THE BIG DAY OF MY ART SHOW. EVERYTHING WAS arranged the way I wanted. The gallery had been helpful in their suggestions. It was a mutual decision to place all my recent work in the main room, since they were my abstracts. I'd worked feverishly to complete everything, but pride enveloped me as I gazed around the place.

The back of the gallery was filled with my older works, not as abstract and with more landscapes. I loved every piece I'd done, and my heart had been poured into each one.

"You're going to be a huge hit. We get a lot of art lovers from all over the city at our showings so be prepared. This will put you on the map." I thanked the gallery owner profusely. My goal had never been to be on the map, per se, but to earn enough that I could get my daughter back. I had already achieved that goal. This would only make things better.

The show began at four in the afternoon, with wine being served, along with appetizers. The room filled immediately, and I was introduced to one person after the next.

The owner approached me and told me that one buyer purchased ten of my paintings. I was stunned.

"Who is it? I need to thank them."

"They're in the back room now, arranging delivery."

I went back to see two women, but when one of them turned around, I was both astonished and annoyed to see it was my neighbor.

“You bought all those?” My hand swept the air toward the paintings as shock coated my words.

She beamed. “Yeah. I told you I was a fan. I didn’t buy them all, though. This is Stacey, my sister-in-law, and she bought a few.”

Stacey extended her hand. “It’s a pleasure meeting you. I discovered your work several years ago at an art fair downtown.”

“Right.” I remembered doing those downtown art fairs. It had paid off because now my work was in several galleries and my price point had gone up significantly. The two women stared. “Ravina, where are you going to hang all of them?”

“I’m gifting one to my other sister-in-law, two will go in my office at work, and the rest in the condo.”

Stacey volunteered, “One of mine is for our sitting room off the bedroom and the other for my office at work. Your colors are just stunning.”

“Which of you bought the four seasons?”

Ravina’s hand popped into the air. “I did. My God, they’re perfection.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but they’re some of my favorites. I loved creating them.”

“I would’ve thought winter would be cold and stark, but with the deep reds you included, it’s gorgeous.”

Each season had a color motif. Spring was bright green with pale colors mixed in. Summer had more vibrant hues of pink. Fall had what you’d imagine New England’s leaves to be, with deep orange dominating the scene. For winter, I used shades of white, gray, and black but added splashes of red to remind people of cardinals and how they appear in the winter.

“Ladies, I am very appreciative of this. Just tell them where you want each to go and they’ll handle all the

deliveries.”

I left to rejoin the show but couldn't stop thinking about Ravina. She must have fairly deep pockets as she probably spent upward of forty grand as if it were nothing. What was I thinking? Of course she did. She was a Baines, and they were loaded.

As I mingled around, the owner approached me to tell me one of the paintings from the back room had been purchased.

“Who?”

“The same woman who bought the four seasons.”

Jesus, was she going to buy me out of everything? “Is she in the back room?”

“She is.”

I headed to the back room again to see that she'd bought the landscape of the mountains. It was one of the first paintings I'd ever commissioned but the person who'd wanted it, declined it as he'd changed his mind. It was perfect, in my opinion. I'd worked very hard on it and was filled with disappointment when the man said he didn't want it.

I entered the back room as she was writing out a check. She glanced up to see me and grinned. “I had to have this one too. It reminded us of our mountain home in Highlands.”

“I'm glad you love it.”

“We're going to hang it up there. You should have a show up there sometime. We know a few of the gallery owners.”

“I'd love that but need to get my inventory back up, thanks to you.”

Someone else came in to purchase another painting, so I spoke to them.

Ravina tapped my arm on the way out. “I'll talk to you later.”

I mouthed the words, “Thank you,” as she left.

By the time the showing ended, all but two of the pieces had sold. I was stunned. I didn't expect it.

"You did fabulously." The owner extended his hand.

"Thanks to you."

"We can keep these two in here if you'd like."

"That would be great."

I'd made a tidy profit, even though the gallery got twenty percent of my sales. They deserved it for the ads, the food, and getting the word out to their connections. It was a great day so I headed to my favorite pub for a cold one.

One of the band members, Trey, was there so we ordered some food and ate and drank for a bit. I was starving as I hadn't eaten since early that morning.

"How was the showing?"

"It was brilliant." I told him about it, but he didn't appear excited.

"Does this mean you're going to bail on us?"

Oh man, this was a tough one. "Music is my first love, art my second."

"Come on, dude. At least be honest here. You can't make near the amount of money playing that you do painting."

That much was true. "Yeah, but I love music. You know that. It's bloody fun for me."

"It's more than just fun for us. The rest of us need the extra money, unlike you. If you quit, will you give us a heads-up?"

"Not quitting." I downed the rest of my brew. The truth was, I couldn't keep burning this candle and would eventually have to give one up. The logical one would be music, especially if I was going after custody of my daughter. It would look much better to a judge if her father were an artist versus a guitar player in a band that did gigs in local pubs. My heart was split in two over this and I wasn't sure what to do.



# *Eight*



RAVINA

“CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT WE SCORED TODAY?” I WAS DRIVING Stacey back home.

“We lucked out and getting there early was the key.”

“I knew it. His art is amazing.”

“I can’t wait to hang the new ones. I’m excited for the one I bought for the office.”

“Me too.”

Stacey clicked her fingers. “You know what? You should take him up to Highlands so he can see the town. You can introduce him around to our favorite galleries.”

“That’s not a bad idea. It could come off as me helping him out without an ulterior motive. But I doubt he’d go. He barely speaks to me and other than today, I can’t stand him.”

My sister-in-law chuckled. “If you can’t stand him, you sure don’t show it. You were all smiles around him.”

“Jeez, look at the man. He’s sex on two wheels.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Stacey, you may be married, but damn, you’re not dead.”

“Okay, he’s hot. It’s the accent. But don’t tell Stanton. He’d want to kill the guy.”

I took a quick glance at her. “For just looking at him?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed how possessive your brother is.”

My hand did a little wave. “Eww, he’s my brother, so no.”

“Well, he is. He gets jealous even if I like someone on a TV show. He’s that crazy.” She laughed.

“He’s crazy about you is what it is.”

“You know, for all his bossiness, he really has some issues.”

“Mommy issues. We all do. We’re scarred.”

Stacey sighed. “Aren’t we all?”

“That’s why you two work together so well. If one of you were normal, that other one would run in the opposite direction.”

“Ha ha, true. But I’m so in love with that bossy side of him.”

“Enough. I don’t need to know any particulars from you.”

She cackled at that. I didn’t want to think about how he bossed her around and where.

“One thing was good about today. Gabriel was much nicer than usual.”

Stacey asked, “What does that mean?”

“You know how I’ve told you that the man barely speaks to me and when he does, he’s a huge-ass grump? He wasn’t like that today. Even though he wasn’t exactly verbose, he was much better than usual.”

“I certainly hope so. You dropped a good amount of money on his work.”

I thrummed my thumbs on the steering wheel. That much was true, but I didn’t do it because of him. I did it because his works were spectacular. “You know I didn’t buy all of those pieces because of him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really! I didn’t. I’ve loved his work ever since the first time I saw the one you bought at the fair. His work dominates my home.”

“Yeah, and his looks dominate your brain, do they?”

“No, they don’t,” I lied. “But if his work sucked, I wouldn’t spend a dime on him.”

“Not even a dime?” she asked, tongue in cheek.

“Okay, maybe one painting, but that’s it. You know, I’m glad he’s good because if he weren’t, I’d have a tough time not being honest with him about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“What if he asked me whether or not I liked something? It would be hard to lie if I didn’t.”

“Right. I see where you’re going with this.”

“Honestly, though, who am I kidding? That man has zero interest in me.”

“Maybe after today, he’ll change his mind.”

I thought about that. The problem was, I didn’t want him if that was why he was interested in me. I’d only want him if he truly liked me for the person I was.

I shrugged. “Time will tell.”

We got to the big house, and I went inside for a visit. Stanton came out, as if he had his Stacy sensometer on.

When he greeted her, it wasn’t with a quick hello. He took her into his arms and proceeded to devour her face.

“Jeez, get a room, you two. I came to visit, not watch you swallow her tongue, Stanton.”

He shot me a glance that didn’t require him to say a thing. “You’ll understand one day,” he said.

“I doubt that. PDA isn’t my thing.”

“I’ll remind you of that in the future.”

“Fine. Is there any food around?”

“Go and look. There’s always something in the kitchen. You ought to know that,” Stanton said, sounding annoyed.

“Sorry. Just thought I’d ask first.” With a flip of my hair, I flounced out of the foyer, leaving the two lovebirds to their privacy. I hoped to God I never acted like that if I was lucky enough to find a man.

There were all kinds of snacks out on one of the counters, so I grazed to my heart’s content. Muffins, cookies, and fruit dominated my choices. I ate one of our famous cinnamon muffins, one chocolate chip cookie, and a spoonful of blueberries and strawberries for my health.

Landry came in while I was munching down on my find, carrying an empty coffee mug.

“Hey, I didn’t expect to see you here,” he said, refilling his cup.

“Stacey and I went to an art showing and I dropped her off. I had to leave the two of them as they were displaying too much PDA.” I stuck a finger toward my mouth, indicating how sick it was.

“Tell me about it. I live here,” he said, chuckling.

“Please don’t do that when you hook up with someone.”

“Promise. The same for you.”

“You bet,” I answered with a grin. “And on that note, are you seeing anyone?”

Landry chuckled. “No. When do I have time? Stanton occupies most of it.”

I didn’t quite understand that. It was well known that Stanton always carved out time for Stacey. A lot of it. So, when would he have time to work that hard?

I voiced this to Landry. Another chuckle burst out of him, but this time it lasted longer.

“Well, sister, since he married Stacey, he’s unloaded a lot of responsibilities onto me. I don’t mind but most of the time

I'm buried under a pile of work at the office, so no time for women."

That sounded like something Stanton would do, the little shit. "Leave all the work for you so he can play, huh?"

"Yeah, well, I'll get him back one day."

"How?" I was curious how he'd accomplish this if he was working all the time.

"I have my ways. One day, when my princess arrives, I'll figure it out."

"Princess, huh? You're really holding out for perfection, aren't you?"

"Not any different than you. We should learn from our brothers. They waited and look how happy they are."

That was true. You couldn't pull Stanton away from Stacey and Tristian was the same with his wife, English. They, too, were living a blissful life.

"Maybe someday, my prince will arrive too. He may be hanging out with your princess."

"I won't be holding my breath on that one. Not to change the topic here, but how's the new place?"

A smile grew on my face. "I love it. You have to come visit me soon. We can go to dinner, or whatever."

"Let me check my calendar to figure out a good day."

"I'm holding you to that." I checked my watch and said, "I'm going to hunt down my nephew and then I have to go. I promised Easton we'd go eat dinner together today."

"What? No shopping?"

I grinned. Easton was my niece and I absolutely adored her. I wanted to take her on a trip to Europe, but her parents wouldn't let me until she was older. "It's too late for that now."

"Right. And how many outfits can an eight-year-old possibly need?"

Landry didn't understand. "Brother, it's not about need. It's about want. And if she wants, I'll deliver."

Landry huffed. "You should bring her out to ride soon. When was the last time we all did that together?"

He was right. The three of us loved to ride the horses here, and it had been a while since we'd done that. "As I recall, you've been too busy for that."

A frown wrinkled his forehead. "You know I'd always make time for her."

"Fine! I'll bring her out tomorrow. Be ready at noon."

I chuckled to myself, as I didn't give him time to say he'd be tied up. "Oh, and have the horses saddled for us, please." Then I left to search for my little nephew.

I found him in his room, asleep. Damn, I was hoping for some Edward time, but maybe tomorrow. I gazed at his adorable, sleeping face and hoped that one day my prince would come, and I'd be the mother of an adorable baby.

# Nine



GABRIEL

SLEEPING LATE TODAY WAS WELCOME. NOW IT WAS TIME TO put paint to canvas though as my stock had been depleted. I loved how painting took me out of my world of worry to forgetfulness. I got lost in the scene and it was a gratifying break. After I finished breakfast and two cups of coffee, I was at the canvas creating. This one was going to be an abstract of Juliette, as I knew her, done in vibrant colors.

Juliette was always first and foremost in the decisions I made. The fact that I had no idea when I'd see her again made me ill. The private investigator I'd finally hired sent me weekly updates, including photos. My ex-wife currently had a live-in boyfriend. The idea of my daughter being exposed to that had me chewing nails—and not the ones on my fingers.

The lawyer I'd hired said I didn't have a chance since she'd taken my daughter out of state. I needed to find another attorney who would take on my ex. This had to stop because if it didn't, Juliette would be a grown woman before I knew it.

Nothing about this made sense. I'd offered to pay child support and alimony... to do anything really, but my ex, Jane, refused to accept any of my offers. Even the money wasn't swaying her, which was unusual. That was all Jane had been interested in when we were together. There was a piece of this puzzle missing and I aimed to get it back.

I spent the day escaping my woes and painted away. The piece was coming on nicely, and I wrapped up for the day. My belly grumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since the morning.

After I quickly showered, I went down to grab a bite to eat in a nearby restaurant. It was a small bistro which had excellent food. I ordered a panini along with a bowl of soup and salad.

As I waited for the food to arrive, my neighbor pranced in, along with a young girl. The girl was quite cute and seemed to enjoy the company of her companion. Ravina glanced around, searching for a table when her eyes landed on me. I wasn't in the mood for company, but after all the artwork she'd purchased from me, I didn't have it in me to be rude.

"Howdy, neighbor," she said, her genteel Southern accent lacing her greeting.

"Hello yourself. How are you?"

"I'm great. This is my niece, Easton. You may remember her from the wedding."

She was talking about her brother's wedding where I had played. It jogged my memory, and I recalled seeing the girl on the dance floor.

"That's right. How are you, Easton? Have you been dancing lately?"

Easton pouted, saying, "No. There haven't been any parties to go to."

"You don't need a party to dance. You can dance anytime." I loved it when Juliette used to dance.

"I know, but it's not as fun." She swung her hand, which was holding Ravina's.

"I have an idea. You should get your aunt to take you out dancing sometime."

Her eyes grew brighter at the prospect. "Can we, Aunt Ravina?"



“That’s a great idea, but we have to find a place that plays music early in the day.”

“Okay. Hey, mister, can we sit with you?”

I remembered how open kids were when she asked the question. “I don’t see why not,” I answered. It wasn’t in me to be rude to her.

Easton quickly pulled out one of the chairs and sat in it as Ravina shrugged. Then she followed suit. “Have you ordered yet?” Ravina asked.

“Yes, but it’s fine.”

The waiter appeared and handed the two women menus. He returned a few minutes later to take their order. Easton ordered a hot dog and fries, and Ravina ordered a large salad.

All the orders were brought out together so we could eat at the same time. Easton entertained us with her stories about horses, horse poop, and shopping.

“Aunt Ravina bought me a new riding outfit cause my old one got too little.”

“That’s nice. Do you like it?”

“Um hmm. I got new brown boots too. We’re gonna ride the horses tomorrow. My horse is called Rowdy.”

“Rowdy? Is he wild?”

“No, sir. He’s real nice but I liked the name. Do you like horses?”

“I do.”

“You should come tomorrow and ride with us, shouldn’t he, Aunt Ravina?”

Ravina grinned at her niece. “He should but maybe he doesn’t like to ride.”

“But he said he liked horses.”

“Easton, someone can like horses but not know how to ride.”

Big eyes turned to me, and she asked, “Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“I sure do, but it’s been a long time since I’ve been in a saddle.”

“Oh, then your butt’s gonna hurt. Uncle Stanton went with us once and his butt hurt so bad we had to go slow but then his horse got spooked by a snake and he fell off and the snake bit him and he had to go to the hospital, didn’t he, Aunt Ravina?”

Ravina glanced at me and said, “Easton, are you trying to scare him off riding?”

“No, ma’am, I was just telling him the story. My butt never hurts but old people get hurt butts.”

It was nice to know I was an old person. “They do, huh?”

“Yup. Just ask Uncle Stanton.”

This loquacious child already had me smitten, which only made me miss Juliette even more.

Easton piped up again and asked, “Mister, what’s your name again?”

“It’s Gabriel.”

“Mister Gabriel, do you got riding outfits?”

“Uh, not anymore.”

“Well, maybe you can go buy some today.”

Ravina interrupted and said, “Easton, eat your dinner. Gabriel can ride in jeans and sneakers if he wants. He doesn’t need a special outfit.”

“Then how come we got them?”

“Because they’re cool,” Ravina said.

“You don’t think he wants to be cool too?”

“Maybe, but what if he decides he doesn’t like riding anymore?”

Easton snapped her fingers. “Oh, yeah. Okay, then, you can ride in some jeans.”

“I think that would be best. Uh, what time is this ride taking place?” I asked.

Ravina answered. “Around noon. Will that work?”

“Sure.”

“And you really want to go?” she asked in disbelief. I couldn’t blame her as I’d not exactly been friendly to her.

“I’d love it.” It was a lie. I wouldn’t love it but I’d probably like it. And since the kid had asked me, I couldn’t refuse.

“Mister Gabriel, bring your bathing suit cause we might go to the swimming hole.”

“That sounds great. I love to swim.”

Then Easton leaned toward me and put her hand up to her mouth. “Don’t tell no one but we’ve gone skinny dipping there.”

“You have?”

“Yup, me and Aunt Ravina.”

“Hey, it’s Aunt Ravina and me.” Ravina corrected her.

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you weren’t using proper grammar.”

“Oh. Can we skinny dip with Mister Gabriel?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Ravina said.

“Why not? Is it because he has a penis?”

“Partly. But mostly because it’s just not proper.”

Then Easton looked at me and said, “Mister Gabriel, did you know that girls have ginas and boys have penises?”

“Yeah, I actually did.” My lips pressed together to keep from laughing.

“I’ve seen Daddy’s before. It looks kind of like a log but it’s not dark brown.”

Ravina's hand flew over her face as it reddened. "Um, Easton, let's talk about something else."

I was kind of enjoying the entertaining topic, but I supposed it wasn't exactly a good idea to keep going down that road.

Easton grinned with her mouth full of fries.

"Easton, close your mouth, honey."

Her small hand covered said mouth as she said, "Oops." Then a giggle bubbled out of her. This child made me smile.

"Aunt Ravina, do you think we can ask Uncle Landry to have Dancer saddled for Mister G?"

She'd already shortened my name, which made me grin again.

"Honey, Dancer is a bit rambunctious. Since Gabriel hasn't ridden in a while, he may need a more docile horse."

"What's docile?"

"It means gentle and not as wild."

"Oh." Then her finger tapped her cheek as she looked up at the ceiling. "I know! What about Misty?"

"Misty would be perfect," Ravina said.

"Mister G., she's called Misty cause she's gray and purdy, kinda like fog."

"I hope she likes me," I said.

"Yeah, she likes everyone, doesn't she, Aunt Ravina?"

"She does. Now finish your meal, little chatterbox."

Easton picked up her hot dog and took a big bite. Then she laughed. Ravina rolled her eyes. These two made a great pair. It was easy to see they loved each other and enjoyed being together.

When we were finished, I paid the bill. Ravina tried to stop me, but I insisted.

As we were walking out, I asked, "Noon then?"

“I can drive if you’d like. I’ll give you a knock on the door about eleven thirty.”

“Sounds great.”

We went our separate ways then as she headed for the car to take Easton home. Surprisingly, I had enjoyed spending time with them and looked forward to our ride the following day.

# Ten



RAVINA

ON THE DRIVE BACK TO EASTON'S HOUSE, SHE WAS VERY inquisitive. "Mr. G. is sure nice, but he talks funny."

"That's because he's from England."

"Oh." Easton was silent but then asked, "What's that?"

"It's another country on the other side of the ocean."

"Can we go there sometime?"

"I don't see why not."

"Aunt Ravina, have you ever been?"

"Yes, and they have palaces and castles there."

She sucked in a breath. "Really? With real princesses?"

"With real princesses and princes."

"I wanna go! Can we go tomorrow?"

It would be fun to take her, but her parents weren't ready for that yet. "We will someday, but not tomorrow."

"Cool!" She gave me a thumbs-up, which was her thing these days.

We pulled into English and Tristian's driveway and Easton had unbuckled her seat belt and was out of the car before I had a chance to turn the thing off.

By the time I walked inside, I heard Easton telling her parents that we were going to Egglan!

“What?” English asked.

“Egglan, where they have princes and princesses and castles and stuff. That’s where Mr. G. lives.”

Both adults glanced at me, and I said, “England. And it’s Gabriel. We saw him at dinner.”

“That makes more sense,” English said.

I carried in the purchases I’d made, and English said, “Good lord, I’m going to have to build that child a bigger closet with all the things you buy her.”

“It’s only new riding clothes. Her pants were too small as were her boots. I also got her a new helmet because the old one had run out of expansions. I couldn’t adjust it anymore.”

“You going riding?” Tristian asked. He was the only one of us who didn’t care for it.

“Yeah, tomorrow. I’ll pick her up around eleven thirty.”

“OK, I hope the weather holds out. It might rain,” my brother said.

“If it does, we’ll go to a movie. Oh, can you send a bathing suit with her so we can swim?”

“Yeah, I’ll put it in her backpack,” English said.

“See you tomorrow. Bye, Easton!”

She ran up and hugged me. “Thank you for my things today, Aunt Ravina.”

“You’re welcome.”

Up popped her thumb. They must be doing that a lot at school.

I headed home for a night of Netflix and me, alone on the couch. I’d given up on Gabriel. I figured if he were interested in me, he would’ve done something about it already.

I was snuggled on the sofa in my favorite pj’s when there was a knock on the door. I was surprised to see Gabriel

standing out there. “Hey.”

His eyes roamed over my pajama-clad body, and he said, “Nice.”

“Shut up. They’re my faves for a night of TV. What’s up?”

“Uh, yeah, I was wondering if you’d like to join me for a glass of wine.”

Here I was, no makeup, hair a mess, and wearing pajamas and the man wanted me to come over. “If my appearance doesn’t scare you into the next state, then okay.”

“You look great. Come on.”

I followed him across the hall and we sat in his living room sipping our wine.

“I never really got a chance to tell you how much I appreciate your support of me and my art.”

My hand swooshed through the air. “Hey, I love your stuff, so it was beneficial for me too. Now I have beautiful art on my walls instead of blank spaces.”

“You could’ve done that with a couple, not as many as you bought. I hope you’re pleased with them and don’t regret it.”

I set my glass down. “I have zero regrets over my purchases so stop worrying about it.”

“It’s not worry. I just want my customers to love what they bought.”

“Well, I sure do, so stop.”

“Hey, wanna see what I’m working on now?”

“Seriously? I would love it.”

I followed him into one of the bedrooms, which was his studio. The painting was on an easel, and I was stunned when I saw it. “Oh my god. Wow. That’s so cool. I love the colors.”

“It’s my daughter.”

I gaped. “It’s amazing.” It was impossible to tear my eyes off the thing. “I thought you didn’t do portraits.”



“I don’t, with one exception. I have a long way to go before it’s done, but you get the idea.”

“Yeah, and I love it. I would love for you to paint Easton.” I quickly said before I lost my nerve.

“Before I commit to that, let’s see how this one turns out.”

“Deal.”

We went back to finish the wine.

“Your niece is very entertaining.”

“Tell me about it. I never thought I’d love a kid so much as her. She’s my heart.”

“Just wait until you have one of your own. It changes every fiber in your body.”

“So, where’s your daughter? I assume she’s with her mother.”

His entire countenance changed. I’d seen people get angry, but he took it to a new level. His eyes grew so dark, I took a step back. I was gazing into the stormiest sea I’d ever seen.

“Yes, she’s with her mother.” I hadn’t expected the snappy response.

That was it. He didn’t give a location or any details and had shut down so completely, I feared asking him anything else.

“Okay then.” I inhaled deeply, wondering where to take this conversation.

A moment passed when I heard a long sigh from him. “Sorry, I don’t like to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry too. I wish you’d see Stacey about this. I think she could help.”

His head went back and forth. “I already have an attorney who’s supposed to be top notch in this area and I’ve gotten nothing.” Sadness seeped from him. I wanted to comfort him but didn’t know how.

“I don’t want to push this, but she is your daughter, and you have every right to see her.”

That didn’t go over very well. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand why I had this pressing need to help him. He’d been nothing but rude but below the surface, an amazing person lurked, waiting to be set free. Or at least that’s what I told myself. He sparked something inside of me that I’d never experienced before. My tenacious self refused to give up, even though it pissed him off.

Anger-filled eyes bored straight through me. “Don’t you think I know that? I’m not stupid. It’s a little difficult when your ex-wife leaves the state and refuses to comply with anything you offer her.” His explosive response left me trembling.

“Maybe I should go.” I didn’t want this conversation to continue, and I seriously had no idea what to say to the man.

“Maybe you should.” He confirmed what was in my head.

I stood and walked to the door. But then something made me turn around. I saw the pain etched on his face, so I tried one last time. If it didn’t work, I could sprint out the door. “Call Stacey. Her last name is Baines. Look her up. It’s your loss if you don’t. She’s brilliant.” I gently opened the door and went to my own apartment.

Unfortunately, I could not get him out of my mind, and not for the reasons before. Yes, that man was gorgeous, but the situation he was in bothered me to no end.

I tossed and turned most of the night and finally got out of bed around five in the morning. It took several cups of coffee to get my eyelids to stay open. Today was going to be a long day since we were going riding.

My phone dinged with a text. I picked it up to see who it was.

It was from Gabriel.

*Gabriel: Backing out today. Not up to it.*

That was it. Only I couldn't let that go. He needed to get out and away from his place.

*Me: No, you can't. You promised Easton and you have no idea what it's like breaking a promise to her. Besides, it'll do you good.*

I saw three dots and waited for his reply.

*Gabriel: I won't be good company. Running on zero sleep.*

*Me: Same here. That means we can both complain. Misery loves company.*

*Gabriel: Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you.*

*Me: See you around eleven thirty.*

Then an idea struck so I texted Stacey to explain the situation.

*Me: Can you please be there when we arrive and at least pass him your card?*

I waited for a response but got none. Hopefully, she would show up. Maybe if he saw her, he'd change his mind. Either that or he'd shoot me. I was hoping for the former.

# Eleven



GABRIEL

MY SOUR MOOD HAD REMAINED ALL THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT. I was in no mood to be cheerful with a young girl, especially since it would remind me of what I was missing out on with my own daughter. But a promise was a promise, so I found myself getting dressed for a horseback ride.

I heard the doorbell, so I grabbed some swim shorts, a towel, and met Ravina in the hall.

“You ready?”

“Guess so,” I mumbled.

“I know you’re not happy about this, but once you get out there, you’ll change your mind.”

I stopped walking and said through gritted teeth, “Would you please stop pretending to know what’s good for me? I’m a grown man and know myself better than you.”

My comment struck hard, but I didn’t feel one ounce of guilt about it. She wasn’t a parent. She had no idea what I was going through so how could she possibly know what would make me feel better?

“Right. Sorry. I won’t mention it again.”

Pretty sure I set her up to walk on eggshells, but too bad. She’d insisted I come, so here I was.

We rode down the elevator in silence and walked to her car, which was a sleek, black Mercedes. It wasn't until then I noticed what she wore. A plain, short-sleeved, white cotton T-shirt clung to her breasts, tan riding pants hugged her curvy hips, and knee-high brown leather boots covered her calves. She looked... stunning. Dark hair was twisted into a messy knot at the nape of her neck and her face had a fresh glow about it. I wasn't sure if it was the makeup she wore, or if it was natural. Her skin didn't appear to be loaded down with anything, so I assumed she was simply beautiful. How had I not noticed the entire package before today? This would make things even more difficult between us.

The drive to pick up Easton was made in relative silence. I appreciated her not trying to coax me into an unnecessary conversation. We pulled up to the house, which was a huge rendition of your typical suburbia home, but beautiful, nonetheless. I preferred older-styled homes, but this one had touches of elegance on the front that reminded me of that.

"I'll be right back," Ravina said as she scooted out of the car. A few minutes later, a grinning Easton accompanied her. She was decked out in riding gear and looked adorable. A pang of sadness hit me until she started chatting.

"Hey Mister G. Are you ready for our ride today?"

"I hope so because I'm here."

"We're gonna go swimming too and I brought my Cinderella bikini."

"Wow, I bet it's cool."

"It is. I left the matching tiara and glass slippers at home because I didn't want to lose them."

"Great idea."

Ravina backed out of the driveway and off we went. The drive took about twenty minutes and we finally pulled into the circle in front of the house. The only time I'd been here was when the band played at the reception. The place was huge and reminded me of where I grew up. I hadn't been back to England in quite some time. My father and I had words when I

told him the family business wasn't for me. That's when I left and moved to the US, determined to prove to him I could be a success in the career of my own choice.

"I'm going to run inside a minute to see if my nephew is awake. You're more than welcome to join me," Ravina said.

"I'm gonna go find Uncle Landry in the stables." Easton was eager to see her horse.

"Easton, come back if he's not there and remember—"

"I know. Stay away from the stalls. I hope he has Rowdy out. I missed him." Then she scampered off, following a gravel drive to whereabouts unknown.

We entered the mansion and Ravina said, "Follow me."

She took us to a huge kitchen where breakfast was being made.

"Miss Ravina! It's grand to see you."

Ravina went up to the older woman and hugged her.

"Sally, I've missed you and your cooking."

Sally humphed. "Looks like it. You could use a few pounds, missy."

Ravina laughed. "I could not. If I still lived here, I'd be in trouble."

"No, I'd be fattening you up. You girls like to be bean poles these days."

"I agree," I said, joining in the conversation.

Sally stared at me for a second until Ravina introduced us.

"It's a pleasure," I said.

"Likewise." Her eyes narrowed as she inspected me. She was a protective thing.

"Gabriel, Sally has been with the family since before I was born."

That explained it. "Then you're like a mother to her," I said with a grin.

Both women frowned. Hmm, that was odd.

“She’s better than my mother ever was,” Ravina said and hugged Sally again. “Is my nephew awake yet?”

“That little thing has been hollering up a storm. I told Miss Stacey to give him some baby cereal, but she won’t listen. She thinks all he needs is the breast. He’s going to milk her dry.”

Ravina laughed. “I don’t think so, but I’m going to see him. Come on, Gabriel.”

We went up the huge staircase and I followed her into a room that was decorated in a variety of shades of blue. It was quite fancy for a little guy.

“Here you are,” Ravina said, and she walked toward the crib. That’s when I noticed the other woman in there.

“Gabriel, this is my sister-in-law, Stacey. You probably remember her from the art show and wedding.”

I dipped my head in acknowledgment.

“Yes, it’s nice to see you again,” Stacey said. “You must be going riding.”

“I brought Easton, but before we went, I wanted to give Edward a little smooch.”

Stacey handed the baby to Ravina and she commenced to cover his cheeks in kisses. Then she handed him back to his mother. Once again, my heart banged against my ribs as I remembered Juliette when she was this young.

“We’ll run up here when we get back.”

“Have a great ride,” Stacey said. Then we walked to the stables where Easton was already mounted on her horse.

“It’s about time,” she called out when she noticed us.

“We weren’t that long,” Ravina answered before introducing me to Landry, her brother.

“I’ve got a gentle mare for you to ride. Her name is Misty.”

“Cause she’s gray, see?” Easton pointed to the horse.

“I do and she’s real pretty.”

“Yeah, and nice too.”

Landry handed me the reins and said, “You shouldn’t have any problems with her. She likes to follow so give her her head.”

“Will do, as long as you don’t race.”

“No racing,” Ravina said.

“But Aunt Ravina, can I jump Rowdy?”

“Not today. It’s been a while and we don’t jump out on the trail.”

“Ohh-kay.”

We all mounted up and I pulled in the rear, following Ravina. Easton was between Landry and Ravina. We rode across a pasture and soon were on a trail. My arse was fine so far, but I knew it was only a matter of time before that changed. About an hour into the ride, the trail opened up to a meadow where there was a lake fed by a stream.

“This is beautiful out here,” I said. The truth was the ride had helped my disposition. It freed my mind of what had been a burdensome worry and forced me to focus on the present and controlling the horse.

“This is where we skinny dip,” Easton shouted.

“Yeah, but not today,” Ravina reminded her.

Landry dismounted and helped Easton down. I followed suit, intending to help Ravina, but she was off and running toward the lake before I had a chance. She ripped her boots off and stuck her feet into the water.

“It’s divine,” she called out. Then she came back and pulled a bathing suit out of her saddlebag. I’d forgotten about that until she tossed me my own. “Girls change over there, and boys can change here. Come on, Easton.”

They wandered over to a group of hedges and slipped behind them. Soon they emerged in their suits. I gawked at Ravina. Two tiny triangles covered her nipples held together



by a thin string and another covered her lady bits. When she turned around, I was shocked to see it was a thong. I stood there and gawked. She had the most gorgeous arse I'd ever laid eyes on.

“Let's go!” Ravina took off running toward a dock. When she got to the end, she gracefully dove into the water. Easton followed her but jumped in instead. I breathed a sigh when Easton surfaced, but I shouldn't have worried. The girl knew how to swim. She and Ravina raced across the lake and when they got to the other side, they waved. The lake was small, so it wasn't a big deal. I dove in after them, but by the time I surfaced, they were halfway back across.

“Doesn't the water feel good, Mister G?”

“It does,” I answered, staring at Ravina. Landry finally joined us, and we all floated around for a few.

“I'm hungry,” Easton said.

“Then let's eat,” Landry answered.

We got out of the water, but I had difficulty concentrating. Ravina's arse was staring at me as if extending an invitation. She walked to her horse and pulled off a blanket to spread on the ground. Was she going to eat in that bikini? If so, I wouldn't be able to get anything down since so much saliva had pooled, I was constantly swallowing.

She sat down, crossed her legs and opened the basket that Landry had set down. Then she handed out sandwiches, plates, and forks. Out came a bowl of potato salad, to which we all helped ourselves. Even Easton ate a pile of it.

I stared at my plate and watched everyone else eat. Ravina glanced over at my half-full plate and asked, “Not hungry?”

“No, but it's good.”

Easton asked, “Uncle Landry, did you bring treats for the horses?”

Landry dipped his hand into the basket and pulled out a bunch of carrots. “Sure did.”

“Yay.” Easton hopped up and took the carrots over to the horses. They gratefully chomped them down.

“Who wants a chocolate chip cookie?” Ravina asked.

Easton yelled, “I do!”

We ate the cookies then went for another swim. Afterward, we plopped down on the blanket and rested. I fell asleep and was surprised when Easton shook me awake.

“Mister G, it’s time to change.”

My suit was dry already so all I had to do was put the jeans on, along with my T-shirt and shoes. Ravina and Easton went back to the hedges to retrieve their clothes. They returned dressed back in their riding gear. It was disappointing to see her luscious body covered up.

“Where to now?” I asked.

“This trail makes a huge circle on the property, so we follow it until we get back to the stables,” Landry responded.

It took a couple more hours to return and by that time, my arse was screaming. I refused to show it though, but my grimace was evident. I groaned when dismounting.

“You okay?” Ravina asked.

“His butt hurts. Look at how he walks,” Easton said, the little tattletale.

“Yup, my butt hurts all right.”

“It’s okay, Mister G. It’ll get better fast.”

“You did great though,” Ravina said. “You kept up the whole time.”

“Thanks,” I groaned.

“Mister G, wanna see the horse poop pile?”

“Do I have to?”

“Yup, come on.” She grabbed my hand and took me to the back of the stables. “Look! Isn’t it something?”

“It sure is,” I said, glancing at Ravina, who rolled her eyes.

# Twelve



RAVINA

AFTER THE RIDE, WE WENT INSIDE TO GET SOMETHING TO drink. As always, there were snacks laid out so I told Gabriel to help himself. Stacey came in while we were munching down. Easton's mouth was covered in chocolate from the cookies and when she grinned, it looked like she didn't have any teeth.

Stacey had Edward with her, so I was able to get some cuddles in. Stanton came in and shot me some fiery glances. He did not approve of Gabriel, but too bad. I was an adult and could decide who I wanted to call a friend.

As we were leaving, I noticed Stacey handing Gabriel a card as she said something to him. I was out of earshot so didn't know exactly what passed between them.

On the ride home, Easton was a chatterbox again. She hopped from one topic to the next, barely taking time to inhale. I dropped her off and promised to see her the following weekend.

“Bring Mister G. riding again so his butt gets used to it.”

“Yes, ma'am.” I saluted her and left. On the drive back to the apartment building, Gabriel handed me a piece of his mind.

“You went behind my back to involve your sister-in-law?”

“Yes, I did. However, you don’t have to do anything. She’s there if you want,” I explained.

“Please drop it, Ravina.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Getting my hopes up again and then gaining nothing.” His voice boomed inside the car.

“Gabriel, you can’t stop trying.”

“Why are you so focused on this? It has nothing to do with you!”

He was right. It didn’t, but I still couldn’t believe he was willing to give up.

“That’s true, but I don’t want to see you lose her.”

“I don’t either but when you try and try and fail and fail, it robs you of any hope.”

“Then I am going to hope for you.”

He growled out his response. “Stop. Just stop already. I can’t have you doing this all for nothing.”

We arrived at the parking garage, and I let it drop. He was like conversing with a brick wall on this subject. I’d figure out a way to work behind the scenes somehow.

After the elevator doors slid shut, he said, “Just for the record, I do have an attorney and a private investigator sending me information on my daughter. I haven’t given up.”

“I know, but please give Stacey a call. She may know something or try something new. It really can’t hurt. And furthermore, she doesn’t need the money.”

We stopped at our respective doors, and he nodded. “I’ll think about it. Thank you for taking me riding today. It did help, even if I didn’t act like it.”

“I’m glad.”

“I have a question. Do you always wear such revealing bathing suits?”

It was a question I hadn't expected, but I grinned. "Guess you'll have to hang around me to find out." I winked at him and went inside my apartment, leaving him staring after me. I did a mental fist pump. It was the first time he'd shown any interest toward me, not that it was an overabundance of it. It did show me that he was paying attention though. And other than our slight altercation in the car, his assholery had lessened. Progress.

The first thing I did was call Stacey. When she answered, I asked, "What did you tell him?"

Her response was to laugh. "I told him that I was relentless when it came to cases, and I only worked part-time so I didn't have an overly booked schedule. I also said I'd be happy to investigate his case and if I thought nothing could be done, I'd let him know. What did he say to you?"

"He's extremely touchy on the subject and convinced nothing can be done."

Stacey sighed. "That's a shame. I get it though, because a lot of people experience that hopelessness at first. Maybe he'll call."

"He did say he had an attorney and a private investigator."

"That's a step but if his attorney isn't active, that won't get Gabriel anywhere."

"I'll keep pushing him to call."

"Walk the line. He definitely isn't talkative about this."

I thought and thought about how to engage him in this. If he gave up, he'd never know his daughter, which was unacceptable. As a parent, that would be devastating.

Maybe telling him Easton's story might help. Her mother, English, had a difficult time with Easton's father. Her case was totally different, but if English had just given up, who knows what would've happened to Easton.

I paced for at least an hour, trying to figure out a way to get to him. It was heartbreaking to know his pain. I finally marched across the hall and banged on his door. He didn't

answer. He probably didn't want to talk to me. I tried again and waited, but nothing. It was time to give up for now.

I returned home and plopped on the sofa. I smelled like a horse, so a shower was in order. I wrapped my hair in a towel after and got dressed in comfy jeans and a tank top. When I unwrapped the towel from my hair, it was a mess, but I wasn't in the mood to comb it, so I curled up on the couch and flipped the TV on.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I looked out the peephole to see Gabriel there.

When I opened the door, he pushed his way in, and held up his hand, a finger pointed at me. "You have to give this up. It's not your business and I don't need you poking into things."

"I'm not poking into things."

"Then what do you call it?"

"I'm concerned about you."

"Don't be. I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Can I tell you a story?"

"No! I don't want to hear some sweet, happy-ever-after fairy tale. My head's been filled with that for the last two years and it's time to live in the real world."

"This isn't a fairy tale. It's about Easton's biological father."

"You mean it isn't your brother?"

"No. English had Easton when she was in college and the father nearly strangled her."

"Easton?"

"No, English. If Tristian hadn't come to her house, English wouldn't be here and Easton's bio dad would have her." I explained the story to him as he listened.

When I finished, he said, "That's not anything like my situation."

“True, but you never know what will happen if you just take the chance.” My voice had elevated in tone and he stared at me.

I was surprised—no, make that shocked—when he took two long strides toward me and put his hands on my shoulders. Then his mouth crashed onto mine, bruising my lips. I sucked in my breath as he kissed me. He worked his way around my mouth, sucking my tongue, sending shivers scooting down my spine. My head swam with lust as I thought about him doing this to other parts of my body. When he released me, my breath was coming fast.

“Your mouth was made for kissing, not talking, and your body was made to be fucked, not poking into my business.”

Whoa.

Then he turned and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Home, before I do something I regret.”

“Regret?” Why would he regret it?

“I won’t take any chances with women again.”

“You mean you’re going to be celibate forever?”

He never answered but walked away instead. The woman he’d been married to must’ve really screwed him up, but I intended to straighten him out... if he let me.

# *Thirteen*



GABRIEL

RAVINA HAD GOTTEN TO ME. SHE'D BROKEN THROUGH MY barrier but then I fucked it all up by kissing her. It wouldn't happen again... or so I told myself. The only problem was I couldn't get her sexy body out of my mind. I headed to the shower... again... to resolve the issue. The only problem with that was the relief was short lived.

Several days passed and I was still out of sorts. I tried to paint but every vision in my head was of her—my fucking nosy neighbor. She was ruining my painting mojo. Angrily, I gave up and stomped out of the place. When the elevator opened up to the parking garage, I headed for my baby—a black Harley—put on a helmet I stored in the carrier and revved her up. Then I went on a ride, heading for the mountains.

With no destination in mind, I found myself in North Carolina before my thoughts settled. The warm air rushing against me was refreshing as were the views. And just like that, my emotions calmed. That was what riding did for me. A sense of freedom enveloped me every time and I lost myself in it.

This girl was the first thing I purchased when I'd made enough money through my paintings. It was one of the best things I'd ever done for myself. The rest area I was in gave me stunning views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It had been a



while since I'd been here, but I wouldn't wait so long to return. The soothing sensation I experienced was well worth the drive.

I straddled the bike and prepared for my drive home when visions of my pesky neighbor popped into my mind. Why did she have to be a gorgeous brunette with azure eyes? Her mouth, with plump pink lips, reminded me of our kiss and my dick responded like the champ I didn't want him to be. This woman had a hold on me and I neither wanted or needed it. The last thing I wanted was a complication of a relationship and the possibility of another disaster. My trust in women had plunged to zero after what I'd been through.

The engine revved and I took off, attempting to dispel thoughts of Ravina. When I pulled into the parking garage, her face loomed in my head like I'd never left. Anger rippled through me in waves as I rode the elevator. I was pissed at myself for not being able to control my own bloody emotions.

My feet stomped down the hall toward my door and when I looked up, there was a note attached to it. I ripped it off and went inside.

*Gabriel, I'm cooking dinner tonight, which is more of an experiment. Please join me if you want to be my guinea pig.*

*Ravina*

Why couldn't the woman give up and leave me alone? I didn't want this attention from her because I genuinely liked her. Was it bad that I wanted to fuck her until she screamed my name? The problem though, was walking away from her would not be easy. It wasn't because she was my neighbor. No, that wasn't it at all. Even though I knew getting involved with her was a bad idea, I wanted it more than anything. Almost. Not more than I wanted my daughter back.

My feet wore out the floor as I considered the options available. Who was I kidding? I only had two and one of those didn't suit me. The other was eating me alive.

I stood in front of her door and rang the bell before I changed my mind.

“Coming,” she yelled.

*Not yet, but you will be.*

The door opened and there she stood, a bright-yellow apron tied around her neck and waist, and flour dusting her cheek. Her blue eyes twinkled with mirth as she said, “Come into my den of not-so-very good food.”

Her cheerfulness was contagious and my mouth twitched as a grin spread across my face.

“Why isn’t the food good?”

“Well, first of all, I burned the bread. Second, the salmon isn’t looking too good. And third, my potatoes are very dry.”

“Let me look.” I followed her into the kitchen and the first thing my eyes landed on was black-crust bread. “Maybe if you cut off the crust, it will still have a chance.”

“You think?”

I didn’t but I couldn’t spoil her expression of hopefulness. “Possibly. Where’s the salmon?”

“In the oven.”

I peeked inside to see a large piece of salmon that had been completely overcooked. Its color almost matched the bread. “Hmm, I think you can take this out.”

“It’s done?”

“Yeah, and maybe even a little more than that.”

“Shoot. I ruined it too, didn’t I?”

“We’ll have to taste it to tell. What about the potatoes?”

My question hung in the air until she opened the microwave and I saw the shriveled up things. They looked like they’d been cooked for hours and did not resemble potatoes in the slightest.

“Ruined too, huh?”

“I hate to break it to you but I think so.”

“I tried to eat one and it was superhard. When I finally was able to chew it, it was awful.”

“Did you follow any recipes?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I wanted to make sure everything cooked fast, and I guess I blew it. Turning the oven higher doesn’t work too well.”

It was strange that she had zero cooking talents. “Did you ever cook at home?”

“Gosh no. We had Sally and two other women for that, and they never taught me a single thing.”

I took my index finger and brushed the flour off her cheeks. “Take off the apron and put on some shoes. We’re going to the store and I’ll show you how.”

We hopped in my old jeep and headed for the grocery store. I threw some asparagus, more salmon, and the makings for a nice salad in the cart. Then I added salad dressing and some seasonings. We stopped at the bakery and tossed in a French baguette.

“Do you have butter?”

“Yup.”

We were on the way home in no time. Then we began preparations.

“First off, salmon is the easiest thing to cook. Put your oven at four hundred.”

She turned the oven back on and threw out the old salmon and potatoes.

“Can you wash the asparagus and then I’ll show you a trick?”

She smiled as she worked on her chore, and I demonstrated how to cut off the ends. “See? Bend one stalk and where it breaks is where you cut the rest of them.”

“That’s easy enough.”

“It removes the tough portion of the spear.”

“Okay. What’s next?”

“Rinse the salmon under cold water, then dry with a paper towel.”

I watched her do as I instructed. “Now place it on a pan and season it with this.” I handed her the salmon seasoning I’d bought. She sprinkled on a little. “Add a lot more. Really coat it well.”

She was much more liberal with it this time. As she handed the container to me, I held on to her hand a little longer than was necessary.

“Excellent. Now drizzle the asparagus with olive oil and then salt and pepper it.”

Once she was finished, I popped them both in the oven.

“That’s it?” She acted surprised.

I nodded. “That’s it. The key is not overcooking. How good are you with making a salad?”

She scrunched up her face, which had me pressing a light kiss to her nose. She chuckled. “Sorry, I’m not very good at that.”

Her expression was adorable. “Okay. Wash the lettuce. Once you’re done, dry it off.”

While she did that, I washed the cucumbers, peppers, and tomatoes. “Salads are easy because anything goes. You can put whatever you want in them.”

We both worked to assemble it. As we worked, I snuck in light taps to her arms, because I couldn’t stop myself. By the time we were done, the salmon was ready. I pulled it out and showed her how to test it for doneness. “Put a fork in the thickest part and spread it to see inside. If it’s still a bit pink, but not very opaque, you’re good.”

It was perfect. I pulled out the asparagus and plated everything. We sat at her counter and dug in.

“Mmm, this is delicious,” she hummed.

“And so easy. You could do this again, right?”

“I think.”

“Just repeat everything and make sure to check it at about fifteen to twenty minutes. Like I said, the key is not overcooking it.”

“What about potatoes? Do you know how to make them?”

“Sure. If you use the little ones, just halve them, put them on a pan, toss with olive oil, salt, and pepper and cook in the oven until browned. Pierce them with a fork to test their tenderness.”

“That’s it?”

“You can cook a lot of easy things in the oven like that. Most vegetables are great roasted.” I eyed her luscious mouth as she chewed.

“I’m going to try. Eating out is a pain. I get so tired of it.”

“That’s exactly why I learned to cook. I used to watch those cooking shows all the time. I picked up a lot of pointers from them.” I stuck my fork into some salad and stuffed it into my mouth.

After I swallowed the bite, I added, “You know what else? An air fryer is great too. You can cook just about anything in them.”

“I’ve seen those and wondered if they were legit.”

We finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen. Ravina was wiping down the counter and I put my hand over hers, helping. Then she asked, “Do you want to try the bread?”

I leaned over her shoulder and checked out the item. “I’ll pass on that.” Then my lips touched her gorgeous neck, and I kissed her. It was too tempting to ignore. She shivered and bent her neck farther to allow me to have more access. I ran a brief trail of light kisses down to where her neck met her shoulder.

“Guess I should toss this.” She picked up the loaf and tossed it into the trash with a laugh. It sounded like she’d just thrown a brick in there. “Maybe I’ll forget about bread making for now.”

We were standing arm to arm, and she turned her eyes up to me. In one quick move, I spun her, put my arms on her shoulders and kissed her. Then I pushed her against the counter and lifted her onto it, spreading her thighs with my hips.

“I told myself to stay away from you, but it’s impossible.”

My kiss was rough and invasive. I tasted every bit of her mouth and tugged on her lower lip with my teeth.

“Why are you torturing me like this?” I breathed.

“You’re the one who’s doing the torturing.” Her hands had moved to my shoulders.

“I’m not gentle.”

“I don’t want you to be.”

“We shouldn’t do this.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t make any promises. I’m not interested in a relationship.”

“Who said I was asking for one?” Her hand unbuttoned my jeans, and the zipper came down. My cock sprung free, and she gasped.

“Do you want to call it quits?” I asked, giving her a final chance.

“I never start something I’m not willing to finish.” Her answer was all I needed. I lifted her up as she straddled my hips. My dick rubbed against her jeans. I needed to get this woman naked and fast.

We entered her bedroom, and I pushed her back on the bed to remove her pants. She wore a silky black thong underneath and I put my mouth over her mound. My tongue licked her clit through the thin fabric as she writhed under my touch.

“Are you wet for me?”

“Yes,” she panted.

I snapped off her thong and spread her lips to reveal her engorged clit. Her slit glistened as my tongue flicked over her nub. I added one finger, then another inside of her and it wasn't long before she shuddered against my hand.

My pants were in the way, so I kicked them off and grabbed a condom from my wallet. My hands shook when I rolled it on. It had been ages since I'd had a woman. She was spread wide and bared for me, so I plunged my dick inside her.

"Are you okay? I won't be gentle," I told her.

"I'm good and I don't want gentle."

With that encouragement, I thrust in and out, putting her legs on my shoulders. The fierce motion scooted her farther on the bed, so I crawled up and continued to fuck her. Her blouse was still on so I grabbed the placket and jerked it open. Buttons popped off but I had her bare, except for her lacy bra. I tugged it down, freeing her breasts. My mouth sucked and nipped one nipple as my fingers pinched and squeezed the other. At first, she yelped but then her moans grew louder and louder.

A tension grew deep in my belly and radiated to my cock. I wanted her to come first. My finger reached for her clit and then pressed down and circled it.

My name tore out of her mouth in a loud gasp as her body shuddered out an orgasm. Her inner muscles clenched my dick, and I exploded in my own release.

She was spectacular and this was only the beginning of a long night.

# Fourteen



RAVINA

GABRIEL PULLED OUT AND DROPPED BETWEEN MY THIGHS. HIS mouth danced over my slit until his tongue finally reached the goal. My goal. My clit. He had all the right moves and I planned to enjoy them.

His tongue drilled into me mercilessly as I twitched and wriggled.

“Don’t move.”

That command was impossible to obey. I was filled with electricity and each time he pressed me, I reacted.

“I said not to move.” His eyes pierced mine momentarily. Then his tongue went back to work. It was killing me. My hips jerked and he said, “Two times. Now you pay.”

I was flipped on my stomach and when the palm of his hand smacked me, I jerked. It was so unexpected.

“Have you never been spanked?”

“N-no.” My breathing was uneven.

“You’re about to be.” His hand smacked me again and I jerked as wetness rushed to my core. The tension inside me was unbearable.

“Please,” I begged.

“Please what?”



“More. I need more.”

Before I finished the sentence, the spanking came fast and hard.

“Your arse is beautiful.” Then he swatted me again. And again, until a climax burst inside of me.

He hiked up my hips and plunged inside me. Dear lord, he was going to kill me.

He spread my cheeks and said, “Gorgeous. Perfect,” as he continued to bear down on me. He bit my shoulder, my hip, and I went off again. I heard a deep groan pour out of him and felt his hardness throb inside me. A whine escaped from me when he pulled out. I wanted him back in there.

The bed moved as he crawled up and rolled me on my side. I was limp and lifeless when he put his arm around me and pulled me against him.

“Was I too rough on you?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all.”

“You weren’t rough enough. How’s that for an answer?”

“Hmm, then next time will be even better.”

“Next time?” I figured him for a one and run.

“You seriously don’t think that after what we just did, it was our last?”

I shrugged. He nuzzled my neck and asked, “Well?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me.”

“What I can tell you is this. Tomorrow, you’ll have trouble walking.” He left the bed and went to the bathroom. When he returned, he pulled another condom out of his wallet and said, “We’ve only just begun, and the night is still young.”

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GABRIEL'S WARNING CAME TRUE. WHEN I WOKE UP, I crawled out of bed and winced. My entire body was sore. I went to the bathroom and noticed the bruises on my inner thighs. My ass was also covered in them. We'd had rough sex and he banged me like a drum last night. When I went back to bed, I saw the note he'd left.

*I'll call you later. Hope you're not too sore and tired today.*

*Gabriel*

Hmm. The note was a bit brief. What did I expect? Up until last night, the man had barely spoken to me and when he had, he'd always been angry. Until last night. My body still tingled in all the places he'd used me. And after all that, I still longed for more. I had no idea sex could be so... explosive. He had magnificent staying power. A good soak in the tub would probably ease the soreness between my thighs. Although, the delicious ache reminded me of everything he did. I'd never had sex while we both stood, and it had been unreal. He'd told me to squeeze my thighs together and the friction of him moving in and out had me coming in no time. I lost count after four orgasms. I usually didn't have that many in a month, let alone one night. It wouldn't take much to get used to having him around. Those types of thoughts could get me into trouble.

He'd warned me that he was not into relationships, so that meant one between us was off the boards. Would we just be fuck buddies? That idea scared me because as crazy as it sounded, I could see myself developing feelings for the man. He was hot enough to make my blood sing as it was, coupled with his moves between the sheets made him irresistible. Yup, I was definitely in trouble. I had to remember how much of an asshole he could be.

After trying to go back to sleep, I gave it up and headed for the tub. A soak was in order to ease my sore body. I was relaxing in a cloud of suds when the doorbell rang. And rang. I wrapped a towel around me and went to see who it was. Gabriel stood outside bearing two coffees and a brown bag.

“Good morning,” he said, brushing past me when I opened the door. “Did I interrupt your shower?”

“Nope, a bath.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I need coffee.”

He handed me a cup and I sipped it. Then he wrapped his long fingers around my wrist and pulled me toward him. With a gentle tug, the towel dropped to my feet. I raised my brows. “Have something in mind?”

“Yeah. Breakfast.” He pulled me to the couch and lay down. “Sit. Here.” He motioned to his face.

“You want me to sit on your face?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “Yup. I want to take you for a ride, baby.”

Who was I to refuse that offer? I climbed on top of him and straddled his mouth.

“Lower.”

I complied and felt him spread my lower lips. When his tongue licked me, I jerked. “Ahh.”

He blew out a puff of air, then continued. One orgasm later, he ordered me to fuck him.

“Huh?” I was a bit out of it.

“Sit on me and fuck me, Ravina.”

“Condom?”

A hand dove into his pocket and he pulled one out. I took it from him, ripping it open with my teeth. Then I unsheathed him, opening his jeans. He popped out and I fisted him.

“No. Don’t do that.” He brushed my hand away.

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

My eyes instantly narrowed. “That’s not an answer.”

“Fine. I want to last.” His teeth scraped his lower lip and all I wanted was to kiss him. So, I did.

He kissed me back voraciously. Then, with a palm to my chest, he pushed me backward and said, “Fuck me.”

After I rolled on the condom, I took him in hand and guided him inside me. Then I sat until he was balls deep.

“That’s it, baby, do it.”

I began slowly but his hands on my hips increased the speed of my movements. His hips rose each time to meet me, and his punishing rhythm had us both climaxing soon.

I fell onto his chest, saying, “I need to work out more. I thought running was enough but apparently, it’s not.”

His body vibrated with his laughter. It wasn’t something I’d often heard so I grinned in response. “I like the sound of that.”

“Of what?”

“You laughing.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Yeah, about that. You need to lighten up.”

“Hmm. I need to do a lot of things but right here is what you get.”

I had no response to that, so I remained silent.

He finally asked, “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Get dressed so we can eat.”

I lifted up as he was still inside of me. Then I walked back to the bedroom and put on a robe. When I returned, he had heated up the coffee and the cinnamon rolls he’d brought.

“Here you go.”

I offered up my thanks before taking a bite. “Yumm. Where did you get these?”

“The coffee shop. You’ve never had them?”

“No, but I will from now on. They’re so good.”

We ate in companionable silence and then he shocked me.  
“Play hooky today and hang out with me. It’s Friday so ...”

“You don’t have to paint?” I asked.

His sculpted shoulders moved up and down, albeit slightly.  
“Yeah, but I need a break and want to take it with you.”

# *Fifteen*



GABRIEL

WHAT THE HELL WAS I DOING? I'D SWORN NO RELATIONSHIPS and here I was hanging out with Ravina. The worst was when I asked if she wanted to go on a bike ride.

"I don't have a bike here."

"No, I meant motorcycle."

"Oh. Okay, I'll admit I'm afraid."

"That seals it. We're going. Put on some jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. Oh, and boots if you have them."

"Uh, okay, but let me check my work schedule."

Just to make sure she dressed appropriately, I followed her into the bedroom.

She opened her phone, then after a bit, she texted someone. Then went to the closet and pulled out a pair of worn jeans and a short-sleeved shirt.

"Long sleeves."

"But it's hot out."

"I know but the sleeves will give your skin protection from any debris."

She changed her shirt.

"No bra?" I asked.

“Do I need one?”

“Up to you.”

“Then no.”

She put on her boots, the ones she wore when we rode horses and said, “I’m ready.”

We went to my place and I put on a different shirt and boots. Then we went down to the parking garage where my lady sat.

I opened the compartment, handed her a helmet, and I put one on too. “They’re equipped with headphones and a mic so we can talk.”

“Nice. Go slow please.”

“Just hold on to me. If I turn, follow my lead.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Lean into the turn. Just do what I do.”

She got on and then I did. “Put your arms around me and hold on.”

We left and I navigated the traffic until we got to the highway that led to the mountains. Then I opened her up as Ravina’s arms tightened. “Don’t worry. I’m a safe driver.”

“I trust you.” She might, but I detected a slight quiver in her tone. She pressed her body closer to my back. Oddly, it was comforting to me.

“I hope so because I’d never put you in danger.”

“My dad died in a car wreck and my brother almost did too. They were together when it happened. It’s why I’m gun-shy.”

What a bloody tragedy. It must’ve been awful for their family. “Understood. I’m always careful.”

When the scenery got more impressive, I felt her relax. “This is gorgeous. I never noticed how pretty it was when I was driving.”

“One of the reasons I like the bike. It opens everything up.”

I pulled off onto one of the viewing areas so we could take in the view.

“Wow, just wow! Out of all the times I’ve made this drive, I’ve never once thought of doing this.” She stared across the horizon and sighed.

She looked like a dream as she inspected the view. Suddenly, she turned and asked, “Hey, wanna go to Highlands?”

“Now?”

“Why not? We’re halfway there as it is and we can spend the night up there.”

The spur-of-the-moment trip appealed to me. “I’m in if you are.”

She looked up to the sky and then said, “I love playing hooky. Besides, I’m part owner of the company. What will they do? Fire me?”

Good point. When you were in her shoes, there wasn’t anything you couldn’t do.

“Let’s go then.”

Once we got close to the small town, she directed me to their home. It was much more than I expected. It had been a couple of years since I’d been up here, and I certainly had never been to their estate. A gate blocked our entrance, but she tapped a series of numbers and it opened. A long curvy road led to the house where a circle drive took us to the front porch. It was a huge timber-and-stone structure that looked imposing, yet comfortable. I was eager to see the interior.

I followed her up the stone steps where she entered a code to open the door. Then she waved me through, and I was overwhelmed with how amazing it was inside.

“This is really something. The view alone is worth a million words.”



“Yeah, my father bought this property before I was born, and it took them several years to build. But the result was worth it.”

We stood side by side in front of one of the dozen or more windows and looked out at the mountains. The blue mist that hung over them made the scene ethereal.

“I need to paint this view.”

“That’s a great idea! Hey, tomorrow before we leave, we should check out the art galleries here. I know most of the owners and it could be another venue for you.”

That was a great idea. “There’s a problem. I need to replenish my inventory.”

“You can at least talk to them.”

True and I also could find out what their biggest sellers were. If they sold a lot of smaller paintings, then I could crank those out quickly.

“Sounds great.”

Ravina linked her fingers with mine and drew me away from the windows. “Come on. I’ll give you a tour.”

The main floor held the great room, which had all the views and a gigantic stone fireplace. There was a second den on the opposite side of the gourmet kitchen that had a fireplace in the center of the room, with seating around it. It was fabulous.

Upstairs were all the bedrooms, identical in size with the same amenities. Each had an en suite, which contained a huge walk-in shower, a large soaking tub, a separate water closet, and a long vanity that held two sinks.

The rooms were exquisitely decorated in soft colors, and each had its own fireplace.

“This is really something.”

She still held my hand. “Dad had the whole thing remodeled right before he died. We’ll have to come up here in the fall for the colors and stay a week.”

“That sounds wonderful. Did he ever get to see it after it was finished?” Then I thought about how I was talking about making plans with her for the future. Was this something I should be worried about? Nevertheless, here I was, enjoying my time with her. This was completely unexpected. That was wrong. I totally knew I liked her but had lied to myself.

“Barely. He came up a couple of times, and then the accident happened.” Changing the subject, she asked, “You hungry?”

The question took me out of my head. “I am. Do we need to go and eat somewhere?”

“No, there’ll be food here. It may not be much but there’ll be something. There’s a couple who lives on the property and they have instructions to keep the kitchen fairly stocked. Come on.”

We sought out some food and I was surprised to see how well stocked the place was.

“So, you know I’m not a cook, but I can make a mean sandwich. You in?”

“Sure.”

I eyed her as she assembled a couple of sub sandwiches and then put them into a small wall oven to toast. She found a bag of chips and added a couple of pickles to the plates. By that time, the subs were ready, and she pulled them out, plating them up.

We sat at the massive counter and ate. The subs were surprisingly tasty. “These are great. What’s your secret?”

“Really nothing. I just load them up and toast them. That’s it.”

After we ate, we sat in the living area and one thing led to another. Before I knew it, she was naked underneath me as I fucked her. Her thighs wrapped around me, and I felt her heels dig into my ass as I plunged into her.

She was tight and slick around me, and it was impossible to hold back. This was a woman who loved sex as much as me

and I made sure she had hers before I got mine. Afterward, we lay in a tangled mess of limbs as I kissed her luscious mouth.

“That was fun,” she said, grinning.

“It was that.”

Then we heard gravel crunching and the deep purr of a motor.

“Shit. Someone’s here,” she yelled, trying to push me off her.

I hopped up and pulled on my jeans as she did the same. I was shirtless and she was in the same state as the front door opened.

“Who’s here?” a deep voice boomed.

“I am, Stanton. I’m here with a friend.”

Her brother walked into the room, and his eyes darkened as they skipped over us. Then they zoomed in on me and what I saw wasn’t good.

# Sixteen



RAVINA

DAMN IT. STANTON AND STACEY WOULD HAVE TO SHOW UP. IT was a good thing they hadn't arrived fifteen minutes earlier. The thought sent me into a fit of giggles.

"What's so damn funny about this?" my brother asked, sweeping his arm out.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." I straightened my expression.

My answer did nothing to appease him as he glared. I was used to this side of him so it didn't bother me. His attention turned toward Gabriel. "And who is this?"

Annoyance descended upon me with the way he asked the question. "*This* is Gabriel Knight. Gabriel, meet my overbearing brother, Stanton."

"What are your intentions with my sister?"

Oh, my God! What the hell! "Stanton, stop it. Gabriel is my business, not yours."

Then Stacey touched his arm and said, "Honey, why don't you bring in our bags?"

Stanton snorted and walked out.

My sister-in-law came closer and said, "I'll work on him. He's such—"

"A bully," I finished.

“He sure can be.”

“Thank God I have you,” I said to her.

Gabriel cleared his throat. “I’m going to…”

“What?” I asked.

A short laugh popped out of him. “I have no idea, but I think it’s best if your brother doesn’t see me half-naked.”

“Bull. You’re here with me and we need to set him straight, which I’ve been trying to do for years now.”

Stanton walked back in carrying two bags.

“Where’s my nephew?” I asked.

“We engaged the nanny for a couple of days so we could get away. But now…” Again, his glare hit me. He tried to intimidate me. It worked with a lot of people, but not me.

I put on my cheery face and chirped, “That’s fantastic. And let me remind you, brother, that this is a family home. You are not the singular owner. But I’ll be kind and invite you to join us for dinner tonight. I’ll make a reservation at my favorite restaurant.”

Stacey grinned but Stanton grimaced. “Don’t bother. We’ll eat alone.”

Apparently, Stacey wasn’t on board with his plan. “Stanton, I’d like to spend time with Ravina and Gabriel.”

His gaze instantly softened as he turned to his wife. “Well, then, that’s what we’ll do.” Then his eyes pierced me again as he growled, “Make the damn reservation.”

I stuck out my tongue in rebellion as he carried their bags up. “He’s a happy dude today.”

“Always. Don’t pay any attention to him. I’ll handle the man.”

“I’m sure you will.” We shared a laugh.

Then Stacey said, “Hmm, I hope we didn’t interrupt anything.”

“No, but it’s a damn good thing you didn’t get here fifteen minutes earlier.” Then I explained how we ended up here. “We’re only staying the night, so you can tell my bossy brother that.”

“Just let us know what time and where for tonight.” Then she disappeared upstairs.

“He’s a swell chap.” I’m sure what Gabriel really meant was that he was an asshole.

“He can be when it’s on his terms. He’s more bark than bite though.”

“They usually are.”

“Let’s go shower.”

“I need to grab some clothes.”

“You brought some?”

“I always have a change of clothing with me when I ride, just in case I decide to spend the night somewhere.”

“Smart man.”

He left and was back in a jiffy. Then we went up to our room.

I turned on the shower, but he stopped me. “How about a bath?”

“That’s what I was doing when you knocked this morning. By the way, thanks for the interruption.” I’d never had a better one in my life. As I thought about it, it had been years since I’d had sex. No wonder I was aching between my thighs.

“I can’t promise I won’t touch you.”

“That’s one promise I won’t ever want from you.”

Then his green eyes caught mine and he asked, “And what kind of promise do you want?”

A lump formed in my throat preventing me from speaking. I only gaped at him as he waited.

“Remember what I said? No relationship.”

Was this a reminder or a warning? I nodded in response, then turned back to the bathtub to add some salts. When I looked at him again, he'd stripped and stood before me in all his beautiful glory. And he had more than his fair share of it... glory that is. It radiated from him nearly making me swoon. I must've groaned because he winked and asked, "Like what you see?"

My eyes drifted down and he was immense, rigid, and ready. "Fuck me."

"I plan to. Get rid of the clothes, Ravina."

He was a bit demanding, but I did as instructed. He set me on the counter, spread my thighs, and dove in. Thank the heavens the man had a full head of hair, or I wouldn't have had anything to hold on to. My fingers plowed through his locks, sure I nearly drew blood on his scalp. He was targeting my clit with his lips and tongue while his fingers worked me into a frenzy. When I came, it was as if fire licked my core and turned into an electrical current that zipped throughout me.

In one solitary move, I was on my feet, bent over the tub as he smacked my ass.

"Tell me to stop."

"No." Each slap brought me closer to another climax. I wasn't expecting him to plunge right in, but he slammed into me as he spanked my cheeks. My pelvis pressed the ledge of the tub and with each thrust, it ground down, putting pressure on my core. Add in the butt smacks and I was coming all over again. My ass burned but I loved the tingle. His hands lifted my hips high, almost too high for me to stand so I had to hold on to the tub for balance. He continued to fuck me over and over until I felt his legs stiffen as he moaned out his orgasm.

By then the tub had filled and he put me in the almost too warm water. My ass still tingled and thinking about what just happened made lust soar in my veins again. My gosh, the man was in-fucking-credible.

He stepped into the water and pulled me back onto his lap. I lay against his chest with a sigh.

“Tired?”

“Not really. A bit sore though.”

“Good. You can count on being more so by the time we go to eat.”

“Crap, I forgot the reservations.”

“It can wait.”

“No, it can’t. Let me grab my phone.”

It was in my jeans pocket, so I only had to reach for them to get it. Then I phoned my favorite restaurant and asked for a reservation. We got one at seven, so I texted Stacey to let her know.

I leaned back on Gabriel, and he said, “Tell me about your family.”

“You already met the bossy brother and his lovely wife. And you met Landry when we went riding. You still need to meet Tristian who is Easton’s dad. That’s it, other than my dad, who died in a car accident, as I told you.”

“Your mother?”

“Yeah, she’s not in the picture. She was the worst mom ever but was better to me than she was to my brothers.” I didn’t want to say any more about it.

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. What about your family? You never mention them.”

A long sigh released from him. “My father and I don’t get along at all. He wanted me to take over the family business, but I was more interested in music and art. He pretty much disowned me so I left England and came here.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry too. That sucks. Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“One of each and they’ve always done whatever my father says. I haven’t spoken to them in a couple of years, and



haven't seen them in nearly five, so you can call me the black sheep of the family."

"Then you're all alone here?"

"I am now. My family used to consist of a wife and daughter, but..." his voice trailed off.

"Please discuss this with Stacey. If not for nothing, it's worth a shot. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Nothing but getting my hopes up again is something I don't want to deal with."

Made sense. I'd never been in this situation so who was I to give advice?

We both stood up and I noticed he didn't have a condom on. "Um, did you forget to wear a condom?"

"No, I took it off already."

"Damn, I must've had orgasm brain. I don't remember that."

We went to the bedroom after we dried off and I climbed in bed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Taking a nap." I figured that was in the plan.

"Nope. No napping. We can sleep anytime."

"Then what?"

"Let's go for a hike."

That sounded good. "Do you have shoes to wear?"

"Sure. I'll be fine. I didn't say I wanted to scale a mountain. Just a simple hike."

We had a lot of trails on the property. I had the perfect place to take him.

"Let's go, but I need to hit the kitchen so we have water."

I grabbed a day pack from my closet, and we traipsed downstairs. There was bottled water in the refrigerator, so I threw several into the pack. Then we went out the back door.

A paved drive led down to the garage, but behind that was a trail. Several others branched off of it and I knew the correct one to take.

We hiked up and down some hills and followed a small stream. It eventually brought us to a pond where there was a waterfall. It wasn't a grand one but it was pretty nevertheless.

"This is smashing," Gabriel said.

"I love it here. Let's get naked and swim."

It dawned on me that we spent as much time without clothes as we did with them. I giggled at the thought.

"What?"

I shared my thoughts, and he laughed as well. Then he added, "I like it this way. Clothes are overrated. They get in the way."

He was right and I knew where our swim was headed as I glanced at his cock. Since he was ready, why waste a perfectly good erection? I said as much when I found myself in his arms with him kissing me. We got into the cool water, and he pushed me toward the cascading falls. We swam under it, letting it wash over us.

"I used to come here as a kid and bring soap and shampoo to bathe."

"I don't blame you. This is the perfect spot for that. We should camp out here sometime," he suggested.

"Camp? Why would we do that when there's a perfectly good bed less than an hour's walk from here?"

"For the experience. You know, a campfire, a cozy tent, the stars."

"No thanks. I'm not a camper. I'd rather sleep in a bed. My idea of camping is spending the night on our sleeping porch."

"You're such a wimp."

"Yup. I love my comforts."

His raspy chuckle sent heat licking my skin. I gazed at him, enjoying the view. Sculpted muscles and a rock-hard body stared back at me. When I looked at him, it was difficult not to get aroused.

Before I could think, I blurted out, “You’re perfect. From top to bottom.”

“I am, huh?”

“Yes, and you have to know the effect you have on me.”

“The feeling’s mutual, baby.”

He picked me up like I weighed nothing. My legs straddled his shoulders while he licked me like I was his last meal. My back was against a rock wall, and I spread my fingers on it, trying to gain purchase. An orgasm exploded within me as I cried out.

He slid me down his body and impaled me on his sheath-covered cock. I never saw him roll on the condom. He must have an endless supply of them stored somewhere. Then he rocked his hips against mine until he came.

We floated in the water for a while, enjoying it, until we made the hike back home.

A stop in the kitchen for a little snack was in order. We rummaged through the pantry and found something to eat.

“I was really hungry,” I said.

“I was too. Glad we came back when we did. My stomach was growling like mad.”

As we stood together, a voice interrupted us.

“Where have you been? I’ve been searching all over for you.”

Stanton stood there, wearing an angry expression.

“We went for a hike, not that it’s any of your business,” I responded. He was such a prick today.

“I need to talk to you, Ravina.” He speared Gabriel with his eyes. “Alone.”

# Seventeen



GABRIEL

I HAD JUST ABOUT ENOUGH OF THIS ARROGANT BASTARD. TO be fair though, that was like the pot calling the kettle black. But I was compelled to speak up. “Mate, you don’t have to speak to her like that.”

His scowl was what I expected. His index finger aimed at me. “And *you* don’t tell me what to do. By the way, I’m not your mate.”

My hands went up in the air as I said, “Just trying to defend your sister. You don’t have to be such a prick.”

That didn’t help much. His eyes could’ve killed with the glare he shot me.

“Stanton, what’s up with you today?” Ravina asked.

“Nothing.”

“Fine. If you want to talk to me, talk. Anything you say to me you can say in front of Gabriel.”

The muscle in his jaw twitched as he stared at his sister.

“I don’t want you seeing him.” He gestured toward me with a flick of his head.

What the fuck? He wasn’t going to order her around, at least not in front of me. “Ravina is an adult and can make up her own mind about who she wants to see.”

She put a hand on my arm while Stanton huffed out a response. “Don’t interfere. This isn’t your business.”

“The bloody hell it’s not. You’re discussing me so I think it’s precisely my business.”

We all turned at the sound of Stacey’s voice. “Stanton, I told you to stay out of this.”

“You did, but...”

“No buts. Gabriel is right. Your sister is a grown woman and can decide for herself without any interference from you.”

Stanton scoffed. “He’s not good enough for her. A damn guitar player in a band.”

Ravina stepped forward. “That’s all you think he is? Look at the art Stacey bought. This man is super talented and it’s time you stepped back from your lofty opinions.”

Points for Ravina for not backing down, but I didn’t need anyone to fight my fights. “You know something? You’re exactly like my arse of a father. He thinks he knows it all too, but he knows nothing of me and neither do you.”

We had a stare down and I was looking into the eyes of a bull preparing to charge.

“Stanton,” Stacey’s voice held a tone of warning.

He finally retreated but said to Ravina on his way out of the kitchen, “If he hurts you, which he will, don’t come running home to us.”

Those words held a ring of truth, and I began to rethink my involvement with her.

“Don’t worry about him. He’ll settle down.”

“Maybe, but he’s got a point. I don’t want to hurt you but who’s to say I won’t?” Why did that fucker have to show up and ruin my mood?

“Who’s to say I won’t hurt you? We’ll never know if we don’t take a chance.”

“True, but you’re aware of my thoughts on having a relationship right now. It would complicate everything.”

“Fair enough, but that doesn’t mean we can’t hang out together.”

Like her brother, she also made some good points. The problem was, hanging out with her could get addictive. She’d proven to be the woman I hadn’t expected her to be. And the sex was like nothing I’d ever had. Her willingness to get down and dirty with a great shag was a plus. Could I do this and not get tangled up with her? “Right. But I’ll ask you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“If things feel like they’re getting complicated, tell me and I’ll do the same.” That was only fair.

“Sounds good to me. Now let’s get ready for dinner.”

“I only have jeans to wear, yeah? Will that be okay?” Since this was a spur-of-the-moment trip, I hadn’t brought anything else.

“It’s fine. I’m wearing jeans too and this is a tourist town, so anything goes.”

Surprisingly, our shower was just a shower. We even bathed separately. As she took her turn, my thoughts went back to Juliette. I wanted her in my life in the worst way. Maybe Ravina was right, and I should talk to Stacey. If the timing worked, I may bring it up tonight.

Ravina exited the bathroom, bundled in a robe and her hair a mass of wet curls hanging down her back.

“You could go like that,” I suggested. “On second thought, maybe not. I might be tempted to ravish you during dinner.”

She chortled. “Ravish me? I’m sure Stanton would love that.”

It would serve the bloody prick right.

She disappeared into her closet and came out wearing a pair of jeans that were practically painted on her. They molded

her arse perfectly, and I wanted to slap the hell out of it. Her blouse was plain white and silky. She was a vision.

“Are you wearing your hair like that?” I asked only because it was lovely.

“Gosh, no. I look like a wreck. I need to dry and straighten it.”

“Don’t. It’s exquisite the way it is.”

She wore a confused expression. “But I haven’t even combed it.”

I shrugged. “Who the fuck cares when it looks like that?”

“I have to at least untangle it.”

I snapped my fingers. “Come here.”

She eyed me warily but came to where I stood. Then I ran my fingers through her gorgeous tresses, loosening the tangles. “Now you’re perfect.”

“Hardly. If you want to see perfect, you need to meet my sister-in-law, English. She’s stunning.”

“And you don’t think you are?”

The answer was a lift of a shoulder. It amazed me how some women had no idea of how they appeared to others.

I took a quick shower and dressed in my jeans and T-shirt. “I’m sure your brother will have a brilliant opinion of my clothing.”

“No doubt. You ready?”

“I am. Do you want to ride with them?”

“No, I’d rather take the bike. Is that okay?”

“Fine with me. Let’s go.”

Ravina sent her sister-in-law a text and we left. The ride to town was beautiful and we both enjoyed the wind and scenery. We arrived at the restaurant about the same time Stacey and Stanton did. He eyed my clothing with a disdainful glare. This guy really needed to lighten up.

Ravina took my hand as we walked to our table. It offered a window-front view so we could people-watch. Stanton ordered a bottle of wine without asking us what we wanted. Strike one.

The waiter handed each of us a menu but before I even opened mine, Stanton ordered several appetizers. Strike two. The man treated all of us like we were children. Aggravation washed over me, but I held my tongue.

I stared at the menu, not really seeing what was in front of me. He was pushing all my buttons and I didn't know if it was on purpose, or because he was like that all the time. Nevertheless, this would be a long dinner.

Our wine came and when the glasses were filled, I took a long sip. I needed the calm that alcohol would provide.

I should've expected the comment, but it still took me off guard.

“Do you guzzle wine all the time? You know an expensive bottle like this should be savored.”

I took the proverbial gloves off and answered, “I never guzzle wine, but tonight it seems necessary. Your arrogant arse is the reason.”

Ravina squeezed my thigh, but it was too late. His complexion reddened as he glowered. “Had I known I was such unpleasant company, I would not have agreed to join you. My sister, however, invited us so...”

“Maybe you should start treating others as though they have a brain.”

“I do, when I see signs of one.”

The waiter returned, placing a platter of various appetizers on the table.

Everything looked delicious, but when I took a bite, it was tasteless.

The waiter came back to take our dinner order and I sat, waiting for Stanton to order for us. When he didn't, I mumbled, “Shocker.”



“What was that?” He asked.

“Nothing,” I sneered.

“Who wants to start?” The waiter asked.

Of course, that was when Stanton piped up. “We’ll all have the bone-in rib eyes, the spinach and baked potatoes.”

Was this guy for real? It sounded wonderful, but I wanted to order my own. I added when he stopped talking, “Scratch the ribeye for me. I want the branzino, mixed vegetables, along with mashed potatoes. Oh, and can you add a Caesar salad to that?”

“Of course, sir.”

Then Ravina said, “I’ll have the same, thanks.”

Stanton’s scowl deepened and if he didn’t stop that, those lines would become permanent.

The women made small talk as we ate and after dinner, our waiter came for dessert orders. I had no interest in it but once again, Stanton ordered a round of cheesecake for us all.

“None for me, thanks,” I said.

After the waiter left, Stanton asked, “You have something against cheesecake?”

“Not at all. It’s you ordering my food for me that I have something against.”

Stanton scoffed. “Fine. I was going to pick up the bill, but I’ll let you pay your half.”

“That’s fine by me. In fact, I’ll pay the whole thing.” I wanted to add you bloody wanker, but again, held my tongue.

“I’m surprised you can afford a place like this.”

We squabbled back and forth, and the women left to use the loo. They were probably sick of listening to us.

When they were gone, he leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. “I don’t like you and I really don’t like you dating my sister.”

“Too bad for you she feels differently.”

“I’m going to do everything in my power to split the two of you up.”

He’d gone too far. Ravina and I were not committed to each other, but he didn’t have to know that. It rankled that he thought he had control of everything. I rose to my feet and said, “Outside. Now.”

He followed behind me and when we got to the street, he took a swing at me. I ducked and threw an uppercut to his jaw. He stumbled back and massaged it. Then he came at me like a bear. We both gave as good as we received until finally, I said, “Truce?” This fight was going nowhere, and it was ridiculous of us to continue.

He dabbed at the corner of his mouth. “Sure. How about we get a drink somewhere?”

“What about our tab at the restaurant,” I asked.

“I’m sure Stacey or Ravina already handled it.”

We walked down the street and entered a sports bar. The bartender took our order after we sat. “I’ll have Oban, neat.”

Stanton’s brows rose. I guessed he didn’t take me for a scotch drinker. “I’ll have the same.”

Our drinks arrived and I downed mine. He followed and we ordered several more. Then he suggested we go home.

“I’m sure the girls have already left so that leaves us here. Can you drive?”

It had been several hours since we’d started. Given my body size and the amount of food I ate, I calculated I’d be okay. But I wasn’t okay with having someone on the back of the bike. Driving wouldn’t be a good decision, so I said, “Nope. Are there any taxis around?”

“Let’s ask.” He motioned for the bartender and asked.

“I’ll get one of our employees to drive you.”

A young boy came over who looked too young to have a driver’s license. “You two need a ride home?”

“Yeah,” Stanton said.

“Ride’s out back.”

We followed him to an old beat-up Camry. “Back seat, please.”

The two of us barely fit and the entire situation hit me. I began with a small laugh but soon it was exploding from me. Stanton stared at me like I’d gone mad.

“What?”

“Look at us two huge blokes, poured into this car. That’s what.” A hint of a grin appeared on his mouth and then he, too, was laughing. The poor kid driving waited for directions. When I could breathe again, I routed him to the house. He pulled up by the porch, right behind Stanton’s car. We both staggered out of the back seat and paid the kid a hefty sum.

“Come on, let’s drink some real scotch now.”

He went to the bar and opened a Craigellachie single malt that had been aged for thirty-three years. I knew the price tag on this, and it was quite a sum.

“You sure about this?”

“I never do anything I’m not sure of.”

We clinked the glasses and started to drink. “Bloody hell, this is tasty scotch.”

“Right?”

“I’ve had good scotch before, but this is brilliant.”

He nodded and then asked, “So you and my sister, huh?”

“Yeah. What can I say? She is one proper woman.”

“You’re going to hurt her.” It was so matter of fact, I gazed at him a second.

“Why do you say that?”

“She has rotten luck with men, which is why I try to protect her.”

“Is that why you were such a wanker to me?”

“Yup. It usually makes them run, but you, you gave it right back to me.”

“I won’t be bullied by anyone. It’s why I stood up to you. But don’t you think she can make up her own mind about who she sees?”

“Here’s the thing. Our mother sucked. She’s currently in prison for killing my father and trying to kill me too. She tried to poison Ravina against us, and it’s taken a while for all of us to deal with this. Pretty sure she hasn’t disclosed most of this.”

I was gobsmacked by this admission. “I had no idea, but I’m terribly sorry for all that.”

“Yeah, it was rough on all of us. We were raised by nannies because our father was gone so much. Our mother cared more for the money than us. It wasn’t a good upbringing so I’m trying to do my best to watch out for her.”

When taking all this into account, I understood why he was so protective of his sister. “All I know is I enjoy the hell out of being with her. She’s full of surprises and I love that about her. My family life was good until the day I told my father I didn’t want any part of the family business. He totally lost the plot and disowned me. That’s how I ended up here.”

“Ravina knows?”

“Yeah. I told her.”

“What kind of business.”

I took a deep breath and said, “My father owns half of the UK. He’s an earl and is in the paper-making industry. He also buys out companies that aren’t doing too well and turns them around for a tidy profit. He’s all about the money, mate.”

A rueful laugh came out of Stanton. “My father was like that, but actually changed before he died. He left his ruthless ways and became a true gentleman.”

“At least you had that part of him before he passed.”

“True, I consider myself lucky. Tristian never knew him like the rest of us did. That still saddens me.”

“Look, mate, I don’t ever want to hurt your sister. But I’ll be honest here. Sometimes it happens even when you have the best intentions.”

“So true. When was the last time you saw your family?”

“I left when I was eighteen. I saw them about six years ago after my daughter was born. My father still didn’t want any part of my artsy lifestyle then.”

“Truth be told, I have that same idea about you.”

“Do you want to see my financials?”

“No, I’m fine now. Your right hook and uppercuts convinced me.”

We drank long into the night, sharing stories of our boyhoods. By the time I crawled into bed, the sky was lightening with the rising sun. I’d have hell to pay when daylight came.

# *Eighteen*



RAVINA

GABRIEL AND STANTON'S BICKERING DROVE ME OUT OF MY seat and to the restroom, with Stacey on my heels. When we got to the Ladies' Room, I turned to her and said, "I can't deal with this."

"I'm sorry Stanton is being such an ass."

"And control freak, but Gabriel isn't acting much better. They both keep egging each other on."

Stacey sighed. "Those damn male egos. Let's just go home and leave them to themselves."

"Really?"

"Why not? If they want to act like that, they can do it without us."

"It would serve them right and maybe teach them both a lesson."

We left the restroom and went toward our table, but they weren't there. Then I glanced out the window and gaped. "Look at them." The two grown men were outside of the restaurant, clearly seen through the window, throwing punches at each other. I'm surprised the police hadn't shown up.

Stacey followed my glance and she groaned. "Should've known it would come to this."

I couldn't believe they were knocking each other around. How much more immature could one get? "Let's get out of here. There has to be a back door here."

The waiter led us through the kitchen and out we went. Stanton's car was parked about a block away, so we walked to it. When we got home, I ran upstairs to change into sweats. Stacey did the same, and then we opened another bottle of wine.

"Just so you know, I really like Gabriel. He's very nice."

"Yeah, when he's behaving. I'm going to kick his butt in the morning."

We waited up for them, but they never came home so we went to bed. Alone. Damn them.

In the morning, I rolled over and all I noticed were fumes. Gabriel smelled like he'd rolled around in a barrel of whiskey. He had a bruise on his left cheek and scrapes on his hands and arms. He and Stanton must've gotten into the liquor from the smell radiating off him. I slipped out of bed and went to the bathroom. Then I pulled on my sweats and T-shirt and padded downstairs for coffee. Stacey was already in the kitchen.

I wrinkled up my nose and asked, "Did Stanton smell?"

"Gah, yes. Like a bottle of whiskey. The entire room reeked."

"The same. I had to get out of there. It was disgusting." I almost gagged at the thought.

Stacey nodded. "I wonder how they got home."

"I don't care. I'm just glad I didn't have to drive them. The fumes alone would've gotten me drunk."

My sister-in-law grinned, but it was a devious one. "I have an idea. Let's wake them up and make them go hiking."

"They wouldn't go."

"Then we force it. We can manipulate them, making them feel like the jerks they are. And if they don't want to, we tell them we're leaving."

“Brilliant idea. Let’s eat first and then do it.” I thought about their reaction and couldn’t wait.

We made a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast and then went upstairs for our surprise attack.

I threw a pillow at Gabriel. “Hey, wake up.”

A long groan came out of him. “Urgh. So soon?”

“Soon? It’s getting late and Stacey and I want to go hiking.”

One bleary eye opened and stared. “Hiking? Today?” The words came out between a groan and a squeak.

“Yeah, today. We’re leaving later so we have to go now. Come on and get up.” I threw another pillow at him.

“My head hurts.” He sounded like a whiny kid. Then he shielded his eyes from the light that streamed into the room. I had opened the shades and it was downright bright in here. “Can you close those again?”

“No! Come on, Gabriel, get up.” I shook his body with my hands.

“I can’t just yet.”

“Then I guess Stacey and I will just go home if you want to wallow in bed all day.”

“I’m not wallowing. I’m hungover.”

“Humph. Should’ve thought about that before you got so drunk last night.”

I went to the closet and changed, then slammed the closet door.

“Hey, take it easy on the noise.”

“Last chance, Gabriel. Get your rear end out of bed.”

I pulled up a playlist on my phone, turned up the volume, and let it rip. Loud metal streamed and I set the phone next to his ear on the pillow. He bolted out of bed yelling, “Are you trying to kill me or something?”



Standing there with my arms crossed, I answered, “Or something. I’m trying to get your stinky butt out of bed.” I threw him his clothes and demanded he get dressed.

“Coffee. I need coffee.”

Jeez, the man was a pain when he was hungover. “If you’d get your butt downstairs, there’s an entire pot made.”

He slowly tugged on his jeans, then put on a T-shirt. He made tracks for the kitchen with me following, carrying his shoes.

Stanton was pouring a cup of brew, looking as gray as Gabriel. Stacey sat at the island with a grin on her face.

“Good morning, big brother.”

He answered me with a growl.

“Arrgh to you too. You sound like a pirate. Or like Gabriel. How much did you two drink anyway?”

Another growl came out as he mumbled his response, which I could not understand.

Gabriel poured himself a cup of coffee and stared at me.

I put water in my pack, along with a few protein bars. “Drink up, guys. We’re ready to go and it’s getting late.”

“Do we have to?” Gabriel asked with a grumble.

“Yes. And stop being such a pussy.”

He scowled, reminding me of my brother.

“By the way, how did you two get home last night?” I asked.

“Some kid drove us,” Stanton said. “I think I gave him five hundred bucks.”

“That’s cheaper than a DUI,” Stacey said.

“Let’s go. We can chat on the trail.”

Both men took their coffee along. With an eye roll from me, we set off. I headed toward the trail we were on yesterday. About ten minutes into the hike, Gabriel ran behind some

bushes and threw up. Stacey elbowed me as she pointed at her husband. He was white as a sheet. I figured he wasn't far behind Gabriel. Sure enough, a few minutes later, he was throwing up too.

"Good grief, you two are pitiful." I sent them both a challenging glare, which they ignored. It was unusual for my brother not to pick a fight so he truly must feel bad. Good because it was what they deserved.

"My stomach hurts," Gabriel moaned.

Stacey and I walked ahead of them, chuckling. "I told you they'd suck today," I said.

"They do. I didn't expect them to be this bad."

"Yeah, well, they'll feel better when they get in the pond."

We finally arrived and before they had a chance to sit, I said, "Take your clothes off and get in. You two stink to high heaven." Booze oozed out of their pores as they sweated up a storm, even though it wasn't that warm. The stench was awful.

"I need a nap," Stanton said.

"Fine. Take one after your swim," Stacey said. "You stunk up the entire room last night."

They both stumbled as they undressed. We turned around. Stacey didn't want to see naked Gabriel and I had no desire to see my brother without clothes either. When we heard the splash, we turned back around.

"Aren't you two getting in?" My brother asked.

"Nope. We don't smell like a whiskey barrel," Stacey said. We both took seats on a rock and giggled at them moaning and groaning.

"Guys, if you can't run with the big dogs, you should stay on the front porch." I threw out a bar of soap. It plunked into the water, but Gabriel snagged it. I watched him lather up and rinse off. He swam to the waterfall and stood under it. Stanton did the same and finally admitted it felt good.

"I guess this wasn't such a bad idea after all," he said.

“That hike served you both right. I can’t believe you got into a fistfight on the street directly in front of the restaurant. How embarrassing.” It still shocked me to think of it.

Stanton hung his head and for the first time ever, he acted remorseful. I didn’t know if it was shame or his hangover.

“You two looked like idiots out there,” Stacey added.

“Gigantic idiots.”

“We’re sorry,” Gabriel said. “We didn’t mean to act like that, but we did clear the air between us.”

“That’s nice, but it doesn’t matter to either of us. You both need to grow up and not act like teenagers,” Stacy told them.

“You’re right and I apologize,” Stanton said. “Can we get out and have a snack?”

“I guess,” I said. I chucked two towels at them that I’d stuffed into the pack. They dried off and put on their clothes. I handed them each a protein bar.

They sat on some rocks and chomped on their snack.

“Now I need a meal,” Gabriel said. “I’m feeling more like myself.”

“So am I. Can we go back?” Stanton asked.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. Both of them sounded like little boys asking permission to eat a cookie.

“What do you think, Stacey?”

“Hmm. Only if you promise no alcohol today.”

They both chimed, “We promise.”

Stacey and I figured they had endured their punishment and it was fine to go back to the house. When we got home, they were like two rats rummaging through the pantry. Before they were finished, they’d consumed two sandwiches apiece, an entire bag of potato chips, a block of cheese, a sleeve of crackers and some watermelon. Neither of them uttered a word as they ate. They also drank about a gallon of water between them. I’d never seen anything like it.

Stanton stood and stretched, saying, “I’m taking a nap.”

“Not before you clean up this mess,” Stacey said.

“And you two need to go and get Gabriel’s bike,” I said.

The two men picked up after themselves and then left to go back to town and retrieve the Harley. They weren’t gone long and when they returned, they disappeared upstairs to take naps.

“Looks like you two aren’t leaving anytime soon,” Stacey said.

“Eh, it’s fine. We can go tomorrow. But I think our plan worked out remarkably well.”

“So do I.”

We high-fived and then turned on a movie. When it ended, the guys still hadn’t shown up.

“Want to go into town and grab a bite?” I asked.

“I need to change first.”

We went up to do that, and I heard snoring all the way down the hall. “Jeez, they sound like buzz saws.”

“That hike really wore them out. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I threw on my clothes and put a little makeup on. Gabriel never moved while I was in there. So much for a fun day with him.

Our favorite sandwich shop was situated in the middle of town so after we ate, we did a little shopping. Since we weren’t in the mood to go out to dinner, a grocery store stop was in order to pick up some steaks. When we arrived back at the house, the guys were in the living room watching TV.

“Look who’s awake!”

They turned to look at Stacey but were still bleary eyed.

“Damn, you two still look bad,” I said, adding my two cents.

“If you hadn’t made us go on that hike this morning, we’d be feeling better,” Stanton growled.

“You sure about that, big guy?” Stacey sat next to her husband and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Who knows. We overimbibed.” His expression turned sullen.

“Is that what you’d call it? You were worse than two drunken sailors, brawling in the street. Which, by the way, we’re having steaks for dinner. We’re cooking,” I said.

Gabriel asked, “We’re not going home?”

“No way am I getting on that bike with you today.”

“Fair enough. I was absolutely wrecked last night and still am knackered. We went to bed too late.”

“All I can say is I hope last night is never repeated.” I gave Gabriel a cold stare.

“It won’t be. I usually don’t drink that much. I hope you believe me.” He was so serious, he had to be telling the truth.

Since he seemed sincere, there was nothing else to say. Stacey could deal with Stanton in her own way. I had never seen my brother act like that before so hopefully, this was a one-off.

That night, in our room, Gabriel apologized again.

“I’m really sorry about last night, yeah? I, uh, don’t normally do that. Stanton and I mended our ways, but I hope in doing that, I haven’t ruined our friendship.”

Friendship, huh? For someone who just wanted me as a friend, I wondered why he fought my brother last night. “I wouldn’t go that far, but it was troubling to see you two like that. Honestly, I’m glad you felt like crap today. You deserved it.”

“I did. It won’t happen again.”

I hoped not or we wouldn’t be *friends with benefits* anymore.

# Nineteen



GABRIEL

STANTON AND I MENDED OUR DIFFERENCES OVER TOO MUCH liquor and got sloshed. Whilst at the time, it seemed like a good idea, now I regretted it. I'd acted like an arse in front of the women, which was not good. And then we tried to knock each other's bollocks off. Why did we act so bloody stupid?

I promised Ravina it wouldn't happen again, but I really didn't need to make that promise. Drinking was fine, but not that way. Thinking back, I couldn't remember the last time I had that much scotch. Maybe never and never again.

"Your brother and I are now friends. At least we got that much from it." Turned out that Stanton wasn't such a wanker after all.

Her brilliant eyes pierced me with a sour stare, and I shriveled. No woman ever made me do that, but Ravina had a way about her.

"Please don't be angry. We didn't do it with bad intentions. It was that one drink led to another as we hashed out our differences. When we came home, we were already ruined so we didn't use good sense."

One of her brows rose as her head oscillated. She blew out a breath and said, "I don't know what to say. I've never seen anyone so smashed, and you even threw up. That behavior should've been reserved for your teenage years."

She was right and I had no argument. “I agree and it won’t happen again.”

“Better not.” I flinched at her warning.

“I’m going to brush my teeth.”

“Good idea as I still can detect whisky on your breath.”

That was bad. I scrubbed my teeth so hard, I wondered if I scraped the enamel off. Then I gargled with mouthwash before leaving the bathroom. Ravina had already changed into her pajamas and went into the bathroom after me. She emerged with a scrubbed face devoid of makeup.

“You should look like this more often. You have beautiful skin. No need for makeup.”

“Thanks, but are you trying to butter me up to get back into my good graces?”

I was sincere when I said it. “No. I truly mean it.”

She dipped her head once and climbed between the sheets.

I reached over to touch her, and she slapped my hand away. So much for sex tonight.

“We can have make-up sex later. Right now, I need sleep as I didn’t get much last night.”

Guilt stung me. My snoring must’ve kept her awake. It even woke me up a couple of times. “I’m sorry. I usually don’t snore.”

“I know.”

I lay still, listening to her breathing until it became soft. She was asleep. No sense in worrying about anything tonight. We’d chat in the morning.

I awoke to booming thunder and lightning snapping. The shades were up, and rain spattered the windows. Only it turned into a drenching downpour.

Ravina stretched and sat up. “Is it storming?”

“Yeah, go back to sleep. We won’t be going anywhere for a while.”

“Didn’t think about that. Guess we’ll have to wait out the storm.”

It wasn’t a storm; it was a couple of days’ worth of them. We were trapped here until the weather broke unless we wanted to ride home with Stanton and Stacey. They were staying until midweek.

“I hadn’t planned to be away this long.” I had work that needed finishing.

“Same here. We’ll just have to wait and see about the weather.”

Ravina hopped out of bed and threw on some yoga pants and a shirt. Then she disappeared into the bathroom and came out with a grin. It seemed her anger had dissipated. “I’m going down to start breakfast.”

“Sounds brilliant. I’ll be down in a minute to help.” I was hoping for some between-the-sheets action, but she had other things in mind. I needed to get down there fast before she burned up the eggs and toast.

The aroma of coffee hit my nostrils as I descended the stairs. My mouth watered so I quickened my steps.

“There you are. Here.” Ravina handed me a huge mug of the brew.

“Mmm. Thanks.” It was delicious. I enjoyed how Americans drank their coffee... in gigantic mugs. What I didn’t like was how the coffee shops had all those weird concoctions with whipped cream and sprinkles. That took the taste of coffee away so I couldn’t quite comprehend why they liked them so much.

Ravina stood in front of the huge stove with a bowl next to it. “I’m making pancakes, bacon, and eggs.”

“Wow. That’s fantastic. Let me help.”

She popped a tray loaded with bacon strips into the oven. Then she made the pancake batter. Her hands worked like crazy, only she didn’t appear to be making progress.

“Um, do you know what you’re doing over there?”



A tinkle of a laugh came out of her. “Not really. You know I don’t cook. Stacey is the cook.”

I moved to help her. “I think you need to add pancake mix to that.”

“Yeah, I found some and measured it out into that bowl.”

I peered into it and there was only a small amount. “Are you cooking for two or four?”

“Four.”

“You’ll need more than that. Where’s the box?”

“Pantry.”

I saw it right in front, so I grabbed it. “See? It says for four servings right here.”

She zeroed in on it and then laughed. “I was making four pancakes.”

“That would be fine if we wanted small ones for appetizers.” One tiny pancake would not do for me today.

Somehow, I was the one who ended up cooking breakfast. I figured it would come to this. She had no idea on how to put it all together. I was surprised she’d actually gotten the bacon in the oven. The kitchen filled with the scent of it when I opened the oven door to check on it. It was coming along nicely. I’d lived here long enough to know that Americans liked their bacon crispy, but I checked with her anyway. I was right on that.

Since the bacon was close to finishing, I started on the pancakes. They didn’t take long, and Ravina covered the stacked plate with foil. Then I scrambled the eggs and poured them on the griddle. When I was scooping them off, the other couple made an appearance.

Ravina had taken the bacon out and it was on paper towels, draining.

“Wow! This looks and smells yummy,” Stacey said.

“It’s ready if you want to fix your plate,” I said.

Ravina had placed butter, syrup, salt, and pepper on the island counter. Everyone filled their plates, and we ate. It was perfect in every way.

“Looks like you two won’t be leaving anytime soon,” Stanton remarked.

“Right, and it’s supposed to storm all day,” Ravina answered.

“You might be stuck with us for an extra day or two. The forecast isn’t very good for bike riding, I’m afraid.” I’d never take a chance in this weather.

“It’s fine. We’re leaving on Wednesday so if the weather is still rough, you can ride with us.”

“We may take you up on that,” I said. “I won’t take any chances of riding in bad weather.” Riding in rain was not my thing and I would never put Ravina in danger.

# *Twenty*



## RAVINA

OUR MOUNTAIN TRIP EXTENDED TO THREE DAYS. GABRIEL hadn't seen the art galleries here, so we all took off for town one day. It was misting rain and foggy. The drive down the mountain was precarious as the visibility was like pea soup. We took the curves slowly as Stanton white-knuckled the steering wheel. I had told Gabriel about his accident where our father had been killed and that now he was an especially careful driver. Still, Gabriel squeezed my hand as we inched along.

We made it safely to town, but the weather was still nasty. While it was only misting at home, rain pelted us as we ran to one of the galleries.

The owner, James, greeted Stanton and me by name and said, "It's so nice to see you two again. It's been a while."

I introduced him to Gabriel as Stacey and Stanton perused the artwork.

Gabriel asked pointed questions and then pulled out his phone, showing James his gallery of paintings.

"These would do extremely well here. Most of our work is not abstract so you would be our first."

"I could bring several paintings up and if they do well, I can add more."

They made the deal and we left. Gabriel was very happy about their transaction. “This could open up a new avenue for me,” he said.

“Yes, and I think you’ll sell like crazy here. So many people come up here during the summer months, and fall is extremely busy with the changing of the leaves.”

“I need to get home then and get some work done.”

If the weather would cooperate, we’d leave. This motorcycle thing wasn’t exactly a great idea. We should’ve checked the weather first, but then again, we hadn’t planned on staying.

Two days later, we had a break and the sun actually showed itself. I leaped out of bed with joy. Rain was a necessity, but I loved the sunshine more. It breathed life into me.

“Wake up, lazy. Let’s eat and go!”

“Can you not be so excited this early?” Mr. Grumpy was back.

“Hey, you’ve wanted to leave more than me so I’m conveying some excitement to you.”

“True, but I didn’t want to get up at the crack of dawn.”

“It’s after seven, you big goof.”

With that, I ran to the bathroom to shower and get ready. When I emerged, he was still in bed. “Are you ever going to get up?”

“I was waiting for you to get done so I could shower.”

“I’m going to dress, then go down to get the coffee on and pull out some breakfast things.”

He stood up and I was in awe. I loved Gabriel’s physique. Hard planes of sculpted steel had me close to drooling. He reminded me of a tiger as he stalked to the bathroom. My eyes were pasted to his ass. It was so scrumptious, I wanted to bite it. What the hell was I thinking? Bite his ass? I gave myself a good shake and went downstairs.

Stacey had beat me to the coffee maker.

“Ahh, you’re the best.” I poured a cup and then went in search of food. My arms were full of breakfast items as I came out of the pantry. “We’re leaving after breakfast.”

“Figured as much, which was why I put the coffee on. Stanton is in the shower.”

“Gabriel too.”

She sidled toward me and said, “You two seem to be hitting it off nicely.”

“I think so. He took my admonition of his drunken behavior well. No pushback at all and extended his apologies. That made me feel better. I don’t want to hang out with an alcoholic.”

“Pretty sure he isn’t that and they were both egged on by each other. I’m glad they made up though. Makes it easier on us.”

“Right you are.”

Gabriel made his appearance before Stanton. He poured his own coffee and checked out the food I’d set on the counter. Then he opened the box of donuts and took one out. He had the thing devoured by the time Stanton showed his face and was eating another.

“Morning, everyone,” my brother said. “You two heading out?”

“Yeah, we finally got our weather break.”

He nodded as he sipped his coffee. “Well, I have to say I enjoyed having you two around.”

“Thanks, big guy.” I nudged him with my elbow.

I chomped on a protein bar as I watched Gabriel grab his fourth donut. “Like donuts, huh?”

“Mmm, yeah. My greatest weakness, so you know for the future.”

The future, huh? I smiled at that idea. Warmth filled my belly to know he was thinking ahead.

We finished eating and went out to leave, but the bike seats were wet. I ran inside and grabbed some towels to wipe them dry. Better not to have wet butts while riding.

After we said our farewells, we took off down the mountain and made our way to the highway. The roads were still damp from the long rains we'd had so Gabriel took it easy on the drive.

We had just crossed the state line and I was snuggled against his back when a car sped up behind us. He tailed us so closely, I was afraid he would run us off the road. Gabriel pulled to the side, and the car went around us to pass, but in the process, clipped the back of the bike. The rear wheel slid out and we went skidding across the road, landing in the brush on the side.

My head bounced on the pavement, causing stars to circle in my vision. My left leg burned in pain as I tried to sit up. Scrambled thoughts had me thinking all sorts of scenarios, until I came back to reality and comprehension over what happened hit.

The first thing I heard was Gabriel moaning. I sat up and succeeded, but my vision went blurry. Several blinks later, I called out his name.

“Gabriel? Are you okay?”

“Not sure. My head hurts and I can't move my right leg.”

The bike rested on it which was why. I reached into my pocket for my phone, but the crash had crushed it to pieces. The car that caused this was nowhere to be seen, so he obviously took off.

“Can you get to your phone?” I crawled over to him, ignoring the pain in my leg.

“Here,” he handed it to me. Luckily, his was in one of those protective cases so it was still intact. I stood up and swayed, my head still swimming. Forcing my way through it, I pushed on as that bike needed to be raised off his leg. It took

all my might to do it, but I succeeded. His leg didn't look bad, but his jeans covered it so I couldn't get a good look.

He'd unlocked his phone for me and then I hit 911. The operator took my information and said help was coming. She wanted me to stay on the line with her, so I did as I sat with Gabriel. Blood stained his jeans now, so I knew his leg had been cut open.

“Can you move your leg?”

He sat up, looking around. “I think so, but it hurts like a mother.”

“Then stay put. Don't want to damage it any further.”

“That bloody driver nearly killed us.”

“I know, but we can't do anything about it now.”

He dropped back to the ground, stretched out, holding his head. He'd taken his helmet off, but I still wore mine. I unbuckled it and took it off then.

We sat on the roadside and in the distance, I heard sirens. It seemed as though it took them forever, but they finally arrived, with the EMTs running to us.

“Him first.” I pointed to Gabriel.

“Ma'am, you're bleeding. I want to check you and my partner can check your friend.”

I was bleeding? I hadn't noticed. The paramedic placed a gauze pad on my forehead, pressing it.

“You have a pretty good slice here that will need stitching. Your leg is injured as well.”

Gabriel let out a shout, “Fuuck!”

“Sorry, man, but I need to have a look at that leg.” He cut his jeans away to reveal a horrific wound. I turned away, gagging. Blood and innards had never been my thing.

“We need to get you to the hospital.” After they loaded us into the vehicle, I asked about the bike.

“A tow truck is on the way and will take it into town.”

Nausea struck as we rode to the hospital, and I thought I'd lose it. I made it without hurling, but it was close. Both gurneys were pulled off the ambulance and we were wheeled inside. Gabriel went to one bay and me to another. A nurse came in and asked a ton of questions.

"How's Gabriel?" I was worried about his leg.

"Once the doctor gets you sewn up you can go see for yourself."

That sounded good. A doctor came in and injected the area on my forehead and leg with the numbing stuff. Then he cleaned the wounds after I couldn't feel anything and proceeded to sew me up.

As he covered the wounds with bandages, he explained the after care and how I would need to get the stitches out later. I'd been lucky as both lacerations weren't serious. Considering the spill we'd taken, it was damn near miraculous.

When he finished, he helped me sit up. I felt fine, except my body was aching.

"Do you have other injuries?" he asked, after he heard me groan.

"No, I'm just bruised."

"Let me have a look."

I lifted my shirt and he examined me. "You're going to have some decent bruises."

"That's what I figured."

He asked about my back and neck, which weren't bothering me. Then he had me stand to check out my legs.

"I want to get an X-ray of your neck and spine, just to be cautious. In my opinion, you're fine, but I'd rather be safe than sorry," he declared. "Take ibuprofen for the soreness and it should pass in a week or so. If not, see your doctor."

I put my pants back on, which only had one leg since the EMT's had cut the other one off to see my wounds. I looked



ridiculous but had no choice. Before I got to see Gabriel, they took me to X-ray.

When I finished there, I left to find him. He had been next to me the whole time. I walked in to see the long, ugly gash on his leg again.

“How are you?” I asked.

“The X-ray came back, and it’s not broken, thank God. Now they have to sew it together somehow.”

I grimaced at the awful wound. “It looks painful.”

“It was, but they gave me something.” His lopsided grin clued me in to how he was feeling.

“Good. I hate for anyone to be in pain, especially you.”

As we were talking, a team of doctors and nurses entered the room.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Johansen and I’m a plastic surgeon. This is Dr. Faulkner, and he’s a trauma surgeon. The two of us are going to fix this.”

“Who are they?” Gabriel asked, pointing to three other people huddled together.

“Sorry, they’re medical students and are going to observe. Is that okay?” Dr. Johansen asked.

“Fine with me.”

They asked me to step out and I did. I had no desire to watch that. The idea made me shudder.

As I waited for the doctors to come out of the room, the one who’d sewn me up came and told me my X-ray looked fine. Then I decided it was time to call Stanton.

He answered after one ring. “Hey, I wanted to let you know we were in a crash. It was a hit-and-run.”

His voice exploded, and he went on a rampage about how unsafe motorcycles were. I tried several times to interrupt, but he kept lecturing me, so I ended the call. Then I called Stacey.

She laughed when she answered. “Sorry, but he’s still ranting. I don’t think he even knows you hung up.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Anyway, we’re both okay. I needed stitches on two cuts—one on my leg and the other on my forehead. Gabriel’s a bit worse off than me, but nothing serious. He’s getting his leg sewn up now. We were lucky though. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“Jeez, Ravina, that’s awful. What can we do?”

“Stacey, I hate to even ask. We need a ride home. Gabriel’s bike is messed up, but even if it weren’t, neither of us could ride.”

“We’ll pack up and be on our way.”

“Is my brother still yelling?”

A giggle hit my ear. “Yes. He’s cracking me up. He has no idea you’re not on the phone.”

“Good grief. Maybe I should call him back?”

“No, let me have my moment here. Where are you, by the way?”

I gave her the name of the hospital and town we were in.

“It may take us a couple of hours, but we’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“You’re the best! Thank you.”

Gabriel’s doctors finally emerged.

“Is he okay?”

“Mr. Knight said I could update you, so yes. We patched him up, and in a few weeks he’ll be good as new. I want him off the leg for a couple of days, so he doesn’t tear any of the sutures. It was complicated, but we managed to put him back together. The only thing he’ll need to do is have someone remove the sutures after ten days to two weeks.”

“Thank you. Can I see him?”

“Sure.”

I entered to see a smiling Gabriel. His eyes were glassy and half-closed as he grinned.

“Well? How are you?”

“I’m great! We can leave now.” He went to get out of bed.

“Whoa, buster, slow it down. You can’t get up yet. Besides, you need crutches, and we haven’t been released yet.”

“Do you think you can drive my girl?”

“Um, that’s a negative. Your girl is getting repaired, so we need to check on her. Stanton and Stacey are coming to take us home.”

“Really? Do you think your brother can bring some of that good scotch we had the other night?”

“I do not. You don’t need any. You’re high as a kite as it is.”

“I am?”

“Yeah, you are.” I chuckled to myself.

A nurse entered and told Gabriel he could get dressed.

“He’s still a bit off his rocker.” I didn’t want him to fall.

“We can help him if you’d like,” she said.

I held up his pants and one of the legs had been cut off too.

“What happened to my pants?” Gabriel asked.

“They cut them off to see how badly you were hurt. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m going to look funny wearing those.”

“Look at me. I’m in the same situation.”

“Yeah, but you’re cute. I like those on you. They look sexy as fuck with your gorgeous arse.”

The nurse glanced at me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Let’s get you dressed, big guy.”

His lower lip stuck out. “Big guy. I thought you called your brother that.”

“I do, but you’re big too, so I’m calling you the same.”

His head moved back and forth as he pouted. “I want my own nickname.”

“Okay, what would you like me to call you?”

His expression went crooked again as he grinned back at me. “I want you to call me Big Bruiser.”

A snort of laughter exploded out of me. “Big Bruiser? How’d you come up with that?”

He aimed his thumb at his crotch. Good lord, the man was bold. I couldn’t deny the size of his appendage, but in his drug-induced stupor, he seemed mighty proud of it. The nurse choked on a laugh. He was talking out of his head.

“Okey dokey, Big Bruiser.”

We assisted him in getting out of bed, helped him put on his pants, and then shirt. He plopped back down afterward and we waited until they came in with his crutches and our discharge papers.

It took well over an hour for them to do all this, along with giving Gabriel his wound instructions. They also sent us home with papers explaining everything.

We took seats in the waiting area and a tad later, Stanton stormed in with Stacey trailing behind.

“Are you two okay?” His voice boomed throughout the room.

“Yes, and we’re ready to go.” I helped Gabriel stand and we followed them back to the car. “Use your crutches. Remember, you can’t put any weight on that leg,” I reminded him.

“Righto, matey.”

Good lord, the man was still loopy. I helped him navigate his way to the car, which was parked right out front. We got him in the back and then the rest of us loaded up.

As soon as Stanton opened his mouth, I knew it wasn’t going to be good. “Motorcycles are dangerous and a life

hazard. You won't be getting on one again."

"Don't tell me what to do. It wasn't our fault. It was the car who was speeding behind us and clipped us as he passed."

"So, you agree with me then. They pose a serious threat to human life."

"Okay, I'm going to say this once and then we won't talk about it again. It wasn't the motorcycle. It was the careless driver behind us. End of story, Stanton."

His reflection in the rearview mirror glared fire at me. As he opened his mouth to say something, I said, "Enough. No more talk of this. If you say another word, you'll get no response from me."

His lips clamped together in a thin line. I added, "And stop staring at me. Keep your eyes on the road."

That seemed to work. He was a very cautious driver since the car wreck that killed my father.

Then Stacey asked, "Would you like to stop anywhere on the way? Maybe get something to eat?"

While that was kind of her, the only thing I was interested in was going home so I told her. Gabriel still wore his silly grin, so I figured he was fine. I reached for his hand.

It was about an hour's drive to our condos. Stanton was quiet but I'm sure he was mulling over the safety statistics of riding a motorcycle, which, I'm sure he'd say were dismally low.

"Other than this, I enjoyed our time in the mountains with you both," Stacey chirped. I knew she was trying to distract that brother of mine.

I agreed with her. "It was great, especially the hike we took with the guys." I heard her snort, while Stanton cast me another glare. I only winked back, to irritate him further.

We finally made it home and I was ready to get out of the car. Stanton opened his door, but I stopped him.

"We can take it from here."

Then he asked, “You sure you don’t need help?”

“Thanks, but no. We got it. But thank you for picking us up. I’m sure sorry we forced you to end your little vacation.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just happy you two are okay.”

We bid them a friendly goodbye and rode the elevator up. Then I walked Gabriel to his door. “Will you stay here tonight?” he asked. I understood his concern and not wanting to be alone.

“Sure. Let me go and change first. Sit right here and I’ll be back in a skinny minute.”

I broke records in the time it took for me to return. But when I entered his condo, he was no longer sitting on the couch. I found him passed out in his bed. Since I could use a nap myself, I crawled in next to him and was soon asleep.

# *Twenty-One*



GABRIEL

MY HEAD THROBBED WHEN I WOKE UP. WHERE WAS I? THEN I recognized the shades in my bedroom. Next, I noticed Ravina was asleep next to me. When did we come home? I dug into my memory bank, and it all flooded back. The accident. The hospital. The ride home. My body felt as though I'd gone ten rounds in a boxing match. Not good at all.

Crutches leaned against the nightstand, so I grabbed them and worked my way to the bathroom. After relieving my full bladder, I hunted for some ibuprofen. Downing three tablets along with a glass of water raised my hopes of feeling better.

The darkened room beckoned, but if I went back to sleep, I'd be staring at the ceiling tonight. I had to figure out a way to paint these next few days to meet my obligations. With one arm, I dragged a stool in front of my easel and then did the same for my palette. After mixing the correct hues, I worked on the canvas. I'd made decent progress, considering, when Ravina came in.

"That looks amazing." She eyed the painting with greedy eyes.

"Don't even get any ideas. This one's been commissioned by someone. It's not up for grabs."

"Figures. I came in here to check if you need anything. How are you feeling?"

“Sore and you?”

“The same. It’ll pass and it’s not too bad really, Big Bruiser.”

“Big Bruiser?” I eyed her with curiosity.

“Don’t you remember?”

My gaze narrowed as I shook my head.

“You wanted your own nickname after I called you big guy. Big Bruiser was your suggestion.”

“I must’ve been out of it.”

“You were and it was rather funny. You pointed to your crotch when I asked about your choice of names. The nurse was with us.”

Jesus. I’m surprised the woman still wanted anything to do with me. “I must’ve gone soft in the head. I can’t believe I did that.”

“Um hmm. You were quite proud of yourself too.” Her brows waggled.

I set the brush down and said, “Thank you for taking care of me.” She’d handled everything and I was very grateful.

“You’re welcome, but I didn’t do very much.”

“You did and I appreciate it.

“Hey, are you hungry by any chance because I’m starving?”

“I hadn’t thought about it but yeah, I’m fairly peckish. Let’s order something,” I suggested.

We chose Asian food and got a mixture of Thai and Chinese. When it arrived, we sat and gobbled it up. Even Ravina ate a fair amount.

“I was really hungry.” She rubbed her belly.

“Same here, and now I’m stuffed. It made sense though, since we hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.”



She cleaned everything up afterward and asked if I needed anything.

“Can you check to see if the brushes are clean? I rinsed them off, but they could use a thorough cleaning.” I explained how to do it.

When she came back, she announced the task was completed and the brushes were on the counter.

“Do you ever paint with oils?”

“Nah, I hate using them. They’re a pain in the arse because they take a long time to dry. You also have to take care when you’re layering colors. Acrylics are much easier.”

She bit her lip as she stared at me.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“You really should talk with Stacey. I told her some things about your situation, not a whole lot mind you, but she said she’d have to talk with you to get more details. Your ex shouldn’t have been allowed to leave the state without your permission if you’d had a proper custody agreement.”

I sighed. “That’s the thing. She left before our divorce was final.” Stacey did seem bright and wasn’t greedy as it wasn’t necessary. Her husband was loaded so she probably didn’t even have to work. My brain wanted to explode every time I thought about this. It got my knickers in a twist though, that Ravina had been talking about me.

As if my mind was being read, Ravina’s phone buzzed, and it was her sister-in-law calling to check on us.

“We’re good. Just finished dinner.” Ravina looked at me askance and I shook my head. I didn’t want to discuss this yet.

She disregarded me and said, “Anyway, Gabriel wants to speak with you.”

My eyes rounded. I couldn’t believe my ears. She handed me her phone and I had no choice but to talk. “First off, it was great spending time with you and Stanton. I’m also happy that the two of us worked things out.”

“Same here. It makes it a lot easier to spend time with my favorite sister-in-law.”

“A lot easier, I’d say. Ravina wants me to speak to you about my custody battle. I’m more than a bit reluctant though.”

“Gabriel, we can talk, and you can brief me on what’s going on. I can’t make any promises, but I’d work hard to help you. I’ll be back in the office on Monday if you want to come in.”

“Okay, but I also can’t promise I’ll move forward. What time?”

“How about ten?”

By then, I’d be off the crutches so I could even drive myself. “Sure, that will be great.”

“Great! I’ll see you then.”

We ended the call and Ravina clapped. “I’m so happy you’re doing this.”

I released a harsh breath as annoyance bloomed inside me. My tone hardened as I said, “Listen, I know you’re trying to help. But please stop, Ravina. I’m handling things and doing my best here. You’re meddling in things you shouldn’t be.”

Her grin morphed into a frown. Her fingers pressed against her throat as her posture wilted. I didn’t want to hurt her, but this was getting to be too much.

Then her posture straightened, and her eyes sparked. “I apologize for wanting to help,” she snapped. “You have a crappy attorney who’s not doing much for you.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because if you had Stacey helping, things would be further along than they are.”

She may have a point, but I was still pissed. “You may be right, but with all due respect, I’d ask you to stay out of my business.” I’d spoken harsher than I’d intended. She flinched

at my tone, but then her shoulders squared. It appeared she was getting ready for battle.

“Wanna know something? I think you like feeling sorry for yourself. You go on and on but don’t work toward getting Juliette back. All I hear is how you miss her. Stop complaining and do something.”

Anger seared through me. She had no right to say those things. “You have no idea what I’ve been through with this. For you to say that is unconscionable. I don’t want to hear another word from you about this.”

She scoffed and said, “You’re worse than Stanton.” Then she stomped out, slamming the door behind her. So much for a great ending to our shitbag of a day.

The following morning, I woke and showered. Then I got to work. I’d accomplished a lot by the end of the day, which was satisfying.

Ravina wasn’t around that weekend. She was busy entertaining her niece, Easton. Even though I missed seeing her, the extra time gave me what I needed to focus on my work. It was for the best though, considering how we ended things the other night.

On Sunday evening, I was surprised when she stopped by. When the knock on my door came, her face wasn’t who I expected.

“Hey,” I said. We stood and stared at each other for a moment.

She took a deep breath and said, “I don’t want to fight.”

“Neither do I.”

“I was trying to help.”

“While that’s true, I want you to stop badgering me. I must make my own decisions regarding this.”

A line etched between her brows. “I don’t understand why you don’t want me to help.”

“I’ve told you. It’s because this is a very emotional topic for me and I’m doing everything I know how to get Juliette back. When you keep needling me, it makes me feel like I’m a shitty father.”

She took a step back as her eyes grew wide. “I never meant for you—”

I held up my hand. “I know but I still feel that way. I have to handle things the best way I know how.”

Finally, she slowly nodded. “Are you still going to see Stacey tomorrow?”

“Yes, and I’m eager to talk to her. She texted me earlier today and reconfirmed.”

“Okay. I was out there yesterday as I took Easton riding. She loves the horses, but she wants some more riding pants, like the ones I wear. I need to take her shopping to buy more.”

“Her parents don’t do it?”

“No, I love taking her shopping, so I won’t let them. It’s one of our things we do together.”

Ravina adored her niece, and I loved that about her. She was generous to a fault.

“You’re moving around so much better. I can’t even tell that your leg is injured.”

“Right? It’s so much better and it’s healing up so well. The stitches are beginning to itch though. I’m happy to be rid of the crutches. Before I forget, can I follow you to work tomorrow?”

“Better yet, I’ll drive you and you can just Uber home.”

That was a sound idea. She told me she’d grab me on her way out.

“Now that we have that settled, how about grabbing something to eat?”

I had just finished dinner before she knocked so I told her.

We talked a little more but then she left as she was tired from her long weekend.

Around nine thirty the following morning, she knocked and off we went. Stacey's office was in the Baines Corporation building, which was also where Ravina worked. We drove into the private lot and then went inside.

The security guards greeted Ravina as we headed to the elevator. Her office, along with Stacey's, was on the executive level.

"Fancy," I commented.

"Out here it appears so, but up there, we have normal offices."

She was right. Once off the elevator, we passed the reception area, which was very posh, but then entered the section where offices were. Stanton's was in one corner with Stacey's next to his. Her door was open so we stuck our heads in. When she saw us, she waved us in.

"I'm going to leave you two. When you finish, just holler at me." With that, Ravina disappeared and closed the door behind her.

Stacey reviewed everything and asked me tons of questions about my marriage, Juliette, and the private investigator.

"Can you send me everything he's given to you?" she asked.

"I can do better than that. It's all in the cloud so I can get it for you now, if I can use your computer."

She pulled out a laptop from her bag, logged on, and handed it over. I got into my account and downloaded everything. Then I pushed the computer back to her.

It took some time to go over the pictures. "Who is this? The man she's with?"

"I don't know. I can't get a close enough view."

She muttered something I didn't quite get.

“What’s that?”

“He should’ve gotten you better close-ups. Fire him today and I’ll get you someone better. In the meantime, let me see if I can doctor this photo so you can possibly identify the man.”

She seemed to be very meticulous and after a few minutes, she came over and took a seat beside me. “Here, how about this?”

I looked at the man and my blood turned to ice. “Bloody hell, that’s my brother.”

## *Twenty-Two*



GABRIEL

ICE, THEN FIRE ROARED THROUGH MY VEINS. HOW WAS THIS possible? My brother lived in England. They'd only met each other a couple of times of which I was aware.

“Hmm, that’s not good. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re not close... anymore, that is. We used to be when we were young. My father disowned me because I didn’t want any part of the family business. He didn’t approve of my artwork and musical skills. That’s how I ended up here and our relationship grew distant.”

“Well, I’m still sorry. Tristian, Stanton’s brother was in the same predicament with their father.”

“That’s what Ravina told me.”

My mind was spinning with how and when my brother moved into my ex’s life. Stacey asked me something, but I was so focused on my traitor of a brother, I didn’t respond.

“Gabriel?”

“Um, yeah, sorry. I was trying to piece this puzzle together, but now I understand why she doesn’t want my money. The woman doesn’t need it. I just don’t understand the betrayal though.”

“Right now, we need to focus on things. Please don’t contact your brother because then the surprise attack from us

won't work. Since they're in Texas, I'm going to see about suing for alienation of affection. We'll also sue for total custody since she moved out of state without your consent. Judges don't like that. If we get the judge I favor, it won't matter that she's the mother. Judge Marisa Fallon is brutal when things like this happen."

That was indeed good news. "My other attorney... "

"I'm going to stop you right there. I don't want to know anything about your other attorney. I have my own ways and I'm very good at this. Fire him today if you want me to go forward with this."

She was certainly much more forceful than my current attorney. In the little time I'd been here, she uncovered who Jane was with, which was more than the other private investigator had. Stacey also sounded determined. My other attorney barely showed any interest in my case. "Right. Yes. I will as I want you to take my case."

Stacey pulled out a file folder and created it for me. "From now on, any communication you receive from her, copy me on. Also, when was the last time you spoke with your daughter."

I scoffed. "I can't remember. I hope she hasn't forgotten about me."

"I'm going to see she hasn't. But don't forget what I said. As tempting as it may be, do not contact your brother regarding this."

"I won't."

We reviewed everything, and she was much more thorough than my other attorney. She wrote furiously on a legal pad and when she finished, she told me some incredible things about her.

"My specialty is battered women, which I usually do pro bono. I was raised by an alcoholic father who routinely beat my mother. One day, he came home drunk, as usual, and beat her to death. He came after me and that was my breaking point, so I killed him. He was a monster. I am vehemently



opposed to parental rights being abused. I can promise you one thing and that is I will do my absolute best to right this wrong.”

How she must have suffered. Life must’ve been awful for her to have to do that. I saw her steel will and I knew she was the right person to help me. Then I asked, “Can you do to the other photos what you did to that one? Not all of them but a few more?”

“Sure. I’ll email everything to you, along with my fees and contract. Don’t worry. I’m cheap.”

“I want you to charge me your normal fees as I have the money.”

“Gabriel, it’s not about the money for me anymore. You saw where I live. I’m in this now to right the wrongs that parents deal with and to also help abused women.”

My respect for Stacey grew. Not many people turned down money. “That’s very kind of you.”

“No, it’s paying back to the people who need help. I grew up without a penny and didn’t have any resources. Or rather, my mother didn’t. She died because of that and was afraid to seek out any help. I don’t want that to happen to anyone else.”

“Still, that’s superb.”

“Let me get to work on this then.”

“Give me a bell when you have something.” I pushed to my feet and asked, “Where can I find Ravina?”

“I’ll take you there.”

We went down the hall and I saw her name on the wall.

“Here you go.”

“Cheers, Stacey.”

I poked my head into the office, and she was on the phone. She waved me in, and I sat down.

“You finished?” she mouthed.

“She’s bloody brilliant.”

After she finished her call, she said, “I’m so happy you were pleased. She’ll do everything in her power to help. I’ll drive you home.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll grab an Uber and you stay and work.”

“Honestly, I don’t mind.”

“Ravina, I appreciate the offer, but I mind. You’ve missed a lot of work, mostly because of me, so stay. I’ll see you later.”

As I went to leave, I wondered if I could make it to the lift without getting turned around.

She must’ve noticed my indecision. “Follow me.” It was only a couple of turns until we reached the reception area.

“Thanks. I’ll see you later today.” I leaned down to kiss her and her eyes widened. It made me chuckle that I’d surprised her.

Our eyes stayed locked until the doors closed. Once off the lift, I ordered the Uber and waited in the lobby. A few minutes later, my ride pulled up.

One of my peeves was when the driver wanted to chat. I wasn’t one to make small talk so I usually sat there in silence, but this bloke wouldn’t stop. Question after question popped out of his mouth as I was about to throw a wobbly. We finally arrived at the condo, and I hurried out of the car. The guy talked my bloody ear off.

It was fantastic to be able to paint without the usual burden hanging over me. I had a lot of faith in Stacey that I’d get to have access to my daughter again. Then I thought about how I’d gobsmacked Ravina when I kissed her. I had a good laugh over that.

This lighthearted feeling lasted all day. I hadn’t been this productive in ages. I loved the look of the project. A call came in from the repair shop that the motorcycle was finished. I arranged for one of their drivers to deliver it tomorrow. It was worth the fee, considering the time it would save. When Ravina rang the bell, I checked the time, and it was after five. I worked the entire day without a break.

I wiped my hands off before I opened the door. She surprised me by her angry expression and snarling, “I can’t believe you kissed me at work.”

## *Twenty-Three*



RAVINA

GABRIEL'S MOUTH TOUCHED MINE AND HE NOT ONLY KISSED me, but it was a full-on invasion as his tongue swept inside. I was flabbergasted by his action as my core tightened in response. I struggled not to kiss him back, but that was asking more than I was capable of.

When he released me, I was aware of three sets of eyes on me. I spun around, intending to return to my office, but one of the receptionists stopped me.

“Is he your new boyfriend?”

“Something like that.” I wasn't into giving out too much information to the employees. It only led to more office gossip.

“He's superhot,” she said.

I nodded, smiled, and headed to my office. Then I fumed. The gall of that man. Why did he have to do that? And now I had to deal with sexual excitement. I was behind on my work and didn't need this disruption.

Frustrated, I pushed on. Stacey stopped by to let me know she was making some progress. “The new PI I hired is great and she will be sending me more information later today. His previous attorney also emailed me what he had, which was barely anything. I wanted to ask him what the hell he'd been doing.”

“That’s why I urged Gabriel to talk to you. I had a feeling his attorney was doing nothing.”

Stacey eyed me and asked, “You okay?”

Frustration gushed out of me. “Do you know what he did? He kissed me right in front of the elevators. And I mean really kissed me!”

Stacey grinned. “He likes you. Gabriel likes Ravina,” she sang.

“Ha ha, funny. He’d better like me after everything we’ve done.”

“Do tell, sister.”

“No! It’s none of your business!”

“Oh, come on. I need some entertainment.”

“Stacey, no. I don’t want my sex life shared with my brother.”

“I won’t tell him. I promise.”

“Not a chance.”

She hummed a second then asked, “Then why are you angry?”

“Because he kissed me in front of the receptionists. Then Diane started asking questions. You know how I hate office gossip. Now I’m the center of it.”

“Maybe they’ll forget. They did about Stanton and me.”

“True, but how long did that take? I think you had the baby before their tongues stopped wagging.”

She waved a hand. “Stop worrying about it. Let them talk. Who cares?”

“Me, that’s who and I’m going to kill him when I get home.”

“I’ll let you get back to it but I’m getting ready to call him. Want me to pass along a message?”

“Nope. I’ll handle it.” And that was my plan when I got home.

Only, things didn’t go as planned. I knocked on his door and when he answered, I said, “I can’t believe you kissed me at work.”

“Why, green eyes? How am I supposed to ignore a fit vixen when she’s standing in front of me?”

His smirk was mesmerizing and the reason behind my anger fled. Then his fingers wrapped around my wrist and tugged me inside. Firm lips met mine as he kissed me again. Tingles zipped up and down my spine as lust exploded inside me. The man had game, that’s for sure.

If he could play at this, then so could I. I pressed my body against his and he deepened the kiss. I moaned when his silky tongue swept through my mouth. His rigid hardness grew as it pressed against my stomach. As fast as the kiss began was as quick as it ended.

A groan eked out of him as he said, “Let’s take this to the bedroom.”

“Oh, great idea. I love make-up sex.”

“Don’t get cheeky with me, green eyes. I can still give you a good spanking.”

The idea of that sent another surge of desire roaring through me. “Promise?”

“Strip. Now. And get your sexy arse in bed.”

I squiggled out of my clothes and sashayed to the large bed. He followed after he took off his own clothing. Gabriel’s body was a dream come true of which I’d never tire. Sculpted muscles greeted me as he moved and yanked me to his side of the bed.

“Spread those delicious thighs and don’t move.”

His tongue teased me and brought me to the edge, only to stop. Over and over until I begged for mercy. He finally allowed me to orgasm, and I writhed beneath his amazing mouth, lifting my pelvis to meet him.

I vaguely heard the condom wrapper tearing and then he pushed inside of me with a bang. Air whooshed from my lungs as my eyes flew open and I stared at his beautiful face hovering above me. This invasion of my body was so complete, I was stretched and filled beyond imagination. No words passed between us, but something else did. This was more than fucking. He was imprinting his soul into mine. I gasped as another climax ripped through me. A sexy groan hit me as he came after me.

Our breathing had escalated but soon returned to normal as we lay together, entwined in each other's arms. My thoughts tumbled around as I wondered what happened between us.

As if he read my mind, he asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing really," I lied. I didn't want him to know what was in my head.

"Bollocks. I want the truth."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. I was thinking about us and where we stand with each other."

"Where we stand?"

"Yes, as in are we still only friends with bennies because what happened just now between us seemed to be way more than that."

He didn't respond but rubbed his scruff-covered jaw instead.

"Well?" I prodded. I wanted a response from him.

"It's too soon, Ravina."

Too soon? What the hell did that even mean? "Can you explain?"

"You have to know by now that I fancy you." He ran a finger down my arm and I shivered. "But I can't commit to anyone at this point."

"Commit?"

"Right."

“Then I have to ask something of you. As long as you and I are sleeping together, will you be faithful only to me? I don’t share.”

He lifted to his elbow and his stare pinned me to the pillow. “Let’s get something straight. I. Don’t. Share. Ever.”

“Okay.” His possessiveness cloaked me, and I shivered.

“If I ever find out you’ve been with someone else, there won’t be a second chance.”

“Great and the same goes for me. I don’t sleep with bed hoppers,” I said smugly.

“It’s been a long, long time since I’ve trotted around like a dog with two dicks. I’m not that person anymore. Now that we have that settled, roll over.”

I didn’t ask why because I already knew the answer. When he thrust deeply inside of me, my response was to meet him. We spooned and it was intoxicating. His arm came around me and his finger snuggled in my slit. My clit jumped to life as he stroked it and brought me to orgasm number three. He was not stingy at all in that regard. After my inner pulsations subsided, he grabbed my hip and pumped hard and fast until he got his own.

He rolled me to him, and his lips savagely possessed my mouth. Then he moved to my neck, and my nipples, until I was lusting for him again. He tugged and sucked them before moving between my thighs. My fingers plowed through his hair as I pulled him closer. I’d never been this insatiable before and he was to blame.

“Yessss...” I moaned.

He didn’t stop this time but gave me exactly what I craved.

“You’re right gorgeous when you come.” His words brought a warm blush to my cheeks.

“It’s all you. You have a mighty talented mouth and tongue.”

A deep chuckle emerged from him. It gave me goose bumps. How could a laugh do that to me? What was going on



here? I knew the answer but veered away from it. I was so afraid of getting hurt and Gabriel had the power to do just that.

## *Twenty-Four*



GABRIEL

IT WAS A SEX-FILLED NIGHT AND WAS EXTREMELY SATISFYING. Ravina took my mind off my problems. She was as voracious in bed as I was, which made us perfect sex partners. I'd expected her to enjoy it, but she went beyond that, matching me step for step. I did my best to wall up my emotions, but I feared she was breaking them down, brick by brick.

I enjoyed her cheeky attitude, honesty (although sometimes I had to pull it out of her), her meddling (although it had pissed me off before), lush curves, and her fondness for shagging. She was the total dish and it was difficult holding back from telling her.

If Stacey succeeded in gaining back my access to my daughter, then perhaps I could focus on a true relationship with Ravina. If there ever was going to be someone for me, it would probably be her. Even though I wanted to tell her, I refrained.

"I'm starving," she announced.

"I could eat something too."

She checked the time and shouted, "Good grief, it's nearly nine thirty! No wonder we're hungry. Let's order in."

"Fine. What do you fancy?"

"I'll eat cardboard right now."

“I’d like something a little tastier than that.” I pulled up my food delivery app and we ordered pizza. Ravina and I threw on our clothes, and I made us something to drink. When the food arrived, we gobbled it up.

“This is so good,” she said, chewing on a piece.

“Yeah, it’s scrummy.”

“I swear, I could eat pizza every day.”

“Not me. I like variety in food.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Indian cuisine,” I answered. “I love the way all the flavors merge and the way it pops in your mouth.”

“Have you been to The Indian Flower yet?”

“No.”

Ravina rubbed her hands together. “Let’s go tomorrow. You’ll love it.”

“Works for me. I have a lot of painting to get done tomorrow and I have a gig on Saturday. The guys have been handing it to me because I lightened up our schedule.”

“Why’d you do that?”

I ruffled the hair on top of my head and sighed. “I love playing, I do. But art is more lucrative and initially I needed the money to pay for the custody case. It’s a dilemma for sure, but I feel like such a wanker to my mates.”

Ravina grabbed the empty pizza box, along with our plates and napkins, and took them into the kitchen. As she went, she said, “Maybe add a few more gigs but not to the extent you did before?”

“Yeah, but the other guys rely on those gigs. The money is their main source of income. I’ve really let that slide.”

“Are you the only one who sets up the dates you play?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not hand it off to one of the other band members?”

“Now there’s the rub. If I do that, I’ll be playing every night of the week and I can’t keep that up anymore.”

“Sounds as though you’re contemplating quitting.”

“Right, I am. Only I’ll miss it. I know it’s selfish, but I really love playing.”

“Can you fill in on occasion, just to keep yourself in the game?”

A gush of air left my lungs. “I don’t know. Thinking about it leaves me knackered. So I shove it away, which is not fair to my mates at all.”

Ravina sat down again, close to me, and took my hand. “Gabriel, it sounds like you have the answer. You need to tell them. In your words, it’s not fair to them.”

“I know. I’ve been such an arse about this.”

She grabbed my phone off the coffee table and handed it to me. “Make the call. Set up a meeting with them to let them know.”

I took the phone and sent them a group text. “I asked them to meet me tomorrow. If I still have an appetite after, we can go to dinner. Is that okay?”

“Sure. I’m glad you’re doing this. Stringing them along isn’t right.”

“As I said, I’m a wanker.”

She got back to her feet and said, “Alrighty then, Mr. Wanker, I’m headed home. I need some real sleep tonight as I have a busy day tomorrow.”

I rose to my feet and beckoned her over. Then I kissed her good night. “Thanks for being my sounding board. I needed that.”

“Any time. See you tomorrow. If you need a ride, let me know.”

“Thank you.”

Then she let herself out. I was liking my ladylove more and more each day.

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I MET MY MATES THE NEXT EVENING. WE WENT TO OUR favorite pub, and I ordered them a round of their favorite drinks. When we sat at a table, I took the plunge.

“I haven’t been fair to you with the band.”

Jeff, who played bass and had assumed the role of second-in-command said, “You think? You’ve left us high and dry and all of us, except you, are hurting because of it. You didn’t even have the decency to call or text until now.”

I bowed my head. He was right and I really had been a cock-up. “You’re right and I hope you all can forgive me. With everything going on, I put the band last and that isn’t right. Thus, I am leaving. I’m going to hand over all the information on the group and everything you’ll need to go forward without me.”

They were outraged. Jeff spoke up first. “Dude, you can’t do this to us. You’re the main attraction.”

“Not true. People like the group, not me.”

Jeff countered. “No, man, they love you. You’re a groupie magnet which translates into a huge crowd for us.”

“I can fill in from time to time. That way, no one will know when I’ll be playing. It’ll keep them coming.”

The drummer asked, “But who’ll take your place?”

“Don’t know that yet, and until we find someone, I’ll still be with you.”

Jeff rubbed his face. “This is bad. Really bad. You were the key to our success, and we made a name because of you.”

“I appreciate that, I really do. But the three of you are brilliant musicians and will do just fine. You’ll see.”

We drank up and I told Jeff I would transfer all the records to him. If he had questions, I'd always be there for him.

I felt completely hollow afterward. This group had saved me in my time of need and now I was abandoning them. I'd never felt like such a fuckup in my entire life... not even when my father disowned me. It was the best I could do though, under the circumstances and hopefully, in time, they'd get back on their feet and soar.

## *Twenty-Five*



RAVINA

I WORRIED ABOUT GABRIEL. HE HADN'T ANSWERED MY CALLS and we were supposed to go to dinner. Finally, I walked over to his door and pounded. A glum face greeted me when he opened the door.

“It went that bad, huh?”

“Worse.”

“I was worried since we were supposed to go to dinner.”

“Sorry, but no appetite here.”

It showed in the tone of his voice. He wasn't even grumpy, as he usually got when he was down or angry.

“Can I come in?”

“Suit yourself, but I'm not good company tonight.”

“Yeah, well, we all have our down days.”

I waltzed past him and plunked down on his couch.  
“How's the leg?”

“Fine. I go to the doctor tomorrow to have the stitches removed. They itch like crazy.”

“It'll feel great after they remove them. Mine did and the itch went away. I take it your meeting didn't go well.”

“As well as could be expected. They’re upset and rightfully so.”

I understood as Gabriel was a chick magnet. I knew that from my reaction to him. His voice was also amazing so I couldn’t imagine who’d they find to step in for him. His guitar leaned against the end of the couch. He usually kept it in the case, so I’m sure he’d been playing it before I came over.

“Play something for me.”

“Nah, don’t want to.”

“Please. The only times I’ve ever heard you were when I went to hear the band and at the wedding reception. I want to hear only you.” Maybe this would help, or maybe it wouldn’t. I grabbed his guitar and handed it to him.

He gave me a wry grin and took it. Initially, he strummed a few chords. Then he broke into a song I’d never heard. It was lovely. His voice was hypnotic as he continued singing. The words had to be about his daughter as he sang about losing the child he loved. The song brought tears to my eyes. When he finished, I was speechless.

“There you go.” He set the guitar down next to him.

“Did you write that?”

“Yeah, when I was having a bad day. It’s about losing Juliette.”

“I surmised that by the lyrics. It’s beautiful, Gabriel. I understand why the band doesn’t want to lose you. You’re really in a bad place.” Then an idea struck. “Why don’t you write music and let the band play it? That way you can keep your hands in the game.”

“There’s a thought. I may do that and perhaps it will keep my mates happy as well.”

“Will you play me another?”

His fingers strummed a haunting melody that I loved. “Have you ever thought of going into a recording studio?”

“I’ve thought about it but never have done it.”



“You should. My brother Tristian may know someone. He’s a photographer and does work in lots of different fields. I can ask.” I selfishly wish he would so I could listen to his music more often.

“Hmm, I don’t know. My plate’s pretty full as it is. Maybe when I get caught up.”

I laughed. “At least it’s a good problem to have.” I checked the time and said, “I need to get going. Tomorrow, I have an early appointment and then I’m meeting with Stacey to discuss my potential new business.”

“New business?”

I hadn’t talked much about this. “I’m opening my own company as an events coordinator for weddings and such.”

“I have no idea what that involves. It sounds complicated to me.”

“Not really. I would hire and coordinate the people to do the jobs. For instance, when Stacey and Stanton got married, I handled almost everything except the band and photographer. My brother, Tristian helped with that. But I hired everyone to do all the decorations, catering, cake, and so on. I love doing it and have a lot of connections as I’ve done some events for the company. I think it would be fun.”

“Right. It still sounds like a lot of moving pieces, but if that’s your thing, then good luck.”

“Thanks. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Hey Ravina, thank you for being such a great listener.” He rose to his feet and walked me to the door. “Sure you don’t want to spend the night?” He wagged his brows.

“Ha. I wouldn’t get enough sleep for what I need to do tomorrow.”

“So true. Then we’ll talk tomorrow.”

I intended to give him a peck on the lips, but it turned into something so much more. Finally, I pulled away, breathless. “This is exactly what I mean.” I opened the door and left before I changed my mind.

It was a struggle falling asleep. All I thought about was Gabriel's tongue in my mouth. He kissed like no other and it never failed to light a fire under my skin. Eventually, sleep came and I didn't move until my alarm woke me.

I arrived at the office bearing two extra-large lattes with whipped cream on top. Stacey's door was open, so I went in and handed her one. We both loved these and she thanked me profusely.

"I'm in terrible need of this today. The little monster kept us both up last night. He's teething and it's awful."

My heart clenched at first because I thought he was sick, but when she said *teething*, I relaxed. "That must hurt like hell. And they don't understand what's going on."

"I know. He's drooling like an open spigot, and I feel so awful for him."

"Have you called the doctor?"

"Yeah, and all you can do is either baby ibuprofen or acetaminophen. He's chewing on everything too. Ruined our remote control. He gummed it to death."

I cracked up at that. "Well, I hope it made him feel better."

We turned our discussion to my business. The name I'd chosen for the business was Events by Baines. Stacey pulled out a file and handed it to me. "These are your letters of incorporation. Look them over and sign, please."

Since she held my complete trust, I only scanned them and signed. "Here ya go. What's next?"

"When I get everything back and you officially have an LLC, it's up to you. English can help you with your website, but if I were you, I'd talk to all your contacts to let them know what's going on."

"Great idea. Tristian said I could have some pictures of the reception to use, and I just need to get English to set it all up."

Stacey nodded her approval. "Then you need to get the word out about your new business."

“I’m going to have business cards made and pass them out to all the bridal stores, caterers, florists, and event venues. My idea is to price low at first to grab the low-hanging fruit. Then when I’m established, I can increase it.”

“Perfect. Just let me know what else you’ll need from me.”

It didn’t take much thinking before I said, “Just help me with Stanton. He’s not in favor of this but I think it’s because he’ll have to hire someone to replace me here.”

Stacey winked. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of him.”

“Thanks, sis. Now I need to get some work done. How about lunch?”

“Thanks, but I’m going home to check on the little one. I want to make sure he’s okay. He’s like a new puppy these days, needing lots of attention.”

“Give him a smooch from Aunt Ravina.”

I settled into my office and called English. We worked on the website and at the end of our conversation, she said, “Easton has been asking about you. What’ve you been up to?”

“Shoot, I need to bring her to spend the night.”

“Please, because she’s driving me crazy. She’s wondering when you’re taking her away on vacation to Egglund.”

I got a big laugh out of that until English asked, “So, what have you been up to? You’ve been strangely absent these days.”

I let out a breath and dove in. “I’ve been sort of seeing my neighbor.”

“Not the hot guitar player?”

“The one and only.”

“Okay, I’m super mad at you. How could you not tell me? I mean, the guy is an Adonis.”

“It just sort of happened. At first, he was a total asshole. But then he morphed into someone much more interesting.” I gave her all the details, except the ones about the sex. I

should've expected her first question, but it still took me by surprise.

"How is he in bed?"

I choked on my latte and coughed my head off.

"Must be pretty damn good," she said with a laugh.

"Um, yeah. That's all I'm saying."

"It's enough. A guy like that has to smoke up the bed linens."

Boy did he ever. "Mmm hmm."

"I'll bet he's yummy naked."

"English, stop. You're a married woman."

"Doesn't mean I'm dead. I know a hottie when I see one. Does he talk dirty to you?"

"Wh-whattt??"

She whispered into the phone. "You know, say dirty things to you during sex."

Oh my god, I couldn't believe she asked that. "I'm taking the fifth."

"He does! I just know it."

"Tell Easton I'll be calling her for a shopping trip soon. Goodbye." I had to get off the phone. Gabriel didn't really talk dirty, but I wouldn't mind if he did. I wondered if I should initiate it. Maybe I'd try to see if it egged him on. An image of his shocked face popped into my head, and I went into a fit of giggles that sustained me all day.

That night when I got home from work, I showered and then rang his doorbell. He answered wearing ripped jeans and a black, faded T-shirt that was splattered with paint.

"Come in."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

“Do you ever talk dirty in bed?” Apparently, he wasn’t expecting that at all because all he did was sputter.

# Twenty-Six



GABRIEL

I CAN TRULY SAY I'D NEVER BEEN MORE SHOCKED BY A question. It wasn't the question itself. It was the way she'd asked. Then I smirked. She was extremely direct, and I liked it. "Have I ever told you how brill you are?"

"Huh?"

"Brilliant?"

"No, but thanks. What does that have to do with talking dirty?"

I laughed. "Nothing at all. I just think your directness is ace. And by dirty, do you mean '*Ravina, I'd love to fuck you raw.*'?"

I watched her throat bob as she swallowed. "Um, yeah."

"Then the answer is yes, but I usually wait until I know my partner is into that. Are you?" I ran a finger down her arm.

"I am." She swallowed again and my cock responded. I'd love for her to do that with my cock in her throat.

I sidled up next to her and whispered, "I love your sexy cunt and it's true that I'd love to fuck you raw until you scream my name. Care to have a go at it?"

Not a word came out of her, but she nodded vigorously. I took her hand and walked her to the bedroom.

“Lose the clothes.” I eyed her as she stripped. I did the same, then motioned her over to me. “Take me in your mouth and deep.”

She dropped to her knees and did the deed. I held her head as she sucked me. It was good. Really good. So good I made her stop. I didn’t want to bust one before we fucked.

“Are you wet, Ravina?”

She nodded.

“Show me.”

Her brows rose but I only nodded back. Then a finger dipped between her thighs and when she held it up in the air, it glistened. I took it into my mouth and sucked. Her gasp pleased me.

“On the bed, on your knees, arse in the air.” She readily obeyed my command and wiggled her arse at me. I smirked and walked close to her, giving her a good slap for being cheeky.

“Ow!”

“There’s more where that came from.”

“Promise?”

My answer was to slide a finger up and down her slit. She was soaking wet. Without waiting, I inched inside of her and when fully seated, I set up a pounding rhythm.

“Your pussy is slick with need. Should I stop?”

“No!”

I thrust hard into her and heard her groan. “How about now?”

“No! Please.”

Her fingers dug into the comforter as I banged her with an intense roughness. Her gorgeous arse aimed at me was too enticing, so I slapped her. The pale flesh turned a lovely shade of pink, so I slapped her again. This woman may be my game

changer and I wasn't sure if I was ready for that. But the sex. Fuck me, it was great.

My climax tore into me without warning, and I jerked her tightly against me as I throbbed inside her tight cunt. When I finished, I pulled out, got rid of the condom, flipped her on her back, and sucked her swollen clit. She came with a jolt as she shouted my name. I had achieved my goal.

I pulled her up for a kiss. "Was that dirty enough?"

"Not really. It was kind of cute."

I roared out a laugh. "Oh, you're a cheeky one, aren't you? Your happy valley sure enjoyed it."

"Happy valley?"

"Your muff, cunt, pussy. Whatever you want to call it."

She giggled and said, "I call it my vagina."

"Eh, too formal. I'm into nicknames."

Her finger traced my mouth. "What do you call your cock then, Big Bruiser?"

I chuckled at her use of the nickname I'd chosen. "That's simple. Anaconda."

She cackled. "Anaconda, huh? You have a lot of pride in your appendage."

"I do as I should."

"I agree. Your anaconda is very ana-commodating!" Her body shook as she laughed at her own joke, which was rather comical.

I tickled her ribs, and she laughed harder. "Oh god, stop. Please."

"Only if you cook for me. I'm starving."

"It's a deal, but you'll hate it."

We dressed and then went to the kitchen. She inspected the contents of my refrigerator and announced we needed to either go out or order something. "You have nothing to cook other



than eggs. I don't want eggs for dinner. Let's go eat Indian food."

I agreed and we ended up at the restaurant she loved we were supposed to go to the other night. The food was delicious, and I told her so.

"Knew you'd love it. So how was your day?"

I swallowed the food in my mouth and said, "Good. You know how I met my mates and did as you suggested? My suggestion of writing music must've perked them up because they called and were in. I explained how limited my time was right now but would do my best. They also said they may have someone who can help replace me."

"Hey, that's as good as it gets. They're lucky to have you."

"No, I was lucky to come across them and they saved me when I needed it. I owe them."

"I like how you're considerate toward your friends. That's a great trait to have."

I shrugged. It's the way I'd always been.

"On another note, I heard from Stacey today."

Her brows shot up. "You did? I saw her today and she didn't mention anything."

"Lawyer-client privilege, I suppose. She fired my old PI and hired a new one, as you know, and this person said that my ex wasn't in Texas anymore but had moved."

"Where?"

I had to smile. "Somewhere in Georgia, and my guess is back here."

"But why would she do that if she wanted to keep Juliette away from you?"

"No idea, but it made my day. If they're back here, then it's all a matter of finding them. Stacey hired a local PI and said she'd have answers soon."

"Hmm, that just doesn't make sense."

“Maybe she needs money now. Who knows, but I plan to find out.”

“I hope so. It’s still puzzling.”

“Yeah, but it’s better than having them in a different state, legally speaking.” At least now Stacey didn’t have to tangle with those confusing laws. It would be much easier now.

“That’s why I’m confused. Wouldn’t she know that?”

“Maybe she wants to marry my brother.”

Ravina gawked at me. “What did you say?”

“I must’ve forgotten to tell you.”

“Hell yes, you forgot. What the fuck, Gabriel?”

“Stacey showed me some photos of my ex with a man. Her new love interest turned out to be my brother.”

“I... I just don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say. I wasn’t sure they even knew each other that well. At first I was raging but the more I thought about it, I decided he could have her.”

“Really?”

“What do I want with her, yeah? She’s a slag. Well, maybe not a slag, but definitely a bitch. I don’t want anything to do with her.”

“I understand. Her behavior shows what an awful person she is. I’m surprised your brother would want her.”

I thought about that again and it was strange. “I didn’t think they knew each other well. But then again, maybe they were doing the dirty and I never knew.”

After I said it, my gut tumbled. If they were shagging while we were married, was Juliette really my daughter?

# *Twenty-Seven*



RAVINA

GABRIEL'S EXPRESSION CLENCHED MY HEART AND IT TWISTED with pain. I knew what ran through his head because it was tearing through mine. What if Juliette wasn't really his? I frantically thought of something to say. Reaching for his hand, I said, "She's yours, no matter what. You were there when she was born. You held and nurtured her. She's absolutely your daughter."

He didn't respond. His eyes had darkened into a stormy green and that tiny muscle in his jaw twitched. I hated this. How could a woman possibly do that or his brother for that matter? "Hey, why don't you spend the night with me at my place and in the morning, I'll drive you to the doctor." He was scheduled to have his stitches removed.

"Not tonight. I'd be terrible company right now."

"You think I don't know that? We could just crawl into bed and sleep. Or watch a movie or something."

A ragged breath left him. "Ravina, I'd rather be alone."

"That's not a good idea. You'll only keep thinking about this. We can call Stacey in the morning and tell her about this. Once she has an action plan in place, she'll figure out how to get a DNA test done so you'll know."

"Fuck," he yelled. "I don't even know if I want the truth."

“That’s fine too, because as I said, Juliette will always be yours. You’re the only father she’s ever known.”

His head oscillated. “How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because she saw you first. You were always there.”

“What if she’s forgotten me?”

“Impossible. You’re unforgettable.”

“Maybe to you, but what about a young child? She’s only six and hasn’t seen me in two years!”

I had no good comeback because he was right. How could a small child remember after that long? No question about it, his ex was a real bitch. Unless I had an ex that abused me, I could never treat someone like that. And Gabriel, while moody as heck, was not abusive.

“You make a good point. Let’s call Stacey tomorrow and see if she can double the efforts on this. We can also ask for her advice. She went through a lot growing up and may have some great advice.”

“Fine. I’ll agree to that, but you should go.”

His words held a finality to them, so I left. When I got home, I called Stacey. Her sleepy voice answered. “I’m so sorry, go back to sleep.”

“I’m up now. What’s going on?”

“Do you always go to bed at nine?”

“When you have a teething baby, yes.”

“Right, sorry. Gabriel had a sort of freak-out tonight. He came up with the possibility that his daughter may actually be his brother’s.”

“Shit. Not good.”

“Not at all. Is there anything we can do?”

“I’ll give it my best tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Night night.” I ended the call so she could get some sleep. That was one thing I didn’t look forward to if I ever had a child.

After I got ready for bed, I crawled in and turned on the TV. I got involved in a movie but fell asleep. When I woke up, something else was on, so I turned it off and fell back to sleep. I dreamed about a young girl and two men arguing over her. The child was screaming and crying and both men yelled at each other. Their faces were blurred, but I knew who they were. It was disturbing when I thought about it. I said a prayer for Gabriel. I didn't want him to lose Juliette. What if she wasn't his? Would the courts honor the fact that he'd raised her?

I showered, dressed, and arrived at Gabriel's front door in record time. When it opened to reveal a messy-haired, bleary-eyed man, I knew he hadn't slept. I handed him the large coffee.

"Get ready. I'm driving you to your appointment."

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that, but just drop me off. I'll Uber back here."

"No, you won't. You're coming with me to the office afterward so we can go talk to Stacey this morning."

He stretched and then nodded. Damn, the man was sexy. He wore no shirt and only boxer briefs. He turned and went to get ready. When he emerged from the bedroom, his hair was wet, and he smelled of manly soap... that spicy, woody scent I loved.

"Ready?" I asked.

"As ever."

We drove to the doctor in silence. I dropped him off at the front door and parked. When I got inside, he was sitting. It wasn't long before they called him back.

As I waited, I checked my messages and emails. I had gotten through a good portion of them when he emerged, smiling. It was like a burst of sunshine after a storm. My heart clanged beneath my ribs and a zing of electricity danced from my spine to my womanly bits. He had uncanny power over me when it came to sex. There was more to it than that. I'm not sure how, but I had come to really care for this man. It was

also scary as hell because he had the potential to crack my heart into a million pieces.

“Hey? You look miles away,” he said.

“No, I’m here. I was just going through email.” I turned my phone off. “That was quick.”

“Yeah, and I can scratch freely.” His grin spread.

“That’s great. Do you feel like you’ve been released from jail?”

“Well, I’ve never been to jail, but I guess so.”

“Let’s go.”

We walked to the car and I drove to the office. When we got up to the executive level, I headed straight for Stacey’s office. Her door was closed so I knocked. She called out to enter. We both went in and took seats.

“We have an issue,” I began. “Gabriel, do you want to start?”

He explained everything I’d told her last night. “I want to find out the truth.”

“We can do that, but it has to wait until I gather every possible bit of information. We need to locate her to do this and we’re working on that. Once that’s done, we can get the courts to officially require it. At that point, you’ll need to find a doctor to run the test and submit it. I can give you a few names.”

“Okay, but what happens after that? What if I find out I’m not her biological father?”

“That’s up to you. If you want us to request custody, given the fact your name is on her birth certificate, we can do that. Keep in mind, with that, you’ll end up paying child support.”

“I don’t give a damn about that. I want Juliette in my life.”

Stacey agreed. “I have the new PI up and running here. It shouldn’t be long before we discover where she’s living.”

“What about my brother?”

“What about him?”

“Is he here with her?” That still was a head-scratcher as to when they’d gotten together. I got why he asked.

“As far as we can tell, yes. Have you called him?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Maybe you should give that a try. Initially I said not to, but it may be telling on where he stands or if he even tells you the truth. Stay mum about the custody case though.”

That was a great idea. “Gabriel, you might shock the pieces out of him.”

“I’d rather *beat* the pieces out of him, but yeah, I see where you’re going with this.”

Stacey leaned forward. “Promise you won’t beat him.”

“I won’t, even though I’d like to.”

Purple half-moons sat beneath Stacey’s eyes. “Not to change the subject, but how’s my nephew? Is the teething any better?”

“Ugh, not yet.”

“Have you tried a frozen washcloth?” Gabriel asked.

“No, only those frozen teething rings.”

“Water down a washcloth and then freeze it. That worked the best for Juliette. I usually kept a dozen of them in the freezer,” Gabriel offered.

“That’s a great idea. Thanks, I’ll call the nanny and let her know.”

I smiled at the two of them as they discussed a topic that was unfamiliar to me. “You two finish up. I’m headed to work.”

“Hey, thanks for being my taxi,” Gabriel said.

“Anytime.” I left them to discuss his case and went to work. I needed to begin wrapping things up here and help my brothers find my replacement.

Speak of the devil, Stanton walked in. “How’s it going?”

“Fine, I’m getting things all nice and tidy for the person who takes over.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m here. Landry and I have been talking and we want you to stay.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but his hand came out. “Hold up a second. We talked and wondered if you’d be interested in part time. That would give you the opportunity to start your business.” Landry wandered in as Stanton was talking.

“You could have freedom and the ability to work on your own business here, when it’s convenient. When it’s going strong, you can back away,” Landry added.

It was a sound idea.

“You can work here, and it will save you time. That is as long as you’re willing and able to do your work for us too,” Stanton said.

“Agreed,” said Landry.

“It’s a deal.” This was a win win for everyone.



# *Twenty-Eight*



GABRIEL

TWO WEEKS PASSED AND STILL NOTHING NEW FROM STACEY. To her credit, she updated me daily via email. The last message I received yesterday was to inform me that it was a possibility she moved somewhere other than Georgia. My hopes plunged and darkened my day. It was obvious in the vicious strokes I added to the canvas.

This debacle had to end soon, or I wasn't sure what I'd do. I'd done my own digging to come up empty-handed. I'd tried calling my brother, but he never answered or returned my calls, even after leaving several messages. The bloke pissed me off to no end.

Yesterday, I went and purchased a burner phone. I figured if he didn't answer that, I had zero hope of speaking with him. I was too angry to call, and I had to calm myself. Unfortunately, I fell asleep after a couple of rounds in the sack with Ravina.

As I painted, I kept thinking about my traitorous brother. Anger bubbled in every molecule of my body. How could he do this? The bloody wanker knew good and well how much my daughter meant to me.

I set the knife down, which I was using today, along with the brush, and went to wash my hands. Then I sat on the couch and dialed my brother's number. This couldn't wait any longer or I'd literally explode.

“Devon Carson. Who’s this?”

“It’s your brother, you asshole. Why won’t you ever call me back?”

“Whose phone is this?”

If my fist could’ve punched his face through the phone, I would’ve done it. “You didn’t answer my question,” I gritted out.

“Dunno. Just forgot.”

“Come on, Devon. Don’t lie to me. I’ve been calling you for two weeks now with nothing.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been traveling.”

“I know. How was Texas?”

Dead silence greeted me. I had to soften my tone, or he’d hang up and I’d be forced to buy another burner.

“Look, I know you and Jane are together.”

More dead silence.

“Devon, all I want to know is how Juliette is faring. I don’t care if you’re with Jane or not, just tell me how my daughter is.”

“Ah, yeah. Juliette is fine.”

“Can we meet up sometime, just the two of us?”

Nothing.

“Just to talk. Honestly.”

Again, nothing.

“You’re my brother. I don’t want to lose our relationship.” I lied. At the present time, I was angry enough not to give a fuck about that.

“Yeah, okay, but Jane can’t know.”

“Dev, do you honestly think she’d find out from me? It’s you who would tell her. Fuck it all, she hasn’t spoken a word to me in I can’t remember how long.”

“Okay. Where?”

“That depends on you. Your choice.” His answer would be the tell-all as I’d find out where he was living.

“Are you familiar with Marietta?”

“No, but give me the name of a place and I’ll pop it into my navigation.”

He named a restaurant and time. It was for today. And bingo, that meant they were in the Atlanta area.

“Be there at two.”

“See you then.”

When our call ended, I immediately phoned Stacey and told her.

“Don’t give anything away about you trying to get court-ordered custody. We want to take them by surprise. I realize it’s asking a lot but be cool and only inquire about Juliette.”

“Right. Do I ask where they live?”

“You can, but I doubt he’ll tell you. We’ll begin a search around Marietta, but I doubt they live there. I’ll have them search for your brother as well. Devon Knight, correct?”

“That’s correct. I’ll call you after our meetup.”

“Great, and just play cool.”

It would be hard, but I’d do anything for my daughter.

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I PULLED INTO THE CAR PARK A LITTLE BEFORE TWO AND WENT inside in search of Devon. He was already there, seated at a table by the window.

“Brother, how are you?” I stuck out my hand for a shake.

He looked at it, but shockingly hugged me instead. Was that guilt?

“Gabe, you’re looking good.”

“You as well.”

I sat at the table and said, “Have you ordered anything yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you.”

The waiter came over and took our drink order. I didn’t know if I’d be able to eat as anxiety rippled through me, upsetting my gut.

As casually as possible, I asked, “So, when did you move here?”

“Yeah, about that,” Devon said, wearing his guilt magnificently. “We were in Texas for a time but came back here recently.”

“Why?”

He smirked and I wanted to slap it off his face. “Why what?”

“Did you move back here?” I was truly curious about that. It would seem being close to me wasn’t the best idea.

“Right. Jane decided the job market was better here.”

“And you?”

He shrugged. “Makes no difference to me. I work remotely for Father.”

“Then my next question is, when did the two of you get together?”

His eyes darted all over the place and never met mine. Here’s where his guilt showed through. “A while now.”

“A while? What does that even mean?”

He fidgeted with his napkin and the waiter dropped off our drinks. I’d ordered a Coke, and he had a scotch on the rocks. Maybe he needed some liquid courage. He took a deep sip and then looked me in the eyes. “It’s been a few years.”

Inside, rage pumped through my veins like fire. This was my brother, the one I’d been so close to growing up. Sure, we weren’t that close anymore since we lived thousands of miles

away from each other, or at least I'd thought we did. But how could he do this to me? What happened to the guy who had seemed to always have my back?

I held my emotions in check. "Dev, I honestly could give zero fucks about you and Jane. However, I am concerned about my daughter. I haven't seen Juliette in *years*. You could've at least called to let me know how my daughter is doing." My gaze blistered him.

"You're right. I'm sorry, but Gabe, it's complicated."

"Bollocks. Everything in life is complicated but picking up the phone and giving me a ring isn't."

"It is when I have to consider what Jane wants."

I wanted to jump out of the chair and pace. Pacing always helped me think clearly. Instead, I said, "You're *my brother*, damn it. Don't you care one iota about that?" I gritted my teeth, acutely aware of the fact they might crack under the pressure.

"Of course I do, but like I said, it's complicated."

"In what way?" I was tired of this cat-and-mouse bullshit.

He sighed, long and deep. "I, uh, yeah, I can't discuss it with you."

"Discuss what?"

"What I can't talk about. Jane made me promise."

"What exactly did she make you promise?"

He stared at me now, unabashedly. "Gabe, can't you just read between the lines?"

"Read what? That you were fucking my wife and Juliette isn't really my daughter?" I spoke so loudly, everyone around us turned to stare.

Devon's jaw sagged. Was that regret or shame emanating from him?

Finally, I stood and said, "Juliette may be yours biologically, but it was me who was there when she was born,

and I want genetic proof of who her father is. But either way, that child is mine. By the way, sleeping with my wife was a total cunt move. Thanks for that, *brother*.”” Then I stomped out of the restaurant, leaving my cheater of a brother alone.

# *Twenty-Nine*



RAVINA

WORK WAS CRAZY TODAY AS I HAD A PILE OF THINGS TO DO and was leaving early to meet with English. She had worked on some ideas for my website and logo and wanted to share them with me.

It seemed like my phone rang every two minutes in the morning, but by noon, I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do. Then I was off to meet English.

She waved me into the house, and we went to her office. She and Tristian both worked from home and had separate offices in which to conduct their business operations. English had become quite successful as a graphic artist and web designer. She and Tristian often worked closely together on projects. They both worked with her father, who was also a professional photographer. That was how they met. Tristian had gone to work there, and English was already working for her father. Apparently, fireworks had taken place between them, as my brother had the potential to be an ass.

"I'm so excited to show you this," she began. "I've created several logo options for you. Let me know which of these you like best."

She opened a file on her gigantic computer and up popped the first one. Events by Baines was the name of the company and she had done an amazing job. The first one had a faded picture of a bride and groom, and flowers encircled them. The

background was a pale shade of green and the company name was in the center. The second one was similar, but the bride and groom were gone. I liked the simplicity of it. The third was a pale-rainbow hue with a square and the company name in the center.

“It’s either the first or second, but they’re all beautiful. I kind of like the simplicity of the second. The first makes it look like I only do weddings.”

“Excellent. The second it is. Now, check out your website.”

She opened it up and I was in awe. “This is where your logo will go.” She pointed to a blank spot. There were pictures of both her wedding and Stacey’s. I’d done all the coordinating and decorating for both and was proud of how beautiful everything turned out.

“I’ll match the background color with that on your logo as well,” English added.

“I love it. It’s soft and beautiful to gaze at. The pictures are perfect too.”

“Great. Here’s what I have for the menu.” It listed all the things I offered, from handling the catering, flowers, photographer, music, etc. Each menu heading listed the companies I’d used. There were several price points for each too.

“You’ve nailed it. I would never have thought of adding all this. It’s perfect.” I hugged her with a squeal. “I’m so excited to get this started now.”

She switched files again and showed me what my business card would look like. Instead of the standard one, mine would be square and a bit larger. “Ooh, this is great!”

“I figured a larger one would stick out better.”

“I approve. Now I need them printed so I can go and distribute them everywhere.” I planned to leave them at the more popular bridal shops, with caterers, florists, and venues.



“I’ll take care of the printing. I have a company I work with that has a fast turnaround.”

“Oh, one important question. How easy is this website to maintain?” I didn’t want to get bogged down in that.

“Very, and if you need it, I’ll handle that end for you. I’ll even post new pictures for you. You’ll have to do the blogging part, to make it really yours.”

“Blogging part?” That never entered my mind.

She laughed. “Don’t worry. Just post once a month and add ideas for events. It’ll be super easy.”

“Excellent. I can handle that.”

“That’s everything I have for you. I’ll finish it up and get your business cards ordered. Now, have you eaten lunch?”

“No, and I’m getting hangry.”

“Then let’s take care of that.”

We moved to the kitchen, and she pulled out two lovely salads with grilled chicken on them. “I planned ahead.” She winked.

“You’re good. I would’ve had to order out.” I sucked at this.

“Tell me... how’re you and your sexy singer coming along?”

I hummed my pleasure at the taste of the salad before answering, and then I filled her in on everything.

“That’s a lot going on for him.”

Nodding, I added, “And he’s hired Stacey for his custody case.” I explained those details as well.

English sighed. “I can’t even imagine. I don’t know what I’d do if someone took my kids away. I’d probably be in jail, charged with murder.”

“Speaking of, how’s my favorite niece?” I asked.

“Not happy with her Aunt Ravina. You have some sucking up to do.”

A long groan left me. “I know and I’m sorry. Is she around this weekend? I can pick her up for shopping on Saturday and she can spend the night with me.”

“She’ll love it. She’s been whining about how you’ve forgotten about her.”

“I promise to make it up to her.”

“Ravina, don’t tell me, tell her.”

“I’ll call her later this afternoon.”

We finished lunch, chatted for a while, and then I went home. It was close to four when I got there, and as I was passing Gabriel’s door, I heard a crash and him shouting. I was alarmed, so I knocked and rang the doorbell.

The door swung open, and he stood there, rage radiating off him.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“What happened?” I walked inside and he closed the door. Then he told me about meeting up with his brother.

“Everything I suspected is true. He was fucking Jane while we were married and before she got pregnant. So, who is Juliette’s father? Him or me?”

“You. Always you. You know that deep down.”

“No, I don’t. I haven’t seen her in two years, and he’s been there the whole time. That wanker moved right in and assumed the role of my daughter’s father. No wonder Jane would never agree to me seeing her. Everything makes sense now.”

“Maybe, but you still have rights to her. Did you tell Stacey about this?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed the side of his face. “I wanted to smash my fist into my brother’s face. I’ve never felt such rage.”

I glanced across the room to see the painting of Juliette he’d been working on utterly destroyed. “I understand. I wish I could do something.”

“You already have by getting Stacey for me. I’m relying on her to make something happen.”

“She will.” I said a silent prayer that I was right. If he lost access to Juliette, I’m not sure how he would handle that. “Listen, I have to call my niece and then do you want to go to dinner?”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty shitty company right now.”

“It’s fine. Just getting away from here may help.”

“You’re right.”

I was happy he’d agreed to go. “Give me an hour and I’ll come and grab you.”

After I dropped my bag on the counter, I called Easton and set up a time to pick her up on Saturday.

“Aunt Ravina, I thought you forgot about me.”

“Never. You know how much I adore you. We’ll have a great time, and we can eat pizza and popcorn for dinner while we watch a movie. Don’t tell your mom, but I’ll even let you stay up late.”

“Can I sleep with you?”

“Sure can.” I made a mental note to make sure the sheets were changed. Easton didn’t need to sleep in a bed where wild sex had occurred.

“Okay. See ya Saturday.”

I changed into something more casual. I pulled on a pair of my favorite jeans and added a white tank top, since it was scorching out. Then I left to grab Gabriel. He was ready and we left.

We went to our favorite bistro and ordered drinks. While we sat there, sipping our martinis, a woman approached the table. Gabriel stiffened as she said, “You never know who you’ll run into at a restaurant.” She was tall, and very beautiful.

“Hello, Jane. Fancy meeting you here.”

Fuckety fuck fuck. It was his ex.

# Thirty



GABRIEL

JANE STOOD BY THE TABLE AND MY HEART CLANKED AGAINST my rib cage. The adrenaline spike wasn't great for remaining calm. I couldn't believe she had the nerve to show her face to me. I was stunned. Seeing her was the last thing I'd imagined. Devon must've told her he'd met with me earlier today. It was a dilemma, and I wasn't sure how to react.

"Hello, Jane. Why now? After years of trying to get you to communicate with me, why now?" I prayed she didn't detect the tremble in my voice.

One simple shrug was all she gave. Then she added, "I wasn't ready to talk, I suppose."

Ravina sat there, silent. I introduced her. "Jane, meet my friend Ravina."

"Hello," Ravina said. Jane nodded slightly.

Then came my answer. "Devon told me about your meeting today."

"He did, huh?"

"Gabriel, you should just give it up. You'll never get Juliette back, especially since... well, you know." She had the gall to smirk.

Rage ramrodded my spine and sent an edge of nastiness to my words. "Know what? That you shagged my brother whilst

we were married? Why, Jane?”

Her mouth twisted into a sneer. “He paid more attention to me at a time when I needed it.”

I looked to the ceiling for patience. “That’s because I was trying to make an honest living for you, whilst you sat at home on your arse. Oh, and fucked my brother. How did he manage, living in England?”

She frowned and chose not to answer that. “You make it sound so ugly.”

“It *is* ugly. It’s disgusting. We vowed to be faithful to each other, and you broke those vows. If you’d wanted him that much, why not tell me and we could’ve divorced? But no, you whored around behind my back, and even now, are with him.”

Her snarky smile made me see red. “That’s true. We’re in love, Gabriel. Get used to it. Devon shows me how much he cares, unlike you.”

“For your information, I *am* used to it. A long time has passed since you and I were together, and I give zero fucks about you or who you shag. I do, however, care about my daughter.”

“Rethink that *my*. She’s not yours, Gabriel.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

“A mother always knows. Don’t you remember how hard I cried after Juliette’s birth? I played it off as postpartum depression, but it was Devon I missed and wanted by my side. That’s why I was so depressed. I wanted *him* to be there with me, and not you.”

“Wow. Nice,” Ravina said. I whipped my head toward her as she said, “You’re a real doozy, lady.” Then she glanced at me and continued, “Lucky for you, she’s out of your life.”

“Too true. It was never her I wanted. Only Juliette.”

Jane’s nostrils flared. “Let me tell you something. I’ll do everything in my power to keep her away from you.”

“Good for you. Now why don’t you be nice for a change and scurry away.” I was done with this conversation. I flicked my fingers, waving her off.

She spun on her heels and flounced away. Ravina said, “I don’t get how people can be so cruel.”

“If she’d wanted him that much, why not just tell me? That’s the big question. It would’ve saved everyone a ton of grief, including Juliette. But no. She went about it in such a sleazy way.”

Ravina reached for my hand. “Would you rather go somewhere else to eat?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. I’m just ready to be done with her once and for all.”

“I get that. I despise evil-minded people.”

We ordered dinner and I did my best to get Jane off my mind. It didn’t work. I was terrible company and suggested we leave as soon as we finished eating.

As we approached our respective doors, I said, “I’m going to call it a night. I just need some time to myself and don’t want to bring you down.”

“You don’t bring me down, but I understand. Good night.”

I gave her a chaste kiss and walked into my condo. It was gloomy and my head was in the wrong place, but I decided to call Stacey. I informed her of my visit with my brother and then seeing Jane. After a brief conversation, she said we’d talk tomorrow.

There was a half-empty bottle of scotch in my bar so I grabbed it and chugged. The trail of burn hitting my gut warmed me. It was exactly what I needed so I took another one.

Next thing I knew, the sun glared through the windows of my living room. My head felt like a dozen sledgehammers were going to town inside it. I glanced around and spotted the empty liquor bottle on the floor. I’d really tied one on. My

belly churned with the aftereffects so I forced myself into the shower.

The worst thing about drinking was it made me feel like shit the following day. Why had I done this to myself? I'd wanted to forget everything, and it had seemed the best way to do that. Now I paid the price.

After the shower, I went into the kitchen and made coffee. I was standing there, naked, when the doorbell rang. I checked the peephole and saw Ravina standing there. She grinned when I opened the door.

"Hmm. Do you always answer the door wearing that?" Her finger moved up and down.

"Only when it's you."

"You sound grumpy."

"I am grumpy. And hungover. Got pissed as hell last night."

"Alone?"

"Nope. Every demon in my head joined me."

She frowned. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"You have. More than I can say. I'll be fine."

"I wanted to ask if you had lunch plans today. I'm working a half day at the office and then will be out delivering my brand-new business cards. Thought we could grab a bite before I went on my business-building mission."

"Wish I could, but I'm delivering paintings today and then meeting up with the guys for a practice session. We have a gig tomorrow night."

"You do? That's great. Where?"

"At the usual place. Wanna come?"

"You bet I do! Okay, I have to run. I'll call you tonight. Don't forget to put your clothes on before you leave." I heard



her laughing as she closed the door. She was always so positive about everything. I loved that about her.

# *Thirty-One*



RAVINA

MY MORNING WAS FILLED WITH ONE REPORT AFTER THE NEXT. I completed everything by noon and left with a briefcase full of business cards.

English had wrapped up the website and it was beautiful. Tristian added more photos to the gallery, and I was ready for clients. I'd called all my connections to let them know and was stopping by to hand out my cards to them as well.

The first stops were the bridal shops. I had ten on my list I wanted to get to today. They were the most popular ones in the area. It took me much longer than I'd anticipated, and I only had time to run by a couple of caterers. I'd have to hit the rest of them, along with the florists tomorrow.

It was after six when I got home. My phone rang as I was punching the code into my lock.

"Where have you been?" It was Gabriel.

"Ugh. It took me forever at the bridal salons. I didn't anticipate all the chatting I'd have to do everywhere."

"I have news."

"What is it?"

"The PI Stacey hired has found out where Devon and Jane live. Now she's preparing all the custody documents to be

delivered by certified mail. We're hoping for a court case soon."

"Oh, Gabriel, that's great! I'm so happy for you."

"And here's the best. She's trying to get a judge to sign off on a DNA test."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Great. I want to know. Besides, my name is on Juliette's birth certificate."

That was something I'd mulled over. If he wasn't genetically her father, then what? I'd leave that to Stacey and him.

"Did Stacey indicate how long it would take?" I asked.

"She hopes not more than a few weeks."

"Gosh, that would be so wonderful."

"I agree. I'm coming over."

The knock immediately followed. Had he been in the hall this whole time?

"Hey," I said, opening the door. "Want a glass of wine or some water?" I went and grabbed some water for myself.

"No, thank you. I've sworn off alcohol and I'm never drinking again."

"Famous last words. You said that when we were in North Carolina."

"No, I believe it was Stanton who said it."

"Right. Anyway, did Stacey say anything else?"

"Not really. She did suggest not contacting them anymore, or at least until after the testing was done. Once those results get in, we're going to try for mediation."

I couldn't imagine that woman agreeing to anything she wasn't forced to, but I kept my mouth closed.

"When are you taking your test?"

"Tomorrow. I'm going to the doctor in the morning."

“How long before your results are in?”

“Not long but it won’t matter until we get Juliette’s results to compare the two.”

Gabriel’s phone rang as we were talking. “It’s Stacey.”

He answered and listened, pausing to say uh-huh a few times. When he was done, he said, “Stacey got the judge to sign off, not only for Juliette but for Devon. She explained that we needed it since we share a lot of the same DNA characteristics.”

“Seriously? That was quick.”

“She’s wicked, that woman. The judge is a friend and maybe that’s why. But Stacey filed the action for paternity so now Jane will be forced to submit.”

“I wonder what Jane will say when she gets it.”

“Personally, I hope she shits herself.”

I cracked up. “She’s going to. At least she won’t be able to dangle the proverbial carrot in front of you anymore.”

“Wanna get dinner?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I have to run first. I’ve neglected my workouts the last couple of weeks.”

His frown was comedic. “Ravina, it’s scorching out.”

“I have a treadmill. It’s comfy in here.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it. Call me when you’re ready.”

He left and I changed into my workout clothes, then hit the indoor road. I had to get going on the exercise again as I’d gotten lax since I’d been seeing Gabriel. It was showing too. My pants and skirts were snug and not that I minded shopping, I didn’t want to buy a new wardrobe.

As I put in the miles, I decided to train for a half-marathon. There were several nearby, so I’d have a choice. It wouldn’t be as bad as a marathon and would take little training.

I finished up at five miles. The last month had taken its toll. I would start running five days a week again. After I

cooled down, I hit the shower.

It was almost eight when I knocked on Gabriel's door.

"It's about damn time. I'm starving so I ordered some Indian food. Should be here any minute."

"I'm starving too."

"How was the run?"

"Painful, as expected. I've decided to train for a half-marathon. Want to do one with me?" I smirked.

"I just might. It's been a while since I've run."

"You can use my treadmill any time you want."

We checked the computer for half-marathons near us and found one in Savannah.

"Ohh, I love Savannah," I whooped.

"I've never been."

"Good lord, we'll have to make a long weekend out of it. Bring your camera as there will be tons of things you'll want to paint afterward."

Gabriel grinned. "I've heard all sorts of things about it. Where will we stay?"

I jumped on one of my apps and quickly rented a house for a week.

"A week?" he asked.

"Yeah. You'll want to stay at least five days and that's the rental requirement anyhow."

It was for a house downtown that would be close to the race starting area. We could walk over in the morning and then walk to a ton of restaurants too.

"November's a great time there too. The major heat will have dissipated so it should be good weather, unless it rains."

"I don't mind running in the rain, unless the temperature is in the thirties. I'm not a fan of freezing my bollocks off."

It shouldn't be that cold then. I showed him the average temperatures for January. "Even if it does rain, I doubt it'll be that cold."

"So, we have six months. I've never run thirteen miles before."

"What's your longest run?"

"Five."

He'd be fine. "Once the weather cools, we'll run outside together. I can coach you if you'd like."

"Sure. Let's start this weekend."

My expression fell. "I can't. Easton is spending Friday night and we're going shopping on Saturday."

He brightened. "Can I go with you?"

"You really want to?"

"Yes! I love going shopping with young kids. I used to take Juliette, but she was too young to get into it."

"Sure. It'll be fun. Friday night is pizza and popcorn night. We'll be watching a youthful, girly movie with princesses, no doubt. You can join us if you want."

"I'm in. I love pizza and popcorn."

He didn't mention the girly movies. That was when I fell in full-on love with him. That he wanted to do those things with me, things that were so important, kicked him up a gazillion notches. I wasn't expecting him to pounce on me. His mouth took me by storm, and all my circuits fired at once. I clung to him like static electricity. We ended up on the floor, making out until he pulled up my shirt and bra and sucked on my nipples. I almost came but he stopped. He stripped off his clothes, took mine off, and fingered me until I sank my nails into his shoulders. His name roared off my tongue as orgasm number one roared through me. I'd barely finished before he flipped me to my knees and took me from behind. It was furiously fast and hard. His cock hit me in places that felt impossible. I was stretched wide and dripping for him. My body responded, building up again for another climax. Then I

felt him come, warm and throbbing inside. Wait, warm? I usually never felt that.

“Shit, fuck, did you put on a condom?”

He pulled out, leaving me empty and lonely.

“I forgot,” he groaned. “How could I possibly forget that?”

I jumped to my feet and hopped around.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting it out.”

He laughed. The man laughed at me in my dire time.

“Ravina, come here.” His arms opened for me and I gladly went into them. “If you become pregnant, I’ll be the happiest man on earth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You and me, together forever. As in wife and husband.”

“Wait. Are you talking marriage here?”

“Yes. The *M* word, because I’m in love with you.”

# *Thirty-Two*



GABRIEL

THE WORDS ROLLED OFF MY TONGUE, AND I HAD NO REGRETS saying them. It was unexpected, but Ravina made me feel alive, loved, and everything I'd always wanted. She was the only woman in the world for me and I knew it. Had known it but hadn't wanted to face it. I'd been in the darkest place before her, I never wanted to go there again. This woman had changed my life. Even if I didn't get Juliette back, I now knew I'd have a great life with Ravina by my side.

“You're serious. You want to get married and have kids?”

“I do. But first, I'd like to take you to England to meet my parents.”

“Okay, you really are serious.” She pinched her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure this isn't a dream.”

I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger and kissed her. “I promise you're awake as can be.”

“And you'll love me even if I'm pregnant and fat?”

“Yes, but I'd never consider you fat. Even if you gained a hundred pounds, you'd be as gorgeous as ever.”

“Who is this man? You were such a dickhead at first. I hated you.”



“I know and I’m sorry. I was blinded by Juliette’s absence. You’ve opened my eyes to a different world, and I don’t ever want to lose you.”

“Hot diggity dog. Who would’ve known?”

“Me.” Her arms went around me and she clung to my neck as she kissed me.

“I love you too.”

“Thank God. I was beginning to worry.”

“Ha ha. Never. Gabriel, I promise to always be faithful to you too.”

“I know. You didn’t have to say it. You have a beautiful soul, Ravina.”

“So do you. It’s only been hidden for a while.”

I held her soft body close to mine. “It’s a good thing you’re an event planner.”

“True. What kind of wedding do you want?”

“No, no, no. It’s all up to you. I never had a real wedding with Jane. We did it at the courthouse, so I’m in for anything.”

“Do you think your band will play, with a different vocalist?”

“I can ask. But when? How soon do you want to do this?”

She bit the tip of her nail. “Let’s wait until all the custody stuff is done.”

“That’s fine, but we don’t have to. I’ve already decided that if Juliette isn’t mine, I’ll go forward knowing that I had her for a while.”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“Ravina, it’s fine. I know in my heart she’ll always be my daughter and maybe in time, I can get my brother to understand that. If she is truly mine, then I want her every other week... if that suits you.”

“Suits me? Of course, it does. You don’t ever have to worry about that. Let’s see what happens with the DNA

results.”

That night, I fell asleep with my beautiful lady in my arms. It was the first time I was at peace with everything.

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A WEEK LATER, I WAS PAINTING WHEN MY PHONE RANG. IT WAS Jane. I answered and she immediately shouted.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she screeched.

“What I should’ve done years ago. I’m finding out the truth, which you never saw fit to share with me.”

“You won’t win. I don’t care what I have to do, you’ll lose this, Gabriel. Devon is Juliette’s father.”

“If that’s the case then fine. However, I want to know the truth, since I’m the one who’s listed on her birth certificate.”

Silence. And then she was gone. I called Stacey to let her know. It was an expected response, according to her.

I’d already submitted my DNA test so it would now be a wait for Juliette’s.

Stacey added, “I’m glad she’s angry. Serves her right. And let’s hope the science is on our side.”

“It’s all we can do at this point.”

“Gabriel, I’ll call you with any news and you do the same.”

It was time to get ready. The band was playing another gig tonight at our favorite pub and I was joining in. They were still looking for my replacement and had put the word out that we’d be playing tonight. We were hoping some potential prospects would show up.

Ravina came over and we left. She was accompanying me.

“Easton says hello and I’m supposed to tell you she thinks you’ll be a good uncle.”

“Is that so?” I laughed. “She’s adorable. I have visions of her playing with Juliette. I think they’d make a good team.”

Ravina touched my shoulder. “I can’t wait to meet your daughter.”

“She’s going to love you as much as I do.”

We arrived at the pub and the others were already there, setting up. I looked at the time because I was sure we weren’t late. They must’ve arrived early.

Ravina helped me carry my things inside and with all of us working, the setup was finished in no time.

The guys got together, and we warmed up, tuning our instruments. Ravina took a table near us and she nursed a drink.

We began the set, and the place grew more crowded. As we played, it turned into standing room only.

My greedy gaze was on Ravina as she danced. I loved how she wasn’t intimidated about getting out there alone. Her luscious arse shimmied to the tune we played, and she spun to face me. Her smile sent my dick into overdrive, dammit. One look from her was all it took these days.

The song ended and next we played another fast tune. We focused on classic rock for the first set and Ravina danced to every song. The last two songs we played before our break were a bit slower. One was by the Eagles and the other was a Fleetwood Mac tune. I noticed Ravina wasn’t dancing to these, so she probably needed a break. It was just as well, since our break was coming up.

When the song ended, I flipped on the music to play while we were off stage and headed to the bar for some water. My throat was parched from all the singing. I downed a bottle and asked for another. Then I went to find Ravina. She wasn’t at the table or the bar, so I wondered where she was. Most likely she was in the bathroom. I waited and waited, but she never returned to the table.

I asked one of the employees if she would check the bathroom, but she came out and said Ravina wasn’t there. My

adrenaline took a hike straight up a mountain as I went outside to see if the car was still there. I realized how stupid that was as I had the key fob in my pocket. I ran back inside and asked the guys if they'd seen where she went. Distress oozed out of every pore on me. They saw it so we went about searching. There was a back entrance that I'd forgotten about. It was down the hall from the bathroom. Maybe she just needed a breath of fresh air.

We hit the back door, with me in the lead, as my feet chewed up the distance. When I opened the door, fury filled me as I took in the scene a short distance away. I vaguely heard my mates shouting behind me, but nothing would stop me.

# *Thirty-Three*



RAVINA

LISTENING TO THE BAND WAS ONE OF MY FAVORITE THINGS TO do. I thought about when Gabriel would no longer be playing, and a sense of sadness enveloped me. They were amazing as a group, and it was hard to tell the difference between them and the original songs they played.

Gabriel had a voice that made me swoon. It was deep and somewhat gritty at times, which sent zips of electricity racing over me.

I danced and danced until I'd worked up quite a thirst. After downing an entire bottle of water, I hit the restroom. I knew they were close to finishing their first set as the songs they played were slower than the others. That was common for them.

When I exited the bathroom, Jane and Devon stood there, waiting. I was shocked to see them as I hadn't noticed them earlier.

Devon's hand wrapped around my arm and he walked me to the rear entrance. When we got outside, he released me.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You know damn well why we're here," Jane spat. "You need to have your boyfriend drop this DNA crap."

First, I was incredulous that this woman had the nerve to ask this. Then fury filled me from head to toe. I wanted to

punch her beautiful face. My nails dug into my palms as I spoke. “Seriously? You two have been fucking him over for how long now and you want him to stop? It won’t ever happen,” I growled. “Furthermore, I hope you two rot in hell over what you’ve done to him.” Then I aimed a murderous glare at Devon. “And you... you should be ashamed to show your face. You’re his brother, for fuck’s sake. You should’ve had his back instead of stealing his wife.”

“I didn’t steal her. She gave herself to me.”

“How convenient. And yet you didn’t have the backbone to refuse her. Wow, what a big man you are.” I was on a roll and turned my ire to Jane. “And you. You took a vow to be faithful to him, yet you went behind his back while he was working his ass off to support you. You’re not fit to be a mother. Poor Juliette, to have role models like the two of you.”

Jane took a step toward me and raised an arm, but Devon stopped her. “Don’t, Jane.”

She stuck her chin out and somehow it made me angrier. “Want to know something? You’re a worthless piece of crap. I pray Gabriel is Juliette’s father. You’re not fit to be a parent.” Then I added to Devon, “And next time, don’t stop her. I’d love for her to slap me. Pressing charges for assault would be glorious.” I turned to go back inside, but the door burst open, and Gabriel rushed out. Well, fuck. This wasn’t going to turn out so well.

“What the hell is going on here?” he roared. His face was a dark mask that I’d never witnessed before.

I tried to interfere by saying, “It’s noth—” but Devon interrupted.

“Don’t worry, everything’s fine.”

Jane stood there sporting a smug expression. It took everything I had not to wipe it off her.

“Fine? I find the two of you with Ravina? I’d say that wasn’t fine at all.”

“We only came to discuss something with her,” Devon said.

“And what was that?”

My breath exploded out of me. It wasn't worth not telling him the truth, so I said, “They want me to persuade you to drop the DNA testing.”

Gabriel's teeth clamped together so hard I heard them click. That little muscle in his jaw twitched. “Only when hell freezes over will that happen. You two are despicable. Especially you.” His finger aimed at Devon. “We spent our years growing up together. We were close and always vowed to have each other's back. Do you remember that, Devon?” His lips curled in disgust.

“Yeah, I do, but this wasn't intentional. It just happened.”

The venomous look he cast at them made even me cringe. “It just happened? Do you think I'm an idiot?”

Devon's hand came up, palm facing Gabriel. “No! Not at all. But we never... what I mean is, it wasn't planned.”

“Oh, and that's supposed to make it okay? You're the idiot, not me. I have a question. Do Mother and Father know you've been fucking Jane?”

“Stop saying that. You make it sound so ugly.”

What the hell! It *was* ugly. You didn't steal your brother's wife. That was the lowest of the low.

“Christ, you're a fucking twat. You never answered my question.”

“They know now, but not before. I told them after your divorce.”

“And what was their reaction?”

Devon sighed. He appeared beaten down, as he should. “They were not too happy about it.”

“And?” Gabriel prompted.

“Father threatened to disown me, but I told him of the value I could add to our portfolio by seeking business in the US.”

“It figures. Money always did talk to him.” Gabriel was silent. I wanted to interject something to defuse the situation, but nothing came to mind.

Then Gabriel’s lips pursed with suppressed fury. I knew by the tension radiating from him, he wanted to smack Devon. I touched his arm. At first, he flinched, but then he took my hand.

His other finger came out again as he pointed it at his brother. “You and I are finished. If and when this ends, we will be civil toward each other for Juliette’s sake, but that’s it.”

Jane sneered. “You won’t have to worry about that because when we get the DNA results back showing Devon is the father, you won’t see Juliette ever again.”

“Not going to happen, Jane, so get that thought out of your puny brain,” I said. I was tired of this deceitful woman.

I wasn’t prepared for her when she lunged at me. We both fell backward, with her on top. When she tried to hit me, Gabriel picked her up and tossed her off and Devon caught her. This was crazy! I’d never been attacked by a woman like that.

Gabriel reached down for me and helped me off the gravel. “Get out of here, you two, before we all regret what happens.”

Good idea. We watched them walk away and Gabriel turned to me. “Are you okay? I panicked when I couldn’t find you.”

“I’m fine. They suck though.”

“Yeah, they do.”

Then I felt a warm trickle on my hand, so I lifted it up to see. There was a piece of glass embedded in my palm. It must’ve lodged there when I fell and hit the dirt. I pulled it out and the bleeding became worse as it had been in there fairly deep.

“Let’s go inside and have a look at that.” He took hold of my good hand again so we walked in together. The band was playing again, minus Gabriel.



We went into the Ladies' Room and ran it under cool water. He lifted my hand and declared, "That looks deep. You might need it sewn up."

I didn't want to inspect it because it would gross me out. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he said, wrapping paper towels around it. "I'll drive you."

"No, you should stay with the band."

"Not a chance. I'll not have you driving alone." He was right as a wave of dizziness hit me.

We walked out to the main room, and he waited until the band ended their song before he let them know what happened. Then we left, headed for the emergency room.

The wait wasn't extraordinarily long before they called me back. A nurse came in and told me the doctor wanted some X-rays of my hand. A female radiology tech wheeled a portable machine in and took the X-ray. Gabriel returned to the room and stroked my forehead as we waited for the doctor. When he showed up, he surprised me with the news.

"Hi, Ravina, I'm Dr. Cain. We're going to take you to surgery now."

"Surgery?" I hadn't expected that at all.

"Yes. It seems the piece of glass severed a tendon, so we need to get you fixed up. I won't know exactly how bad it is until I get in there."

"A severed tendon? Can't it wait?"

"I'm afraid not. If the tendon completely severs, then the surgery becomes more complicated. Right now, it's still intact, so it shouldn't take long."

I was much calmer now than I was when I got here. I turned to Gabriel and told him to go home. "There's no use hanging around here."

"I'm not going anywhere and will be here when you wake up," Gabriel said.

Then a couple of nurses came in and wheeled me out as I waved bye to him.

# *Thirty-Four*



GABRIEL

I WAS STILL OUTRAGED THAT JANE AND DEVON HAD SHOWN UP and accosted Ravina. Their behavior was unconscionable. My brother was totally crossing the boundaries. First, he fucked me over by stealing my wife. And now he did this. Did he have no limits to his deceitfulness?

And then to think Ravina suffered this blow. Since her surgery had been so late, she spent one night in the hospital and was released the following day. Everything went well, and her tendons were fixed. Turned out the glass had sliced into two of them. I'd never forgive my wanker of a brother for this and what he did to my marriage. That bloody excuse of it just happening was bollocks. Fucking your brother's wife doesn't just happen. There are plenty of ways to stop it, only he chose not to.

Ravina was staying with me until she got her stitches out. She needed help and I gladly volunteered. It was convenient living across the hall too. She didn't even need to pack a bag.

I cooked dinner tonight and she was in good spirits. The past couple of weeks hadn't been easy for her. At first, she'd wake up several times a night due to weird dreams of that encounter. She still had them but not as many.

"Thank you for cooking. I've been very impressed with your culinary talents."

“Don’t be. Everything I’ve made has been easy.”

“Hey, I’ll take anything because you know I can’t cook. Growing up with all my meals made for me didn’t do me any favors. I don’t know what my parents were thinking when they did that.”

“It was the same for me. My father insisted on it. My mother probably was a terrible cook. I never found out because as my memory serves, we had someone cook for us.”

“How did you learn? I can’t seem to muster up any interest in it.”

I laughed. “I had to when I moved away. I didn’t have the money to hire a cook. I barely had two quid to live on. That’s why I came to the US. I figured I had a better chance of making a go of it here. Then I met Jane, who didn’t cook, and we had Juliette. I wanted her to eat healthy, so I took it up. Now I enjoy it.”

“Then you’ll have to give me lessons.”

“I learned from watching all those cooking shows on the telly.”

Ravina sipped her wine and nodded. “You were a great student. I’m not a food scholar. I just like to eat.”

I went to gather her plate and silverware, but she stopped me. “Gabriel, I can do it. I’d like you to stop treating me like an invalid.”

“I’m not. I’m only helping you out for a time. You’re not supposed to do anything with that hand.”

“I can’t. It’s in a splint.”

That was true. I wanted to protect her and maybe I was overdoing it. “Okay, I’ll let you do this, but I don’t want you to carry more than you can manage.”

“I won’t. And it’s not that I don’t appreciate everything you’ve done, because I do. I have no idea how I would’ve gotten on without your help.”

She came into the kitchen and set her plate on the counter. “Ravina, I want to protect you. It’s my fault this happened to you.”

“Your fault? How is it possibly your fault?”

I blew out a lungful of stale air. “You were there because of me. If the band hadn’t been playing that night, you would’ve been safe.”

“That’s absolute rubbish. I was there because I wanted to be there. Yeah, the band was playing, but it was my decision to go. You didn’t force me. Stop thinking that.”

I’d tried without success. Every time I thought about it, I kicked myself in the arse. “Okay,” I said, giving her lip service. I’d deal with my feelings over this, but I’d never give up my responsibility in it.

She put an arm around my waist. “Thank you. It makes me feel better. By the way, any news from Stacey?”

“Nothing. Still waiting.”

“I wonder what the holdup is.”

“It’s Jane. She’s dragging her feet and waiting until the last possible moment.”

“Does she work?”

That was a great question. “I don’t know. If Devon still works for my father, it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“What business is your family in again?”

“If they haven’t changed things since I left, then it’s paper. They manufacture paper products for all sorts of things but mainly packaging. With the emphasis on less plastic these days, I would imagine that the business has grown.”

“Indeed. How does that make you feel?”

I could’ve been the asshole who wished ill for it, but I wasn’t. As long as it wasn’t pushed on me, I didn’t care either way. “I guess it’s a good thing for them. I never minded it but didn’t want to be involved. Not my thing.” It must be so

boring to work there. Any office work, for that matter, held no appeal for me.

“You sound exactly like Tristian.” Then she snapped her fingers. “I almost forgot. They’ve invited us to dinner on Friday. Stacey and Stanton will be there too. Are you interested?”

“Absolutely. I’d love to meet the rest of your family. Will Landry be there as well?”

“Not sure. Maybe.”

“Is he dating someone?”

“Not that I’m aware, but you never know with him. He’s as evasive as an eel.”

I understood that. Before Ravina, dating was the last thing on my mind.

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ON FRIDAY EVENING, WE FOUND OURSELVES ON THE DOORSTEP of Ravina’s brother’s house. This place was more to my liking than the ostentatious mansion. Outside it was a typical suburban home so common in the states. The inside was killer. It was large, beautiful, open and spacious with an incredible backyard. The landscaping included a lovely pool area and another section for soccer with a goal set up. If I could live anywhere, it would be in a house such as this.

Easton ran up to Ravina, asking how she was feeling.

“Much better, thank you.” She dropped down to hug her niece. Then a toddler ran up to her, yelling, “Vina. Vina.”

“Ahh, look at my handsome boy. How are you?”

He grinned and his wonky teeth made an appearance. He was too cute.

“Gabriel, meet my nephew, Jameson.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I held out a hand and he slapped it. It was hilarious.

Then he said, “Fist bump,” and offered me his. I bumped mine to it and off he ran, his chubby legs chewing up the floor.

Ravina laughed, and I did too. Then I leaned toward her and whispered, “We need one of those.”

Her brows shot up. “Um, isn’t it a bit early for that?”

“Not at all. When you know, you know.”

Stacey and Stanton arrived with their small son, Edward. He was in a carrier, asleep.

“Oh, dang. I wanted to hold him,” Ravina said.

“You will. I can assure you, he’ll wake up soon,” Stanton said. Then he carried his son up the steps.

Stacey followed him with a huge baby bag. They returned, ready to hang out.

“Did he stay asleep?” Ravina asked.

“Yeah, but he’ll want to eat in an hour. Then he’ll go down for the rest of the night,” Stacey answered.

We went inside and Ravina introduced me to her brother, Tristian. Stanton and Tristian resembled each other, whilst Ravina and Landry did. Stanton and Tristian were both dark haired, while Ravina and Landry had lighter hair.

Tristian pulled me aside. “Ravina told me that you’re an artist.”

“That’s right. I’m also a musician.”

“Nice. Do you ever work with photographers?”

“I haven’t yet but am open to it.”

“Great! I do shoots for International Wildlife and would love to have paintings of some of the photos I’ve taken.”

“Yeah, I can do that. I also do abstracts. You should come and see my work sometime and then decide. I’m not filling orders now but will soon be open again.”

“English and I would love that. Can I have your phone to add my number?” I handed it over and he sent me a text. “Now that we’re set, what can I get you to drink?”

He was a lot more laid back than Stanton had been when we initially met. But then again, I was nothing like Devon. Maybe that's why Jane had gone after him. I followed him to the bar where he poured me the glass of wine I'd requested. Then we joined the others outside on the huge, screened porch. The setup was lovely. The walls were sliders that could be open air, screened, or closed when it was cold. There was a huge fireplace at one end with a big-screen telly over it. Several fans circulated the air, making it very comfortable. Two couches, chairs and two coffee tables completed the room. It was nicely done.

The backyard held a large pool, complete with a waterfall, spa, and what looked to be a lazy river.

Easton ran over and asked, "Mr. G, wanna go swimming? I could wear my new bikini that Aunt Ravina got me."

"I wish I could, but unlike you, I didn't bring my swimsuit."

"It's okay. You can go in your undies."

How do you tell a young girl that you didn't wear undies? Thankfully, her mother intervened.

"Easton, no swims tonight, remember?"

The girl dropped her head and said, "Okayyy."

"Hey, I can always come back another time." That seemed to cheer her up and she grinned. Then Jameson ran over and tried to steal my wine.

"You gotta watch him. He's a thief." Easton nodded for emphasis.

"He is?"

"Yup. He steals Daddy's beer all the time. He doesn't learn real good. My mommy and daddy are trying to make him poop in the toilet, but he don't listen to them at all." She crossed her arms at that.

"Easton, stop telling Gabriel about your brother's poop," Tristian admonished.



“But Daddy, it’s true.”

Tristian stood next to her and said, “Honey, while it’s true, no one wants to hear about it.”

I didn’t mind. The truth was, I thought she was funny, and it had me wondering about Juliette’s personality.

Ravina sat next to me. “Is Easton telling you poop stories?”

“Yeah. She’s quite the entertainer.”

“Too bad it focuses mostly on poop. After Jameson was born, she was fascinated with penises and asked everyone if they had one. I’m glad she’s moved on from there.”

“Have I told you how entertaining I find your family?”

She chuckled. “I bet you do.” Then she winked.

“Hey, I was being clean here. Oh, and she wanted me to go swimming.” I told her about not wearing any underwear and she cackled.

“Yeah, that would be hard to explain.”

Everyone was chatting but soon the conversation turned to my art. They flooded me with questions until Ravina said, “You’ll just have to come for a visit and see.” We agreed to host a party at my place after Ravina’s hand was completely healed.

Then English said, “I can’t believe you sliced your hand like that.”

“She was the bravest woman I know, standing up for me like that. I still wish I could’ve given the two of them a beating.” Five sets of eyes zeroed in on me whilst Ravina also clenched my leg. It was a confusing moment for a second, until she whispered, “I didn’t tell them about it.”

That was when all hell broke loose.

# *Thirty-Five*



RAVINA

THE ROOM EXPLODED IN A SERIES OF CURSE WORDS WHILE English let out a loud whistle. She told everyone to calm down and that there were children present. They listened and stopped shouting.

Every single one of them turned to me and their accusatory glances told me I'd better come up with an explanation and fast.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry. It's over and we're both fine." I held up my hand for emphasis.

Gabriel's stubborn jaw indicated how upset he was. "You're not fine. You will be but you're still nursing that injury. And why didn't you tell me they didn't know?"

I shrugged because I had no good answer other than I forgot. "Look, everyone, here's the deal. I was confronted by Gabriel's brother and ex, but Gabriel saved me. End of story."

I should've known better. With three brothers, two of them here, that response would not be the end of things.

"I call bull on that," Stanton said. Then he asked Stacey if she had known.

Interrupting that, I said, "No one knew except for Gabriel, his band, and me. Oh, and Devon and Jane."

That wasn't enough and I knew them well enough that they would demand more, so I told them, leaving out some parts because Easton was still in the room. She wasn't paying much attention as she and Jameson were watching something on an iPad.

Stanton stood so straight I thought if someone pushed him, he'd crack. "Let me get this straight. His brother and ex dragged you out of the pub through the back door and assaulted you."

"It wasn't an assault. Jane pushed me down and I fell."

Stanton wasn't finished. "On a piece of glass. She pushed you though."

"Yes, and yes." I pointed to where the now healing cut was. It was surprising no one noticed that.

"And your hand? You didn't slice it while cutting vegetables then?"

I chuckled. The idea of me cutting anything was funny, but it made for a good explanation as I was clumsy as all get out with a knife. "Nope. I fell on a small piece of glass but when I landed, it went straight into my hand. That's how the tendons were severed."

"And where are these people who caused all this now?"

"At home, I suppose."

Then English got up and came over to hug me. "I'm so thankful you're okay."

Gabriel said, "She's not okay. She still suffers from weird dreams, so it definitely bothers her."

It was time for me to take the floor. I pushed to my feet and said, "It's over with and done. I made it through with little to show, which is a good thing. I'd ask that you not make a fuss over this. I'm trying to move past it, but if y'all treat me like a fragile doll, which I'm not, it will only make it more difficult."

Stacey said, "She's right. I say we drop it and thank the Lord she's fine."

We were all in agreement over that, but I knew by the set of Gabriel's stubborn jaw, he wasn't finished. I would hear about it on the way home.

"I have one more question. Are you pressing charges?" Stanton asked.

"No, because she only shoved me."

"She came at you like a mad dog, Ravina." I'd hoped Gabriel would keep his mouth shut about this, but no dice.

"Okay, she did, but pressing charges would be useless. Stacey is already working on a custody case."

"Did you call the police?"

"Stanton, that's question number two. You said you only had one more."

He glowered at me but said nothing. Dinner was wonderful, but my appetite had fled. Telling my family about this hadn't been on my agenda for the night.

Easton sat next to me and asked, "Aunt Ravina, do you got a stomachache?"

"No, why?"

"You're not a member of the clean plate club."

I glanced at her plate, which was empty, and then mine. I'd barely touched my food.

"I'm not really hungry right now, but I'm going to take it home for later."

"You know you can't get dessert if you don't finish your dinner and Mommy made chocolate cake."

"Well then, I'm in trouble it seems."

She looked very serious as she nodded. That little girl made me feel better about things, so I proceeded to clean my plate. Well, not quite, but I did put a good dent in it. "Do you think anyone will notice that I didn't eat everything?" I asked her.

I received a nod of approval, but only after she inspected it.

“Good, because I sure would like some chocolate cake.”

“Me too. And ice cream.”

“What? Ice cream too?”

“Yup. It’s the vanilla one that Mommy loves. And whipped cream.”

“Oh, man, I’m sure glad I finished then.”

All the women, except me, helped clear the table and then dessert appeared. The cake was scrumptious and so was the ice cream.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I said. “Thank you for doing this tonight.”

“English has perfected that cake,” Tristian said.

“She has. It was the best I’ve ever had,” Gabriel said.

English beamed. “I’ve gotten to where I really love to bake. And that is not a good thing.” She rubbed her belly and laughed.

“It is too, Mommy,” Easton said. “We love your cake and cookies.”

“I know you do. I love them too, only too much.”

Tristian leaned over and kissed her cheek. “By the way, we have some news,” he announced. “We’re going to be having another family member join us.”

“Who?” Easton asked.

“Your new baby sister or brother,” Tristian answered.

“Does Mommy got another baby in her tummy?”

“She sure does,” my brother said.

“Yay! I hope I get a sister who likes princesses.”

We toasted the couple on their latest pregnancy. I never imagined my brother would want a large family, but I’d been wrong. He was a great dad and he and English were very

happy. Their happiness was contagious because as I glanced around the table, everyone was smiling and having a great time. Except Gabriel. His eyes bored a hole into me, and I knew I was in for it on the way home.

# *Thirty-Six*



GABRIEL

IT MADE NO SENSE WHATSOEVER THAT RAVINA HADN'T TOLD her family about Jane's attack. It was unsettling and when we were in the car, I broached the subject.

Her hand flew up. "Wait. Let me explain. I didn't want any of them to worry and I know how protective my brothers can be."

I understood that. "Fine, but why didn't you tell me? That was..." I huffed. "I don't have words for it. Mind you, I'm not angry. I just feel left out. Maybe I'm acting like a kid, but I think a warning or a heads-up from you would've been nice."

"You're right. I planned to tell you, but I forgot. I really did."

"Please don't ever leave me out. I can help you with whatever it is you need."

"Gabriel, I know, and I didn't do it on purpose. I'm sorry it was so uncomfortable."

I reached for her hand and held on tight. "Have I told you how much you mean to me?"

"A time or two."

"Not enough, then. You're my everything, and I'd do anything for you. I'll always have your back, Ravina."

"I'll always have yours."

“Enough said about that. That’s great news about them expecting another baby.”

“Right? I never thought Tristian would be the one with the big family. I’m so happy for him.”

“That’s how I see us one day.”

She squeezed my hand. “You want a big family like that?”

“Yes, and I hope you do too.”

“I’m not sure. I have three brothers, but my mom isolated me from them, so I was raised alone. The only person I had was my nanny. Mom didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to me, but she always said I was not to run around with the boys. They were wild and she wanted to raise a lady,” she scoffed. “I wanted to be with them, but they didn’t want a girl hanging around. That was why I ended up spending lots of time in the stables and learned to ride. Landry and I were close because he rode too. I competed and had dreams of being an Olympian until my mother told me she wouldn’t allow it. I never knew why. I remembered her and my father argued about it, but he wasn’t around much so I figured I had my answer. My horse was my best friend.”

“I’m sorry but that sounds horrible.”

“When I think back, it wasn’t ideal, but at the time, I loved it. Then Dad bought me another horse and I had two friends. I rode both of them. Still do. I’d love to have a place with a stable so I could bring them to me. But horses are a ton of work, and we have grooms to handle that at the house. They’re really spoiled but don’t get as much exercise as they used to.”

“Then we need to make a riding date. Easton loves it so we need to go out there once a week and take her too.” I wanted to make Ravina happy. If this was a way to do it, then I’d ride with her.

“Oh, Gabriel, that’s a great idea! Let’s do it.”

The following day, we made plans to ride on Sunday. Then I asked, “Can you ride with one hand?”



“Ha! My horses are so well trained, I can ride with no hands.”

The last and only time I’d ever ridden with her, I was at the back of the pack and didn’t pay much attention to her skill level. I was an okay rider, as I’d also grown up with horses, but I wasn’t as enamored with it as she was.

We made the arrangements for a Sunday ride, and we picked up Easton on the way. She was dressed for riding, as was Ravina. As for me, I wore jeans and boots, but that was it. The girls looked professional, and I looked like a bum.

Landry was down at the stables when we arrived, waiting for us. He’d had all the horses saddled and Easton was eager to mount up. Of course, she had to go look at the poop pile first. I declined that little venture and got to know my horse instead. She was a gentle mare, the same one I’d ridden before.

“Aunt Ravina, will you teach me how to jump?”

Before Ravina could respond, I said, “No, she won’t.”

Ravina’s horse trotted next to mine, and she asked, “And why not?”

“Jumping a horse is dangerous.”

“Not if you know your horse and what you’re doing.”

“When was the last time you jumped?”

She stuttered out, “It’s, ah, been awhile.”

“My point exactly. Until you become proficient at it again, no jumping.”

Her eyes lit up with fire. “You cannot tell me what to do.”

“You’re right, but I can certainly stop you if I want.”

“And how will you manage that?”

There were plenty of ways I could think of, but I’d be damned if she’d jump that horse today. “Try me and you’ll find out.”

She didn’t respond but took off in a canter. When I went to follow her, she kicked her horse into a gallop. I didn’t like this

at all. She only had one good hand to control the beast and hadn't ridden in a while. Her defiance had me kicking my horse to chase her. My mount was too docile to go very fast, so it wasn't possible to catch her. I kept her in sight, though, and stared in horror as she took the animal soaring over a tree that had fallen.

The air left my body, and I couldn't breathe for a while. I began to get light-headed, reminding me to inhale. Then the woman had the gall to turn her horse around and come at me, full force, taking the jump again.

When she got close enough for me to hear her, she shouted, "Next time, don't tell me what to do." Then she took off again. Landry and Easton pulled up by me.

"Wow, did you see Aunt Ravina?" Easton asked innocently.

"Yes," I said tersely, as I ground my molars together.

"Gabriel, don't worry about her. She's about as good as someone can get at jumping," Landry said.

Stubborn woman would be the death of me. "While that may be true, she only has one hand to use. Controlling a horse in a jump isn't very easy."

"For Ravina it is. She could jump with her hands in the air. It's her specialty. If it hadn't been for our mother, she would be an Olympic gold medalist." Landry was very assured of himself when he said that.

"I knew she'd wanted to compete. I also know how talented she is. What I don't know is her capabilities with one hand and after not jumping for a while."

Landry patted my back. "Don't worry. She's fine."

Then Easton took off, shouting, "Aunt Ravina, Aunt Ravina, I wanna jump too."

Before any of us stopped her, she sailed through the air over the tree that Ravina had jumped. I held my breath as I watched. She bobbed in the seat, but then was fine. Ravina approached her and I couldn't hear what was said, but from the

looks of things, Easton was getting a good scolding. I'd see to it that Ravina would get one too when we got home.

# *Thirty-Seven*



RAVINA

I CHASTISED EASTON AFTER HER LITTLE STUNT. IT WASN'T that I was against her jumping, but she needed to be guided through the proper steps. Jumping a horse involved the use of her entire body and without proper instruction, she could've seriously injured herself.

“But Aunt Ravina, I did it!”

She was filled with excitement over her feat, but I didn't let it go.

“You did and you're lucky you didn't break your neck. If you don't promise not to ever do that again until you're properly instructed, your riding days are over.”

She knew I meant business. I never spoke to her in that tone.

“Yes, ma'am. I promise. But will you teach me?”

“I will, when I believe you're ready. Uncle Landry still has to walk you through some steps first.”

“Do you think he'd do it today?”

I nearly smiled at her eagerness to learn, but I had to stick to my point. “No, not today. Maybe the next time we come out.”

Then we rode back to the men, and Gabriel fumed. He was as angry as I'd ever seen him lately. However, I would never

let him boss me around. I'd lived under Stanton's bossy ways and vowed never to do it again.

My hackles rose when he scolded me. I wasn't a seven-year-old who didn't know any better. I was an accomplished rider and horses were like bicycles. Once you learned, your muscle memory kicked in. Or at least that was the case for me. I'd been riding for so many years, I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't.

We dropped Easton off and then were on the way home.

"I am not very pleased with you," Gabriel started out.

"I don't want to hear it. I'm a grown woman and know my capabilities, particularly on a horse. You can't and won't tell me what to do."

"You are not using your brain. Your body is compromised with only one hand."

Resentment grew in me. "Wait one minute. You don't know the first thing about jumping horses. That's my area of expertise. I used to jump all the time."

"Key words are *I used to*. You don't do it regularly anymore."

I concluded that there would be no use in furthering this conversation. Even though I still bristled that he wanted to tell me what to do, I clamped my mouth shut and didn't respond to anything he said. When he grew frustrated enough, he stopped speaking too. That was until we got into the elevator. Then I got Gabriel in full force.

He shoved me against the wall, careful of my hand. His mouth crashed onto mine with a ferocity I hadn't yet experienced with him. Electricity fired and raced right to my core. My arms wound around his neck as I pressed myself against him. If he thought to punish me, I could give as good as I got.

The elevator stopped and he drew me out behind him. We went into his place, and he wasted no time in getting us both naked. He carefully undid the buttons on my shirt and removed it. Then he drew a bra-covered nipple into his mouth,

biting down. The fabric cushioned the blow, but also rubbed against me, turning my nipples into granite. My pants went next and then he stopped, and we got into bed. He took his time, running his mouth and tongue from my neck to my core. My thighs were spread wide to accommodate him. I gasped as he stroked me mercilessly. A lock of hair fell on his forehead and my fingers itched to push it back, but my hand gripped the sheet too hard to let go. I gained my release with a groan and allowed the spasms their way. When they slowed, my desire for him, all of him grew.

“I want you, now, Gabriel.”

His predatory gaze drew me in. I was ready for him to take me, only he surprised me when he flipped me on my knees. I loved it this way too, but when the first slap stung my cheek, I jolted.

“Don’t you dare move. You’re going to be punished for that crazy stunt you pulled.”

I shimmied, trying to get away, but another slap landed hard. “Stop,” I cried, wincing at the stinging pain.

“Not until your arse is sufficiently pink and you’re a long way from there.”

The next slap came, and my body responded, but not in the way I wanted it to. It was defying me, growing wetter. He gave me at least ten good slaps, but I’d lost count because I was dizzy with need. My breath was ragged when he kissed each cheek and massaged them. I wasn’t expecting what came next, but he spread me wide and inched inside, slowly at first. He powered into me and stole my breath. His thrusts were hard and fast, the tension building so fast, I didn’t expect to climax so quickly. I screamed his name as I came. If that was his punishment, I’d take it any day.

“Wow, just wow.”

“You think I’m done? We just started, baby.”

Oh hell. He rolled me to my back and his eyes never left mine and he pushed back inside me. He lifted my ankles to his shoulders and set up a wicked pace again. I barely breathed as

he controlled my body with his pounding thrusts. Harder and deeper he went, keeping me right at the edge until I couldn't think. Then my orgasm erupted, taking me over. I arched against him and then shuddered until it passed. He still nailed me with his gaze as he finally got his own release. His powerful body vibrated as he took my mouth in a mind-bending kiss. When he released me, he flashed a wicked grin.

“Every time you defy me, this is what will happen.”

“Then call me Miss Defiance because that was epic.”

# *Thirty-Eight*



GABRIEL

Monday afternoon the phone rang, and it was Stacey. “We have the DNA. She submitted it on Friday so now we wait for the results.”

“How long?” I asked.

“It doesn’t take that long, but the results are now in the court’s hands, so I don’t know. They’ll send the reports to us.”

“Just one more waiting game then.”

Stacey chuckled. “Yeah, but we’re inching closer every day. Hang in there.”

“I will. It was great seeing you and Stanton the other night.”

“It was. We had a great time. It’s our turn next. Oh, and I heard you and Ravina had a little discussion about her jumping.”

“Uh, yeah. It was bloody nerve racking watching her. And then with Easton following, I was bonkers.”

“I’ve never seen her ride, but I know she’s very good according to Stanton.”

“True enough, but to my point, she only had one hand. I wasn’t as confident as her.”

“You want to know something? I’m very happy that you’re so concerned about her. It shows you care.”



“Care? Hell yes, I care. I’m in love with that stubborn woman.”

“And that makes me even happier. Does she know?”

“Are you crazy? Do you think I’d tell you before her?”

“I suppose not.”

“Stacey, that woman is going to be the death of me. I’ve never met anyone more stubborn.”

“Tell me. It’s an inherited trait.”

I thought about Stanton and laughed. “You do have your hands full with that one.”

“Ugh. Don’t I know. You should’ve been around when we were dating. The fool tried to run my life.”

Was I doing that to Ravina? Is that why she balked at me? Maybe I needed to take a different route and ask more than tell.

“I can see how he’d do that.”

“He sure did. Hey, I have to run. Someone just walked into my office.”

“Sure thing. Cheers, Stacey.”

The more I thought about things, the more I knew I was handling everything wrong where Ravina was concerned. I needed to have more confidence in her decisions. After all, she’d proven herself over and over and she wasn’t daft. I’d never go for someone like that.

I cleaned the brushes and wrapped up my painting project, then changed and left. My destination was a jewelry store one of my clients had recommended. When my heart burst out of my chest and landed on the ground the other day as I held my breath praying Ravina wouldn’t break her neck, I knew she was mine forever.

The jeweler was excellent. I didn’t know much about diamonds or settings, but he was patient and explained everything to me. He showed me a diamond that even got my attention. I never really cared too much about that type of

thing. The stone was radiant, and he pointed out how you could see hearts and arrows when moved around. I'd never known that before.

“We can create anything you want. Do you have any ideas?”

Ravina wore a sapphire ring that was very beautiful, yet plain. She'd once told me her father had given it to her upon her college graduation. “That's when I was still a brat. My brother forced me to grow up.” I'd laughed at that but when she told me the full story, she was right. She'd been spoiled to death by her father and secluded from everything by her mother. She'd never worked a day in her life until Tristian forced her to by threatening to cut off her trust fund. It came as quite a shock because now she worked harder than anyone I knew.

“Yes, I want it to be simple, yet elegant. Can you add a few smaller stones next to it?”

“We can, but this diamond speaks for itself. I'd recommend a solitaire in a unique way.” He went to the back of the store and returned with some sketches. “Something like this, perhaps, or this.” He showed me a couple of options that I liked. One had the diamond sitting in the center of a swirling mount. The other had it in a mounting that resembled a hand. It sounded awful but looked amazing. “Do you like either of these?”

The swirling one was very eye-catching. “I like this one. What if she doesn't though?”

He smiled. “We want our customers to be pleased with their purchases. If it's not to her liking, she can come in and we'll create something else for her at no extra charge, of course.”

He showed me some options for bands that sat on either side of the ring but had diamonds on the side. “I really like that idea.”

“Excellent. Then do you want it?”

“Yes, that's the one. When can it be ready?”

“In a couple of days. I can call you when it’s done.”

I paid for the purchase and left. Diamonds were not cheap, but I hadn’t expected them to be. I had no problem affording it. Now I had to figure out a way to ask her to marry me.

Should I take her somewhere? Or just propose over a dinner date? I decided on the former. We’d been waiting here for something to happen regarding Juliette, so it might be good to go on a little trip.

I jumped online and checked out availability for an island trip. I found the perfect place, which included a chef for five days and our own private villa on one of the Bahamian islands.

When Ravina came home, I knocked on her door. She’d texted me, letting me know she was there.

“Hey,” she said, letting me in.

“How’s your schedule at the end of next week for five days?”

“Let me check.” She opened her phone and then said, “I have a couple of things at work that aren’t important. Other than that, nothing. Nothing booked yet for the new business.” She sounded a bit down about that.

“Good. We’re going away for five days. We need the break.”

“Really?” Her eyes brightened as she grinned.

“Yup. I found the perfect place that’s only a few hours away by plane.”

“Don’t do that. We can take the company jet. No one has used it in quite a while so it’s available. Stanton quit traveling so much after he and Stacey got together and after the crash.”

“The WHAT?”

“Yep. He and Landry were in a plane crash but were fine, thank God. Something happened to the engine, so he got a new one after that. But then he and Stacey got together and now with the baby, he doesn’t go out much. Landry does most of it but hasn’t been traveling lately.”

“If it works, then fine.” It would be great because then we could fly directly to the airport there, instead of having to change planes.

She opened her phone again and said, “No one’s going anywhere. I’ll text Stanton and Landry to let them know.” Her fingers tapped out the message and their response was a thumbs-up. “So now that you’ve gotten me excited, where are we going?”

I was going to have it be a surprise, but she’d have to let the pilot know so I told her.

“Really? That sounds amazing!”

“It will be.” Now I couldn’t wait to give her the ring.

# *Thirty-Nine*



## RAVINA

GABRIEL TOLD ME TO PACK LIGHTLY AND WHAT TO BRING. I knew we were headed somewhere in the Bahamas but didn't know the exact place we were staying.

We landed at a small airport on one of the smaller islands and were met by a driver who took us to a marina. Then a boat carried us the rest of the way, literally to the dock at the place where we'd be staying for the next five days. It was stunning. The villa was right on the beach and white sand with turquoise water beckoned.

The owner showed us the property. It was already stocked with what we wanted to eat, and a chef was available around the clock. We also had a speedboat at our disposal, in case we wanted to go fishing. There were wave runners to use, along with anything else we might want. Snorkeling equipment was also available.

The island was completely private, with no one to share the beach with. The master suite had an amazing bathroom but also included an outdoor shower. It was magnificent.

We had a discussion with the chef, so he'd know what to prepare each day. The menu items were restaurant-worthy, and my mouth watered. As if he knew, he showed us where our lunch for the day could be found. He even offered to pack it in a cooler so we could eat it on the beach.

After unpacking, we changed into our suits and went straight to the beach. We brought the cooler with us and ate lunch with our feet digging in the powdery sand. I was excited to find snorkeling equipment in a storage shed so after we ate, we donned the gear and went for a swim. The warm water was amazingly clear, and we spotted lots of grouper, angelfish, parrotfish, and sea turtles, which was exciting. There was a reef nearby, which made the number of species astounding.

We swam back to the beach, and I said, “We should try and catch fresh lobster while we’re here.”

“I’ve never tried that but I’m game.”

Fresh lobster was so delicious. It would be crazy to pass that up. My decision made, I went for it. It was late in the day, near twilight, which was the best time to search as that’s when they were most active. Lobsters loved to hang out under rock outcroppings in reefs, on seagrass beds, and sand flats. It took a little time, but I finally found two beneath me as I floated in the calm water. I dove down and grabbed them. Their spiny shells made it a bit difficult to hold, but I did so gently and brought them to shore.

“Score,” I shouted, holding them up.

“You found some?” Gabriel asked.

“Two! We can have them for dinner. Come on, I want to get them inside before the chef cooks our dinner.”

I set them down to wrap a towel around me and carried them inside. The chef was in the kitchen already and had begun preparations for dinner. He said he could substitute the lobster for the seafood he was going to prepare. We’d have that for lunch tomorrow.

Dinner was fabulous. The lobsters were the best things I’d eaten in ages. Gabriel barely took a breath as he gobbled his up. We hardly spoke a word either.

A long, satisfied sigh eased out of me. “That was delicious. I could eat those every day.”

“Same here. I’m going to grab more tomorrow. I want these every day.”

We warned the chef to be prepared for tomorrow. If we didn't find any, he could cook what was originally planned.

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THE REMAINDER OF OUR DAYS WERE SPENT FROLICKING IN THE water, riding wave runners, snorkeling, grabbing lobsters, and eating. On our last night there, we ate by torchlight on the beach. It was beautiful. Our days there had flown by, but each one had been special. I wasn't very excited about leaving.

"This has been the best vacation. I don't think I've ever had such a fun and relaxing time."

Gabriel reached for my hand. "That makes me happy, and I couldn't agree more. We'll have to keep doing these trips."

"Yes! Where should we go next?"

"Antarctica."

The finality in the way he stated it told me he wasn't kidding. "Wait, isn't it freezing down there?"

"It is, but we'd be on a fancy cruise ship, with a nice warm bed in which to snuggle."

"Snuggle? That's it?"

"No, Ravina, I would fuck you several times a day until you limped, and I'd lick your pussy until you screamed."

*Gulp.* The raspy way he said it sent shivers tickling my skin. "O-okay," I breathed.

"We'd also visit penguins."

I gasped. "I love penguins!"

"There are lots of things to see down there."

"When do you want to go? We'd need more than a few days."

He chuckled. "It's a two-to-three-week cruise."

"You've been looking then?"

“I have. It would be an adventure.”

“I’m in. As long as I don’t freeze at night.” I winked.

“Don’t get cheeky with me. You know I’d never let you freeze.”

It would be the exact opposite. He’d set me on fire, and I wouldn’t need clothes. “True. You’d only heat me up.”

“Wouldn’t that be a great trip for our honeymoon?”

“Could we throw in a side trip? Like to somewhere warm too?”

“Sure. Anything for my lady.” He released my hand and rose out of his chair. He came to my side of the table and dropped to one knee. “Ravina, will you marry me and be my forever person?” He held a box in his hand and opened it up. Inside sat an exquisite diamond ring.

My hand pressed on my chest. This was an utter shock. He’d given no hints at all he was planning this. He hadn’t even acted nervous. My mouth refused to form any words as crazy thoughts flew through my head. Yes, I loved Gabriel with all I had. He was a wonderful man, but I had yet to meet his daughter and I didn’t want to begin a life with him until his custody case was solved. That hung over him like a dark cloud and when we began our lives together, I wanted him to be free of that.

Another thing we hadn’t fully discussed was he wanted more children, but how soon? I wasn’t ready to have kids yet. I wanted my business to grow and be running smoothly when we had children. I knew he was my person, the man I wanted forever, but was he willing to wait? There were so many things we’d never talked about that saying *yes* didn’t seem right. Not yet anyway.

I didn’t want to hurt him, but I wanted him to know the truth. “I love you, Gabriel, and as much as I want to, I can’t say yes yet.”



# *Forty*



GABRIEL

MY HEART EXPLODED AND THEN FELL TO MY FEET IN A million pieces. How had I gotten things so wrong? We'd talked about getting married, albeit briefly, but still. I was bloody sure she was on the same page as me. Her words pierced my soul, and I didn't know what to say.

I was still on my knees when she said, "It's not that I don't see us together one day, but it's too soon right now."

She waited in silence for me to say something. I didn't know where to start. "I thought this was what you wanted."

"It is, just not right now. We have a lot of unresolved things going on. Your custody case. If you get Juliette, she should have time to get used to you again. My business. I want it to take off and grow first."

If she thought that cushioned the blow, it didn't. "I understand all of that, but if we love each other, why not just do it?"

She stood and came to me, taking my hand. "I want us to begin our lives together with nothing influencing it. If we wait, we'll begin on the right foot."

I only nodded and headed inside.

"Where are you going?"

“Inside to pack.” I said nothing else. This destroyed me. I never expected her to say no. I jerked out my bag and threw everything inside that I didn’t need, leaving out clothes for the flight home and my toiletries. How did I miss the signals or get them so wrong? I always thought if you loved someone, you took the next step.

The door opened and she walked in. “Gabriel, let’s talk this out.”

“What’s there to say? You turned me down.”

“That’s not true. While I don’t want to get married right now, I do want to marry you.”

“I don’t understand you, Ravina. When I asked you to marry me, I didn’t say to do it tomorrow.”

“Yes, but why not wait until things are settled with us? Think of your daughter. What happens if you’re granted total custody? She’s been away from you for two years and will need time to adjust. For her to walk into a home with me already there as your fiancé might be difficult. What if she doesn’t like me?”

I grabbed her shoulders. “Do you really think that will happen because I call bollocks on that. She’ll adore you.”

“I hope so but what if she wants time alone with the daddy she hasn’t seen in years?”

That was a good point. However, Ravina was a huge part of my life I didn’t want to give up, Juliette or not. I conveyed this to Ravina. “And aside from that, you live across the hall, so she’ll see you a lot. A warm welcome is all she needs.”

“No, it’s not. She needs time for the bond between you two to grow. I’m not saying I’d completely step away. What I’m saying is if we are just boyfriend and girlfriend, then it’s not so threatening.”

She was probably right. I wore my heart on my sleeve with Ravina and she’d ripped it off. The voice of reason knocked me on the skull. I wanted to see her side, and as I did, she was right.

“Okay, when do you think we can do this?”

“You mean get engaged?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s wait until your custody battle is over. Then Juliette can settle in, and I can concentrate on my business.”

I inhaled deeply and asked, “So you still want to marry me?”

She answered by throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me. “Of course, I do. I want only you.”

I kissed her again and asked, “Do you want to see the ring again?”

“Yeah, but I want to fuck you first.”

“I think I’m the one that does the fucking.”

“Shut up and let’s get naked.”

She dropped the dress she wore, and it puddled at her feet. I was happy to note she wore nothing beneath it. My shorts fell to the floor, and I lifted her up as she straddled me. Then I guided my shaft into her and I powered inside, accelerating my thrusts. I spun and walked to place her against the wall. Her heels dug into my arse as I banged her.

“I love your sweet cunt wrapped around me.” It was sublime and I wanted it forever. My thrusts were frenzied, and I drove into her with fury. It was anger laced with love. With all we had between us, she would always be my one. “I want to hate you, but I can’t. I love you too much.” The words came out with a pant.

“Harder, Gabriel. Give me more.”

I pulled away from the wall and walked to the bed. “On your knees.”

She scrambled to get into position. Grabbing her by the hips, I drove inside her as she moaned. My fingers sank into her soft flesh as I impaled her. Full arousal was never far away when I was with Ravina or even thought of her. Her curves, the luscious globes of her arse, the long muscular legs, her

gorgeous tits, and her tight pussy consumed me. A day didn't pass that my hunger didn't rise for her. She was everything and more. The sex cocoon we existed in was my world and never wanted out.

"More," she gritted out. I complied, hearing my pelvis slap against her arse. The view was unreal, and my undoing. I came with a growl as her inner muscles rhythmically clenched around me. It was ecstasy at its finest, until reality smacked me in the face.

"I hate you," I said.

"No, you don't," she purred. "You're just angry with me."

"You sure about that?"

She pulled away and turned around. Cupping my cheeks, she kissed me, tangling her tongue with mine. I loved the feel of her mouth. My anger had dissolved, but my resentment soared.

"If you hated me, you wouldn't kiss me like that."

"Maybe not hate but resentment. You might say I'm a bit bitter. You gutted me when you said no."

"But I didn't. I only said not now."

"Same thing."

"It's a hundred-percent different. Listen to me. I want to marry you, just not yet."

"Fine," I snapped. "Give me a time frame."

She shrugged. "I don't know. A year?"

"Six months," I countered.

"That's not enough to get my business going."

"Yes, it is. Maybe it would be better to wait and we could build it together."

"Gabriel, listen to yourself. You barely have time for your art orders and when Juliette comes, you'll even have less time."

She was right and I knew it. I remained stubborn though.

“Six months would work. I know it. You may still be building up your business, but that doesn’t mean we can’t go forward.”

Ravina backed away and got off the bed. “I don’t want to argue about this. We have to come to a mutual decision as I don’t want to start our lives together without a compromise.”

“That’s what I’m doing. You said a year, and I countered with six months.”

Her hands landed on her hips, and she sassed, “Okay then, eleven months.”

“Seven.” I smirked at her pout.

“Ten.”

“You have a deal. When do you want to announce our engagement?”

# *Forty-One*



RAVINA

WHEN WE FLEW HOME, THE DIAMOND RING SAT PROUDLY ON my finger. It was a compromise, yet I had doubts. He was near the end of his custody battle, so it was my business that was the issue. I didn't want the time spent on it and away from him to become an issue. I tended to sink my teeth into something and go all in. That translated into being a workaholic, particularly if it was something I loved. Deep in my heart, this business would take off and grow. How fast that happened was the question.

“Why so quiet?” Gabriel asked.

“Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Us.”

“Ravina, do you regret your decision?”

Did I? Part of me wanted to say yes, while the rest of me was thrilled. “No, not regret. Concern.”

He took my hand, saying, “Let's talk this out. Silence never works.”

“Your custody case should be over soon. It's my business I'm worried about.”

“Why are you worried? Do you think it's going to fail?”

“Not at all. I’m afraid I’ll be spending a lot of time on it, which means I’ll be away from you. My brothers offered me a deal that works in my favor. I’ll still be doing my job at Baines, part time, and then my business. Until it takes off, I’ll do both. That equates to being extremely busy.”

“Understood. If you’re worried about me feeling neglected, don’t. I’m a grown man and will deal with it. Besides, I’m banking that Juliette will be spending time with me, so that will give us time together.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I mean, I did, but not in that way. His being with Juliette and getting to know her would fill my place. “Thank you. I feel better now.”

“The question remains, when will we tell everyone?”

“It’ll have to be tonight. I can’t go to work tomorrow with a ring on my finger and no explanation.” Stacey would murder me for that.

“We can make the calls when we get home then. And what about a date?”

“Ten months from now.” I grinned. “I can start planning if you have any ideas on where.”

“Do you want big?”

“No. I want something small and intimate.”

“What about the mountains? Could we do it at the house up there?”

“Ooh, I love that idea! Sure you don’t want to wait a couple more months to get the leaf season? It would be gorgeous.”

“Not a chance. The only gorgeous thing I’m interested in is you. You steal the show over everything.”

I kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

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I PRANCED INTO THE OFFICE IN THE MORNING, WEARING MY biggest grin. Last night, we called everyone and told them. We were met with lots of congratulations, which was great. Only Stanton wanted to know if we were rushing things.

“Just like you and Stacey did,” I answered.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“I’m happy for you,” Stacey said.

English also was thrilled. “I knew it! I knew you two were planning something.”

“We didn’t. Or I was clueless. Gabriel did the planning.”

Then we told them about doing it in the mountains. Everyone was thrilled.

Stanton said, “You know Dad would’ve been so happy to hear that.”

“I know. He loved it up there.” I would miss him walking me down the aisle, or rather through the living room. Then an idea hit. We could do it out on the massive deck that overlooked the mountains. Visions of twinkling lights, lots of candles, beautiful summer flowers, and tulle draped strategically around filled my head. I was going to love planning this one.

My first stop was Stanton’s office. He held out his arms and hugged me. “I’m very happy for you. You two make a great pair.”

“Thanks, big bro.”

Stacey must’ve heard us because she skipped in and gave me a loud *woo-hoo*. Her arms wrapped around me as she squeezed. The girl was strong, most likely from lifting that chunky baby of hers. “I’m so excited for you. And to think you met him at our reception. That makes me so happy.”

Landry came in and hugged me. “Remember our promise, sis. No major PDA, like two others we know.”

I laughed and told him my promise was solid.



“Yeah, just wait. Knowing Gabriel, that’ll fly out the window,” Stanton said.

We chatted for a bit, then I went to my office. My admin came in and asked, “Do I spy a diamond on your finger?”

I held out my hand and showed her.

“Wow! That’s beautiful. I love the swirled setting. And look how your diamond sparkles. Just beautiful.”

“Thank you. It was quite a surprise, I can tell you. I had no idea he was planning it.”

“Sneaky guy. That makes it even more special.”

She was right and that was something I hadn’t thought about.

My admin left and I got to work. I had stacked piles of documents to sign off on, and projects to approve as well. I’d made a dent and was flipping through another file when my cell phone buzzed. I checked and it was Gabriel.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Did you talk to Stacey?”

“Yeah, earlier this morning. Why?”

“She didn’t mention anything?”

“No. What’s going on?” He dangled the carrot and I wanted to know.

“The DNA results are in and I’m coming over.”

My belly coiled into one huge knot. I said a short prayer for good news. “Come and get me when you arrive.”

“I will. Ravina, I’m a bit freaked out about it.”

“Honestly, so am I.” Why hadn’t Stacey come in? It must be bad news.

“Nothing we can do now, yeah?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine,” I said, crossing my fingers.

“See ya in a bit.”

Should I go see Stacey? Maybe it would ease the churning in my gut. It was useless to wait so I walked over to see her.

“Hey,” I said from the open doorway.

“Get in here.” Her gigantic grin told me everything.

“Gabriel is on the way.”

“I know.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Not without him, but...” her voice trailed off.

“I can surmise by your expression that it’s good news.”

She made a zipper motion over her mouth.

“Okay, I’m going back to work. I’ll come back with him when he gets here.”

I sat at my desk, unable to do anything but check the time. What was taking him so long? It had been at least thirty minutes since he’d called. My fingers thrummed a rhythm on the desk. This waiting was killing me.

He finally...finally arrived with a flurry. “I got here as soon as I could. There was a car accident, so traffic was beastly.”

We went over to Stacey’s office and sat.

“Great news, you two. Juliette is positively your daughter. They compared the three results, and you were the match over your brother.”

Gabriel’s smile was enormous, and his body relaxed in the chair. He’d been sitting like a statue. “So, what next?”

“We aim for mediation and I’m already working on it. If we can get her to agree to our terms, then we can forgo going to court. If not, we take it all the way.”

“How soon will the mediation be?” I asked.

“I’m shooting for next week.”

Another week of torture for Gabriel.

# Forty-Two



GABRIEL

MEDIATION HAD BEEN SET AND I WAS GOING TODAY. RAVINA asked if I wanted her there, but I had Stacey as my avenging angel. “Stay and get your work done. I’ll be fine.”

Her hand wrapped around my arm. “Call me as soon as it’s over.”

She left and I went to meet Stacey. We arrived and met in the building lobby so we could enter together. The conference room was set, and I noticed Jane and Devon were already seated, along with their attorney. The mediator was also there.

He began by summing up the case. Then it was handed to Stacey.

“By now, we all know the DNA results. Juliette is Gabriel’s daughter, and we want to share custody.”

The other attorney said, “Not possible. Your client hasn’t had contact with his daughter in over two years.”

Stacey leaned forward and said, “That’s because your client fled the state and would not respond to any of his requests to see his daughter. Ms. Knight deliberately kept the two of them apart. As you are aware, any judge would not be happy to hear that. If you press this, we *will* go to court and sue for full custody.”

“I need a minute with my client.”

The mediator said, “In the best interests of the child, it would be ideal if you could work this out. Dragging this through the court would be detrimental, in my opinion.”

Stacey and I left the room until we were called back in.

Jane’s attorney said, “Against my counsel, my client still refused.”

Stacey rose to her feet. “See you in court.”

We left. As we got on the lift, I said, “I knew she’d be difficult.”

“Don’t worry, she’ll know difficult when we get to court. I’ll file the motion today and we should have a date soon.”

Stacey pulled lots of strings and in two weeks we went to court. I was ready to put this behind me and begin a life with Juliette. Everything had fallen into place perfectly, including the judge. Stacey loved her because she took a hard stance on parents who didn’t do the right thing. Jane had clearly screwed me over, so I was hoping I’d get my reward here.

Stacey was brilliant. She sank her teeth into Jane and whipped her around like a dog toy. She left very little for her attorney to question or rebut. Jane had sealed her coffin when she left the state and wouldn’t communicate with me. Luckily, I saved screenshots of the hundreds of texts I sent her, the emails, and the list of phone calls I made that went unreturned. Stacey entered all of it as evidence of Jane’s refusal to respond. The judge took her time reviewing it. When she finished, she targeted Jane and her attorney.

It felt like I was in an episode of Judge Judy, the way she spoke to my ex. Jane tried to respond but was scolded for speaking. Her attorney grabbed her arm and said something to her. It was easy to see how furious she was.

In the end, I was granted complete custody. I was completely startled. We hoped for joint custody, sharing Juliette equally. But the judge disagreed. She felt that Juliette would have a more stable home with me and could visit her mother every other weekend. Jane was also told she had to pay child support. When she went to say something, the judge

pointed at her and said, “If you open your mouth, I’ll charge you with contempt.”

Court was adjourned, but not before the judge told Jane she would turn my daughter over to me immediately.

Stacey and I hugged and when I went to speak to Jane, she said, “You’ll never get her. I’ll leave again.”

Jane’s attorney said, “If you do that, you’ll go to jail.”

Devon finally said, “Jane, you lost. You should’ve done the joint custody through mediation, but this is your fault. You can’t take Juliette away because you don’t have custody of her. You just lost it.” Then he looked at me and said, “I’ll text you with our address so you can pick her up in the morning.”

“Thanks.” I gave my brother a curt nod.

We got to Stacey’s car. She’d picked me up this morning. “Thanks, Stacey. This would never have happened without you. I should’ve listened to Ravina from the start. You’re fantastic.”

“Thanks. I work as hard as possible at it.”

“It shows. Do I need to do anything in the morning before I pick her up?”

“Just make sure her bedroom is ready. You’ll need to set her up for school too. I’m so happy for you. I don’t know what I’d do if someone stole Edward from me.”

“Thanks to you, it’s over.”

“Should I drop you at home or do you want to go see Ravina?”

“Ravina!”

When we got to her office, she jumped out of her chair and yelled, “Tell me now!”

“We won. Full custody.” I beamed.

“Full custody? Whoa, what a coup!” She ran to me and nearly knocked me on my arse as she jumped into my arms.

“I’m so excited to meet her!” Then she planted her lips on mine.

“I hope I recognize her.”

“You will. When is she coming?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Yikes! We have lots to do. Let’s go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“Yeah, we need to decorate her room! Let’s go.”

Stacey laughed and we left. Ravina took me to some great places for new bedding and some prints for the wall. I also grabbed some stuffed animals and dress-up costumes too. Ravina had suggested those as girls usually loved to play dress-up.

She helped me put out the new things, but she made me wash the new bedding. It was pale pink with tiny flowers on it. I thought it to be quite pretty and girly, which was what we were going for.

After we finished everything, it was dinnertime, so we went out to celebrate. We went to a steak house and ate like a king and queen.

“What time is she coming?”

“I need to pick her up. I’ll text Devon now, while I’m thinking about it.”

I shot him a text and I didn’t receive an immediate answer. It frightened me a bit because I still worried Jane would take her away again. By the time we got home, I had a response waiting.

Devon: *You can come around ten. We’re getting her things ready tonight.*

I passed that on to Ravina. “Looks like you’re getting your daughter early tomorrow. What will you do?”

“I want to bring her here and get to know her again.”

“If you want, we can all go riding on Saturday and have Easton come. That might be a great icebreaker.”

“I’d love that. She may be afraid though, so let me ask her.”

We went to our own places that night. I wanted a good night’s sleep for my big day tomorrow. I couldn’t wait to see my sweet girl.

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TEN A.M. TOOK FOREVER TO GET HERE. DEVON AND JANE lived about twenty minutes from me, so I allowed myself plenty of time to get there. A sudden case of nerves twisted my gut as I stood on their porch, ringing the doorbell.

Devon swung the door open. They lived in a very upscale neighborhood, thanks to my brother. “Come in.”

I followed him inside to hear a young voice say, “But I don’t wanna go. Why do I have to?”

Devon shrugged. “She’ll be fine.”

I wanted to say, “Damn right she will,” but I wasn’t so sure. I had visions of her running into my arms, yelling, “Daddy, Daddy.” Not the unwilling child I’d heard.

Then Jane held her hand as they came into the foyer. I saw several bags packed so I said, “Hi Juliette. Do you remember me?”

She shook her head and said, “No. You’re not my daddy, he is.” My brother actually had the grace to look ashamed.

I refused to reveal my true feelings in front of her. “Close, sweetheart. He’s my brother. Did you know that?”

Again, her head swiveled from side to side.

“Are those your things?”

“Yeah, but not all of them. I couldn’t fit all my toys in.”

“It’s just as well because you’ll be coming back here too. You’ll need some toys here for then.”

Jane walked her over to me and Devon said, “I’ll get the bags for you.”

I walked her out to the car and put her in the booster seat in the back. I purchased it yesterday when Ravina and I went shopping. After I buckled her in, I opened the back for Devon. “Is that it?” I asked.

“One more. I’ll be right back.” He ran inside and came back with the last one.

“Thanks.”

“Gabriel, call if you need anything.”

No way in hell would I ever call him. I nodded to put on a good show and hopped into the car. We drove off as I said, “I don’t live too far from here. Do you like to draw pictures?” I was curious to see if she had the artist gene.

“Yeah. Mommy lets me draw with crayons. I brought my own paper too.”

“Have you ever painted before?”

“No.”

“How about I show you how.”

“Can I?” It was the first time I heard a lift in her tone.

“Sure. But first, are you hungry?”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“Let’s get something to eat first.”

“Can we go to Hamburger Hero?”

Urrgh, I hated fast food, but I’d eat it today if it pleased her. “Sure thing.” I drove to the closest one. It was early so we didn’t have to wait long for our food. We took a seat in one of the booths and she played with the place mat by drawing on it.

Our food was ready, and she ate fairly well. I hoped she wasn’t picky. “What’s your favorite thing to eat?” I asked her.



“Ice cream.” That hadn’t changed. She loved it as a four-year-old too.

“I love ice cream too. What else?”

“Cupcakes.”

“Hmm, maybe we can bake some.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened.”

“Sure. What else do you like?”

“Macaroni and cheese. Chicken fingers and french fries.”

I was going to have a tough time with that diet. I needed to get her to love some healthy things too.

“I love strawberries. One time I ate a whole box, and it gave me a tummy ache.”

“I’ll bet it did.”

We finished up and I took her home. I loaded up a cart with her luggage and we rode the elevator up. When we got to my door, she asked, “Is this where you live?”

“It sure is.”

“Mommy has a bigger house.”

For now, she does. I planned to move soon but Ravina needed to weigh in on it. “She sure does.”

“Where will I sleep?”

“You’ll see.” I opened the door, and she went inside with me following. I pushed the cart in with her luggage. She stood in the center of the room, unmoving. Then she ran to the window. “Wow, I can see Mommy’s house from here.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but I’d let her have it. Eventually she’d figure it out.

She turned from the window and asked, “Can I see my bedroom?”

“You sure can. Come with me.” I led the way and opened her door. I’d purchased a wooden plaque with her name on it and showed her.

“Wow, this is cool.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah. What’s that?”

She pointed to a shelf with stuffed animals. “Those are toys for you to play with.”

“They’re mine?”

“Yes, I bought them for you.”

She ran over to the shelf and picked up the white rabbit and hugged it. It was soft and cozy. “Can I sleep with her?”

“You can. She’s soft, isn’t she?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m going to get your bags so we can unpack, okay?”

She stood there, silent. I came back with the bags, and we put them on the bed to open them. Two held clothes and the other held toys. I let her unpack the toys and I did the clothes, putting them in drawers and on hangers. Looked like she was a fan of shoes. “You like shoes?”

“Yeah. I have lots of them. Some of them make me run fast.”

“Juliette, have you ever ridden a horse?”

“One time at a birthday party. It was a little horse. I liked him, but Mommy wouldn’t let me have him.”

“Would you like to go riding?”

“Can we?” Excitement burst into her smile.

“We can. And I even have someone for you to meet and play with. Her name is Easton.”

“Is she a girl?”

“She is.”

“Oh, good, because I hate boys. They’re mean and dumb.”

“Not all of them are that way.”

“The ones at my school are.”

I thought about that and wondered if she'd ever mentioned it to Jane. "Then it's a good thing you'll be going to a different school."

"I will?"

"Yes, a better one." I'd checked with English, and she sent Easton to a private school. I called them and enrolled Juliette. I was lucky they had an opening because it was a big-demand school. The school had told me where to buy her uniforms so that was something I had to do with her today.

"Juliette, do you want to see what I do every day?"

I got a slow nod from her. I showed her the bedroom I used for my art studio. "You paint pictures?"

"I sure do. We can paint one together, if you want."

Her head bobbed up and down and she appeared eager. "Today?"

"Not today, but maybe tomorrow. Today we are going out to buy your school clothes."

"Okay. Now?"

"We can if you want."

She did, so we left again. We arrived at the store, which sold lots of clothing for kids of all ages. Juliette ran to a rack filled with colorful T-shirts. "I want one of these." She pointed to a bright-pink one.

I grabbed it and then asked a salesclerk where the uniforms were. She took me to the back of the store where there were a dozen or more racks. "If we don't have what you need here, let me know. Which school?"

I told her and she showed me the racks that held the proper uniforms. Then I asked her what size she thought Juliette might be.

"I don't wanna wear those. They're not cute." Her lower lip stuck out as she scowled.

"Juliette, you don't have a choice. Your new school requires them."

“Then I don’t want to go there. I want to go back to my old school.” She stomped her foot.

“You can’t. You don’t live there anymore.”

“I wanna go back.”

I glanced at the woman and asked again for her proper size. She eyed Juliette and told me what she thought. Now I had to get her to try them on.

“Let’s go to the dressing room so you can try. I’ll also let you get something else. Don’t forget, we’re going to ride horses too, if you behave. If you don’t, then no horses.” I hated to be so awful to her, but I couldn’t have her behaving this way either.

The salesclerk said, “Once she gets to school, she’ll see everyone else wearing them and will be fine.”

I nodded and pulled her toward the dressing room. “I don’t wanna take my clothes off in front of you. I’m not supposed to do that.”

Bloody hell, what else? “Okay, then fine. I’ll buy your size and you can try them on at home, okay? My neighbor can help you. She’s a girl.”

“Ohh-kayy.”

I bought her two skirts, two pairs of pants, five shirts and the jacket that went with them.

The salesclerk told me I could return whatever didn’t work. She packaged it up and we left for home.

I saw Ravina’s car in the park, so I knocked on her door when we came back. It swung open and she smiled.

“This is Juliette. Juliette, this is my neighbor and future wife, Ravina.”

“You got a funny name.”

“Juliette, you shouldn’t say that to anyone. It’s not polite.”

“But she does.”

“You’re right. I was named after my mom’s favorite aunt. So, I think it’s kind of cool, plus no one else has that name.”

“Can you help us? I bought her uniforms but didn’t know if they were her size. She wouldn’t try them on in front of me because I’m a boy.”

Ravina raised a brow and held back a chuckle by biting her lip.

“Come on in. We can use my bedroom if that’s okay.”

Juliette nodded and we followed Ravina inside. The two girls went to her bedroom and Juliette came out wearing the skirt and shirt. She looked adorable with her long dark hair and bright-green eyes.

“That’s perfect!” I said.

“I look stupid. This is ugly.” Juliette’s nose wrinkled as she pouted.

“It’ll be fine because everyone else will be dressed the same.”

“That’s right. My niece, Easton, goes to that school and that’s what she wears.”

Juliette put a toe down and swiveled her foot back and forth.

“Honey, you’d look funny if you didn’t wear one.” I tried to come up with anything that would make her feel better. Going from no uniforms to wearing one was difficult, aside from everything else she was going through. But I remained firm on the school. I wanted her to have the best education possible.

“Are you gonna marry her?” She pointed to Ravina.

“I sure am. And we’re going to move into a bigger house.”

Ravina lifted her brows. I hadn’t discussed it with her, but we needed a yard for Juliette.

“I don’t want you to. I just want it to be us.” Then she stomped her foot and walked out the door.

# *Forty-Three*



RAVINA

JULIETTE WAS A PISTOL. HEADSTRONG AND OPINIONATED didn't begin to describe her. She had ideas she wouldn't let go of and one of them was she didn't want us to get married. I'd win her over, but it would take time.

Gabriel mentioned riding on Saturday, so I followed her out the door as she waited in front of Gabriel's condo.

"Hey. Juliette, you're going through a lot right now, and I know the uniform isn't that great, but when you see all the other kids wearing them, it'll be better."

She lifted a shoulder. "Maybe. Maybe not. I just wanna go home. I miss my mommy." She broke into tears, big fat ones. I pulled her into my arms and hugged her.

"I know. But guess what? You'll get to see her too. And your daddy missed you so much and is so happy you're here. So am I."

"But you don't even know me."

"I feel like I do because of your daddy. He talks about you all the time."

"He does?"

"Yes, he does. He also carries a picture of you with him everywhere. Your daddy loves you more than anything?"

She stared at me and asked, "Even you?"

“Yes, even me.” I felt for this young girl because I understood how lost she was. I grew up feeling this way so I hoped I could help her. “Can I tell you a story?”

She nodded slowly.

The door to my place opened and Gabriel stood there.

“Daddy, she’s gonna tell me a story.”

“She is? That’s wonderful.” He unlocked the door and we all went inside.

“Can you tell me in my new bedroom?”

“Yes, I sure can. Let’s go.” We walked down the hall and went into her room. We settled on the bed and I began. “When I was young, just about your age, my mommy wanted to send me away to boarding school. Do you know what that is?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s a school where you stay overnight and only come home for holidays and summer.”

“You mean you don’t get to see your mommy or daddy every day?” She was as shocked as I’d felt at the time.

“That’s right. I didn’t want to go and cried and cried. But my mommy was certain I should go. The day came that I got into the car with all my suitcases and went off to my new school. We had to wear uniforms too. I thought they were awful looking, but guess what? All the other girls wore them too so it really didn’t matter.”

“Were they blue?” she asked as her hands fiddled with the lacy edge of the pillow sham.

“They were! I wore a dark-blue skirt, a white top, and a dark-blue jacket. We even had dark-blue socks too.”

“Just like mine!”

“That’s right. After a week, I got to where I liked my uniforms. Do you know why?”

Her head went side to side.

“Because when I woke up in the morning, I didn’t have to spend time figuring out what I was going to wear. We had those uniforms for school, and then we had our uniforms for play.”

“What did those look like?”

“Well, when it was warm, we had light-blue shorts and dark-blue T-shirts. When it was cold, we had dark-blue pants, and dark-blue sweaters to go over our T-shirts. Turns out, I didn’t mind those either.”

“Then what happened?”

“I made lots of friends and at the end of the year, I cried because I knew how much I would miss them when I went home for the summer.”

She doodled on her comforter with a finger as she asked, “But did you have to wear your uniform at home?”

“Nope. Only at school.”

She perked up and asked, “Will I only have to wear mine at school too?”

“Yup. Only at school. But you’ll like it after you see the other girls in theirs.”

Then she turned to Gabriel. “Can I get one of those uniform hats too?”

Hats? I wondered if they even had them.

“You can,” he said. “We can go back tomorrow and get whatever else you want.”

He filled me in on the little baseball hats they had to match. How cute was that? I couldn’t wait to see her dressed for school. She’d be adorable.

“So, now that you feel better, what do you want to do for dinner?”

“Pizza!” Her shout resounded through the room.

“Pizza it is,” Gabriel said. “Let’s play for a while. Would you like to watch a movie?”



“Okay. Can we watch the one about superheroes?”

“You just have to tell me.”

I was sure I knew which one because Easton liked to watch it so I showed him on Netflix. He turned it on and I left the two of them alone.

Tomorrow was Saturday and I wanted to take Juliette riding, so I called Landry. We arranged to meet right before noon and have a picnic by the pond. Then I called English and asked to borrow Easton.

“She’ll be so excited,” English said.

“I’ll be there around eleven thirty.”

Later, I returned to Gabriel’s and let myself in. We’d exchanged codes to our doors so we could enter without having to bother each other.

The two of them were snuggled on the couch, watching TV.

“Hey, I have tomorrow arranged, but does Juliette have jeans to wear?”

“I have lots of jeans,” she hollered. “Am I gonna ride the horses?”

“You are and you’ll also need a bathing suit.”

“Are we taking the horses swimming?” she asked.

I wanted to laugh at that as an image of us with the horses frolicking in the pond hit me. “No, just the people will swim. And we’re going to have a picnic too.”

That evening we went and ate pizza and Juliette seemed happy. She laughed at Gabriel, who acted like a dork, using his pizza crust as a mustache. As I watched the two of them interact, my heart filled with joy. It wouldn’t be long before Juliette fell in love with her dad all over again.

In the morning, I texted Gabriel and we met in the hall for the drive. On the way, we picked up Easton. She was extremely chatty as she told Juliette about the horses, school, and yes, the poop pile.

“Why do we have to check out a pile of poop?” Juliette asked.

“Because it’s huge.” Easton raised her arms to show how high it was.

“They really poop that much?” She’d piqued Juliette’s curiosity, which I’d expected.

“Hey ladies, can we talk about other things besides poop? Easton, why don’t you tell Juliette about school. She’ll be starting there.”

Easton gasped. “You’re going to the same school as me? Yay!” Then she clapped.

“Do you like it? I didn’t have to wear a uniform at my old school.”

“I love my uniform. It makes my mom happy because we always know what I’m wearing.”

“Do you wear skirts or pants?”

Gabriel grabbed my hand as we listened to the girls chat about it. He’d been worried about Juliette fitting into her new school, but Easton was helping.

As usual, Landry was already at the stables when we arrived. Easton introduced Juliette to him and asked if she could ride Misty.

“I’m going to have her ride with me today, since this is her first time and that way, she can get a feel for the horse.” Landry mounted up and Gabriel handed Juliette to him. She sat behind him and held on to his waist. The rest of us prepared ourselves and we were off.

It was the perfect day for riding. We slowly rode to the pond. Easton wanted to gallop, but I held her back. “Let’s take our time today. Juliette needs to get used to riding. Remember when you first started?”

“Yeah, I had to go slow too.”

“That’s right. Maybe when we finish, Juliette can hang out with her dad and you and I will take a quick ride.”

“Thanks, Aunt Ravina.”

The pond was enticing as we dismounted. “Can we swim first?” Easton asked.

“Sure, let’s go change.” I took the girls behind the hedge, and we put our bathing suits on. Then I yelled, “Last one in is a rotten egg!”

Easton and I took off at a run and I didn’t know Juliette hadn’t followed until I spied her on the small dock. “Come on in, Juliette.”

“I don’t know how to swim.”

Gabriel came up behind her and said, “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you.” They walked off the dock and onto the shore where they both waded in. Juliette splashed in the water, and he coaxed her into the water a little farther. Then he held her while she kicked her legs. It was an abbreviated swim lesson, but she had fun, nonetheless.

Landry set out the picnic while we were swimming so all we had to do was wrap ourselves in towels and plop down on the huge blanket.

He’d brought peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the girls and turkey subs for the adults. There was also an array of potato, pasta, and fruit salads. A picnic lunch out here wouldn’t be complete without some cinnamon muffins and chocolate chip cookies. We also had bottled water. It was all delicious.

Juliette gobbled up her sandwich and wanted some more potato salad. Easton did the same, except she wanted fruit salad.

“Don’t forget the dessert,” I said.

“Dessert?” Juliette chirped.

“Yeah, I bet Uncle Landry brought some cinnamon muffins. They’re the best.”

“He brought cookies too,” I told them.

Easton jumped up and over to Landry, pressing kisses on his cheek. “Thank youuuuu!”

“How could I plan a picnic without cookies?” he asked her.

“You couldn’t.” Then Easton said, “Juliette, you have to try a cookie! They’re delicious!”

The girls downed two cookies each and then both said they were stuffed. Easton lay back on the blanket while Juliette put her head on Gabriel’s lap. Both girls fell asleep. We hated to wake them, but it was time to get moving.

I gently shook Easton, saying, “Hey sleepyhead, it’s time to get a move on.”

She yawned and stretched. Then she glanced at Juliette and tapped her shoulder. “We gotta get up now.”

Both girls seemingly got along well, which made Gabriel and me happy.

We changed back into our riding clothes and rode back to the stables. Then the moment came where Easton had to show Juliette the poop pile. She led her around the back and Juliette ran back, pinching her nose. “Ewww, that was stinky.”

“I know, which is why I never go back there,” I said.

I watched the two girls together and my heart soared. I’d hoped they’d get along but to see them playing and laughing was even better. On the way home, Easton asked if Juliette could spend the night with her.

It would be fun for them, but it had to be cleared with their parents. “Don’t you think you should check with your mom and Juliette’s dad first?”

“Mr. G, can Juliette spend the night with me?”

Gabriel didn’t answer at first and I had a feeling he wanted Juliette all to himself. I understood that, but it would also be good for Juliette too. I kept those thoughts to myself as I wasn’t her parent.

Gabriel finally spoke. “How about this? Why don’t we check with your mom first, Easton, and then we can decide?”

Easton seemed happy with that. She unbuckled her seat belt and bolted out of the car as soon as we stopped in the driveway.

I followed and when I walked inside, Easton was hollering, “Mommy, can Juliette spend the night? Can she, can she?”

English glanced at me, and I saw the shock in her eyes.

“Mommy, we had so much fun together and she’s going to my school!”

“Sorry, I didn’t expect—”

English cut me off. “It’s fine. It would actually be great for Juliette.” Then she turned to Easton and said, “Yes, she can spend the night.”

The words had barely left her mouth when Easton darted out of the house, I was sure to give Juliette the good news.

“Thanks. I’m happy they bonded.” And I was. I wanted Juliette to be happy here and this was a good step toward that. Easton was happy and bubbly. She’d be a good influence on Juliette.

Gabriel and Juliette came inside with Easton. “I heard there’s going to be a spend-the-night party,” he said.

“Yeah, what about that?” English asked.

“Are you sure about this? I don’t want Juliette to impose.” Gabriel was worried about this, and he needed some reassurance.

English stepped right up to the plate. “Don’t be silly. We’d love for her to stay.”

He smiled then and his posture relaxed. “Then it’s a spend-the-night party. We’ll go and pack an overnight bag for her and come back.”

“Great. And why don’t the two of you plan to eat with us?”

“Now you’re really pushing it,” I said, chuckling.

“Are you sure?” Gabriel asked.

“I don’t invite anyone if I’m not sure.”

“What can I bring? You know I don’t cook so it’ll be store-bought.”

“Bring dessert. That should do it.”

This would be nice. Gabriel could have some time with Juliette and we’d also have adult time with the grown-ups. “You got it. We need to shower, and we’ll be back. What time?”

“Any time. Just come on back.”

When we got home, Gabriel suggested a joint shower and I was all in. I’d never turn down an invitation such as that.

We raced to undress and ran to the shower. Gabriel took his time soaping me up and I returned the favor, paying close attention to a particular appendage of his. It didn’t take long before he pulled me away and dropped to his knees. He licked me to an amazing climax and then stood, picked me up, and impaled me on his cock. The cool tiles against my back as the hot water rained down on us set my blood on fire. The sensations of everything happening at once sent me racing toward orgasm number two. Once I caught it, my inner muscles clenched him and he got his own. We stood together, wrapped around each other until we floated back to reality.

With a chuckle I said, “I don’t know about you, but that was the best shower I’ve ever taken.”

# *Forty-Four*



GABRIEL

LIFE WAS PERFECT. JULIETTE HAD SETTLED INTO HER NEW school, with Easton to guide her, and loved it. Every day she was excited about putting on one of her uniforms. What had been a huge issue, was now something she looked forward to. After her first week at school, she'd asked about going back to the uniform shop so she could get more stuff, as she'd said. I happily took her where I purchased a sweater, some socks, and all sorts of accessories such as scarves and even jewelry. She looked adorable every day as she got out of the car and ran to the door with her backpack.

Ravina and I were strong and in love as ever. Juliette had taken to Ravina like a duck to water. When she wasn't around, the first thing out of Juliette's mouth was, "Where's Ravina? Is she coming over soon?" That was another score for all of us. I'd never doubted the two of them would bond. I was just surprised it happened so quickly.

About two months after Juliette came to me, she asked, "When is Ravina gonna be my mommy?"

My jaw hung as I gaped at my daughter. It took me a second to form my thoughts. I cleared my throat, which had clogged with emotion. "Well, we haven't decided yet."

"Why not?"

“Because we’ve had a lot going on, sweetheart. I wanted you to get settled in here first. You’re the most important thing in the world to me and your happiness is everything to me. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, and I love you, Daddy. But I love Ravina too and I want her to be my mommy.”

This was a stumper. How could I explain that she already had a mommy without bursting her happy bubble? “I’m so thrilled that you want that, but don’t forget you already have a mommy.”

She offered up an expression that pretty much let me know I was a dumbass. “Duh, Daddy. I know that, but who said I can’t have two mommies?”

A grin curved my mouth and I asked, “How did I get so lucky to have such a smart daughter?”

She shrugged and said, “Guess you’re lucky.” Then we both laughed. I was damn sure Juliette was six going on twenty-five.

“Do me a favor, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Promise to never grow up because you’re the best.”

She popped her hip out and put a hand on it. “Daddy, you’re silly. I hafta grow up. How can I get married and have babies if I don’t?”

Whoa! Where did that come from? Kids sure wanted to grow up too fast these days. “I know that and I was only kidding you.” I picked her up and tickled her ribs. Her laugh was everything.

When I stopped, she got serious and asked, “Can Easton spend the night on Friday?”

“Oh sweetheart, I wish she could, but this is the weekend you go see your Mom and Devon.”

Her scowl hit my gut. “Do I gotta? I don’t want to go. I wanna have a spend-the-night party here.”



I wanted to be excited about this, but she needed to see her mother. The first time she went, I paced the entire weekend, worried Jane would carry her off to some distant location and never return. It was needless because on Sunday, she was back here and happy to be. “Why don’t you ask your mom if she can spend the night with you over there?”

Her head dropped as she answered, “Naw, she won’t let me. I can’t have spend-the-night parties over there.”

“Why not?”

“I dunno. She just says no all the time.”

Maybe I should speak to her about this. “Well, kiddo, you can invite Easton over next weekend then. She’s always welcome here.”

“O-kayyy.”

Realization dawned on me that the tables had turned. There was a time when I would’ve been giddy over this, but I didn’t want my daughter to be unhappy about going to her mom’s place. I made a mental note to call her on Saturday to see how she was doing.

On Friday, Jane and Devon showed up to pick up Juliette. She walked out of her bedroom, dragging the wheeled suitcase I’d bought for her. Her head was down, and Jane frowned.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Jane asked.

“I don’t wanna go. I wanna stay here.”

Jane turned an ice-filled gaze on me. “What have you been telling her?”

The words hit me with such force, I stepped back. “Nothing. She wanted to invite a friend to spend the night but said you’d say no.”

Jane stared at me for a second longer then turned to her daughter. “That’s right. I’ve told you countless times that there’ll be no spending the nights with friends until you’re much older.” Her harsh tone rang throughout the room, raising my hackles.

“Obviously, this is a discussion we should have later. Juliette, have fun at your mom’s and I’ll see you on Sunday.” She ran to me and threw her arms around my thighs. I was tall so that’s as far as she got. This was much harder than I thought. I knelt and hugged her.

Her hushed voice hit my ear. “Do I really gotta go?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, but you’ll have fun and I’ll call you tomorrow. Okay?”

“Okay. Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you more than ice cream.”

She giggled and said, “I love you more than rainbows.”

“Then indeed, I am a lucky man.”

Jane grabbed her hand and they left, but not before she had a chance to pierce me with another scathing glance. What the hell did I do? Just because Juliette didn’t want to go, it wasn’t my fault. I ticked that off at being a good dad who Juliette wanted to be with.

The next morning, I called my daughter. Jane was not happy about it. “I think it’s best if you don’t speak to her.”

A frustrated breath came out. “Jane, I promised her I’d call and that’s what I’m doing.”

“Well, sorry, but she’s not available.” Click. The call ended. I stared at the phone, stupefied. This was ridiculous. I wouldn’t put up with this so I called Stacey.

“Hey, how’s daddying going?”

“Great, except she’s at her mother’s this weekend. I just called over there, but Jane wouldn’t let me speak to her.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and I’m pissed. Any advice?”

“I have one better. Let me handle this.”

A few minutes later, my phone rang, and it was Stacey. “You can call now.” I detected a smile behind her words.

“What did you tell her?” I was curious.

“That if you didn’t speak to Juliette within the hour, I would file a complaint against her. She does not want to go back to court.”

“You’re amazing. Thank you!”

“Gabriel, if she doesn’t allow you to speak to Juliette, call me right back.”

“I will.”

Jane picked up the phone immediately. She said nothing other than, “Here’s Juliette.”

“Hi Daddy.”

“Hi sweetheart. Are you having fun?”

“Uh-huh.” That response wasn’t too convincing.

“What are you doing?”

“Watching TV.”

“A movie?”

“No, one of Mommy’s shows.”

“Oh.” How could she be so selfish? “I have an idea. Why don’t you draw me a picture?”

“Okay. I will.”

“Don’t forget to bring it home with you.”

“What time are you getting me?”

“I’ll come at nine.”

“Bye Daddy.”

Then nothing. Jane must’ve taken the phone and hung up. Why did she have to be that way? This was all her doing. If she hadn’t left town, none of this would be happening. Only, I had to thank her because now I got Juliette most of the time and that was worth everything to me.

# *Forty-Five*



RAVINA

JULIETTE WAS WITH HER MOTHER THIS WEEKEND AND GABRIEL and I were house hunting. He'd persuaded me to his point of view that we needed a larger place to live, and that Juliette needed a backyard too. I agreed with that, so we were off.

The realtor lined up six homes for us to see, three of which were close to English and Tristian's. Those were of special interest to us since the girls got along so well, but also for carpooling to school.

We looked at the first two, but neither of us liked them. When we got to the third, excitement roared through me. It had five bedrooms, five en suites, two half baths, a large family room, kitchen, and a screened porch that we both loved. The master suite was on the first floor, with the other bedrooms, along with a large second den upstairs.

The backyard was large and perfect. It already had a giant play set, a pool with a waterfall feature, and everything was landscaped to perfection.

"Do you like it?" I asked Gabriel.

"I love it. You?"

"This is it. It has absolutely everything we need. I'd like to update the master bath though. What do you think?"

"I agree. I'm not fond of that shower. We have the space, so I'd like to enlarge it," he said.

“Exactly. I think we should buy it.”

“You sure?”

“Yup.” That day we signed the contract and paid cash for the house. We needed to move and then sell our places so there was a lot of business in our future, not to mention my business had taken off. I already hired two assistants, one of which was handling a wedding today.

We left the realtor’s office, contract in hand and waited to hear back from the seller. Our good news came later that afternoon with the acceptance of our contract.

The first words out of Gabriel’s mouth were, “Let’s get married now.”

“Now? As in today?”

He cracked up. “No, I mean soon. Let’s do it right after the move.”

Butterflies swarmed in my belly as I soared with happiness. “Sounds perfect. We have to plan.”

“I’ll leave it up to you because I only have two goals. One, to get married, and two, to make you happy.”

“The mountains then.”

“Only family?”

“Yeah, and out on the deck close to sunset.” This had always been my dream. No big wedding for me. Small and intimate was my jam.

“I’m all in.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “When do you want to tell Juliette?”

“When she gets home. She’ll be so excited.”

“Did I tell you she asked me when you were going to be her mommy?”

Oh, my heart. Tears came to my eyes and bubbled out. “No. This is everything to me.”

He reached for my hand and squeezed. “She loves you, Ravina.”

“I love her too. One big happy family.” I rubbed my palms together. “Ooh, we have tons to do, and I have to plan our wedding.”

“Are you thinking fancy or simple?”

“Fancily simple.”

He laughed. “Um, can you explain that, please?”

“I want the deck to be gorgeous, decorated with lights and tons of flowers. I want the food to be exquisite. So delicious it melts in your mouth. And I want the cake to be the best anyone has ever had. But... I also want people to be comfortable so no tuxes, neckties, or stilettos for the women. Bare feet or flip flops because we are going to dance our butts off.”

“I love the sound of that.”

“Me too. Now I need to find the right people for it all.”

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WE TOLD JULIETTE AFTER GABRIEL BROUGHT HER HOME. THEN we called the rest of the family. Juliette jumped up and down and reminded me of a pogo stick.

“Guess what?” I asked.

“What?” Her eyes were round with curiosity.

“You and Easton will be my flower girls.”

I didn’t think it possible for her eyes to open any wider, but they did. “Really? With a special dress and flowers?”

“You bet.” I already had the outfits for them in mind. Pink leotards with long tulle skirts and ballet slippers to match. They would look precious in that.

My family was thrilled too. They all had grown very fond of Gabriel and even Stanton was pleased.

The next month was crazy as we both prepared to move. Our lives consisted of packing box after box. My place was

easy compared to Gabriel's. He'd lived there much longer and had accumulated much more. We'd hired movers, but he wanted to handle his artwork to ensure no damage would be done.

The day we received our keys to the new house arrived. I met Gabriel there and we'd hired a decorator to help. She met us there to review the changes we wanted. Most of them were cosmetic, such as painting. We picked out our colors for all the rooms and then planned out the master bath.

We wanted to move in as quickly as possible, so we gave her our approval so she could start on everything. The bath would take a couple of weeks, once they started. We'd stay upstairs until it was done, for convenience's sake.

Fall had arrived, though it was still warm. Our wedding date was set for early October. All plans were finalized, with the invitations sent out. Everyone we invited was coming. We hadn't had the time to make it to England to meet Gabriel's family, but his parents were coming over for the wedding.

The caretakers of our mountain house had been helpful with the wedding planner. They'd assisted every time I'd asked, so I paid them a nice bonus for that.

The dress I'd chosen to wear was not a traditional wedding gown. It was white silk covered in a layer of chiffon that flowed from the waist to the floor. The high neckline turned into a vee in the back that dipped to the bottom of my spine. It was stunning. I loved the soft feel of it and as soon as I'd put it on, I was hooked. I was anxious for the day to arrive when I'd become Mrs. Gabriel Knight and that day was almost here.

# *Forty-Six*



GABRIEL

THE MOVE WAS OVER, AND IT HAD BEEN A MESS. I HATED when things weren't organized, and this was one of those times. When I thought of everything going on, I couldn't believe we'd done it. The house decorating, the packing, the move of our belongings and the art, and finally, the band. They'd found a replacement for me, but as I had promised, I sat in on some of their gigs. It had been overwhelming, but we'd done it.

Juliette had been the easiest part. She was happy to have a yard with a place to play and a swimming pool. She'd even put all her clothes in her suitcases and was ready to go. It was comical when I told her she'd have to unpack some things as we weren't going yet.

Once we got to the new house, Juliette wanted to put all her things away in her dresser and closet. We allowed it and she had done a great job. Things weren't folded as neatly as they should've been but that was insignificant.

We were all pleased with everything once we'd settled in. The house was more than we'd expected. It was exceptional. There was still painting going on but the bathroom was nearly done and looking spectacular. The new shower was huge, with showerheads on both ends. It would be perfect for both of us. A rush of heat hit me below the waist as I thought about it. Time to get my head out of the sex gutter.



The wedding was the following weekend. We were leaving on Monday in order to ensure everything was set. Juliette would stay with English and Tristian, and they would bring her up on Friday so the girls would only miss one day of school. We dropped her off Sunday night and she was as excited as I'd ever seen.

The only roadblock we encountered was my ex-wife. Initially, Jane said we couldn't switch weekends. Why did she have to be so bloody contrary all the time? Juliette was the one who persuaded her. Of all things my child had to do, I hated it was that.

Ravina was almost giddy with happiness when we pulled away for the trip to the mountains. The week passed in a blur, as I assisted Ravina to ensure everything was done properly and to her specifications.

On Friday, everyone arrived, beginning with Stanton and Stacey. They decided to leave Edward at home with the nanny to make the weekend easy on them.

English and Tristan arrived with a flurry of activity. The girls were chatting nonstop and filled with excitement about being flower girls the next day.

"Aunt Ravina, can I carry my wand?" Easton wanted to know.

"Not when you walk down the aisle because you'll be carrying a bouquet of flowers," Ravina answered.

"Yay," Easton shouted.

Then Juliette asked, "Will I have flowers too?"

Ravina crouched down to hug the girls. "Of course you will, and you'll both have flower tiaras."

They jumped and clapped their hands as I laughed. Juliette had grown fond of tiaras ever since she and Easton became friends. She was currently the proud owner of four.

Landry arrived later that night as we were eating dinner. We had a quick rehearsal for the ceremony. Stanton would walk Ravina in, and the girls would go right before that.

Tristian was standing up as my best man with English as Ravina's matron of honor. It was easy peasy.

I watched my soon-to-be-wife interacting with her family and a sense of pride filled me. I was marrying a loving, accomplished woman whom I couldn't wait to be my wife. Tomorrow wouldn't come soon enough.

We'd prayed for good weather, and in the morning, the day dawned bright and sunny without a cloud in the sky. Ravina wouldn't allow me in our bedroom the night before, so I'd moved my things out that I'd need for today.

The caterers arrived around three, along with the florists, who began setting out the floral arrangements and decorating the huge deck. Ravina's assistants were out there as well, stringing lights and other fancy things. Ravina had drawn everything for them, so they only had to follow her plan.

The guys from the band got here around four and when I tried to help them set up, they pushed me aside. I was told that the groom wasn't supposed to work on his wedding day. Even though I'd all but given up my role with them, we were on great terms, and I filled in when they needed me.

The ladies were upstairs getting ready, along with the young girls. Every now and then, someone would run food up there. I'm sure the girls were beyond excited.

The ceremony was set for six thirty so an hour beforehand, I went to get ready. It only took me a half hour to shower and dress. I was wearing a navy suit, with a crisp white shirt and no tie, as per Ravina's orders. "This is not going to be a stuffy affair. I want everyone to be relaxed and comfortable."

Tristian knocked on the door and came in. "You ready?"

"Yeah, and you look ready too." He wore a gray suit with a white shirt as well. I glanced at his feet and saw flip flops. "Glad to see you're following orders." I motioned to his feet.

"You bet. I didn't want to face the wrath of my sister on her wedding day."

"Same here, mate." I looked at my own feet to see flip flops as well. "Let's go."

We'd hired a babysitter for the night, so we didn't have to deal with the children. She was playing with Jameson when we came into the living area, which was brilliantly decorated. It was covered in twinkling lights in every possible nook, cranny and from the ceiling. It was beautiful and I owed it all to my bride.

Our guests began arriving, including my family. Mom and Dad were happy for me and I was pleased they'd come. I wasn't sure since they hadn't even met Ravina until Thursday night, but they had taken to her immediately. My sister didn't come because she was about to have a baby and couldn't fly. Devon hadn't been invited.

"Hey, we need to go and hide until the appropriate time," Tristian said as he led the way to the other side of the house. "The wedding planners told me to get you out of there. No one is supposed to see you until you walk up to the front of the deck."

I remembered discussing this with Ravina but had forgotten. "Right. Lead the way, mate."

As we waited to be called, Tristian asked, "You nervous?"

"Not at all. Just antsy to see my bride. It was weird not spending the night with her last night. I can't remember going this long without seeing her."

Then he told me a story about when he and English's father went on a photography expedition in Asia when English and Easton were in a car accident. That had to be terrifying to be so far from home at the time.

"Damn, that must've been bloody awful."

"Yeah, that's an understatement. If Beck, English's father, hadn't been with me at the time, I'm not sure how I would've handled it. He kept me sane the entire way home, which took forever, by the way. With all that being said, you're in the home stretch now and will see your bride any minute."

I checked the time and saw he was right. As if on cue, one of the planners came in to retrieve us. "It's time."

Tristian grabbed my arm to pull me back from running. “Slow it down, buddy. You only have to walk to the deck.”

We made it to the living room when the planner said, “Okay, you’re up. Just do as we planned.”

It was with great difficulty, but I slowly walked to the very front of the deck, where the preacher waited, and turned to face the small group. Everyone was smiling and it seemed as though I should wave at them.

Then Easton came out, wearing a pink outfit that made her look like a ballerina. It was brilliant. My grin couldn’t get any bigger. Juliette followed, waving at everyone with her bouquet. It was so adorable, my heart melted. The music changed and that’s when I glanced to the open sliders. Ravina stood there, her hand on Stanton’s arm, and was radiant. I’d never seen anyone so beautiful in my life. I was frozen in time and wanted to remember this moment for the rest of my life.

Her gown wasn’t fancy, but it made her appear as though she were a puff of white smoke. The bottom part of the dress billowed around her in the gentle breeze, but the top clung to her luscious breasts like it was painted on her.

I knew it was not in the plan, but I did it anyway. When Stanton handed her off, I took her hand and twirled her around like we were dancing. Her bubbly laugh told me she loved it. She glowed in the late afternoon sun and her image would be with me forever.

The preacher did his due diligence, and I was eager for the moment when I had permission to kiss the bride. When I did, I wanted the crowd to disappear so the kiss could go on and on. We clung together for as long as was appropriate, and even a bit longer. As I released her, I said, “I love you, Ravina Knight.”

“Finally, I’m yours.”

“You were mine from the start, only we both didn’t know it.”

“I did, but you were the stubborn one.”

I was glad she persisted because my life would be nothing without her.

We greeted the guests, and the party was on! Ravina and I danced as I told her how stunning she was. “I’ve never seen anyone more perfect than you.”

Her eyes glistened as I spoke.

“You’re my person, Gabriel, my everything. Today has been my biggest blessing.”

“Mine too. And the girls look adorable. Did you see them practically skip down the aisle?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, I reminded them a bunch not to run.”

We danced to song after song until my wife claimed she was starving. Then we sampled the delicious food. When we finished, I asked her to walk up to the band with me. I’d arranged a surprise for her and now was the time to give it.

She accompanied me there and I asked her to stand next to me as I took a seat on the stool that was provided for me.

The mic needed adjusting so I did that and then said, “I wrote this for my gorgeous wife. She hasn’t heard it yet but she’s going to right now.” Ravina gaped as her hands pressed on her heart.

I broke into the song by strumming my guitar. Then I sang the lyrics.

*She entered my life when things were dark.*

*My heart was closed, walled up and stark.*

*With barely a beat left in my chest,*

*Leaving her alone was for the best.*

*Ravina, you’re the light to my dark,*

*You woke up my heart with your glowing spark.*

*I wanted her with me night and day,*

*Living without her was a lonely highway,  
Being alone again wasn't a choice I would make,  
Without Ravina my heart would break.*

*Ravina, you're the light to my dark,  
You woke up my heart with your glowing spark.*

*Happiness ruled when she finally said yes,  
My heart soared as I felt her caress.  
She was mine, my woman, my forever love,  
Whom I'll always cherish as she's my one true love.*

*Ravina, you're the light to my dark,  
You woke up my heart with your glowing spark.*

WHEN I WAS FINISHED, MY WIFE WAS CRYING. I SWIPED HER cheeks and said, "It wasn't meant to make you cry, love."

"It was beautiful. I love you, Gabriel, and thank you."

The group clapped at the end, but all I wanted was to kiss her salty tears away. I should've waited closer to the end of the party to sing.

"You're my inspiration and going to be the subject of many songs in the future."

She pressed her lips on mine and someone in the group shouted, "Get a room."

"I think that's a great idea," I shouted back. Then I turned to my bride and asked, "Are you ready to get out of here?"

"You bet."

Hand in hand we said our farewells and walked outside to the waiting car. We'd gotten a suite at one of the lovely hotels

in town and were staying there a couple of nights. Our honeymoon would come later.

We sat together, holding hands, when she leaned closer and said, “I have a surprise for you.”

“You do?”

“Yup. We have a bun in the oven.”

“You’re baking bread?” The last time she tried, it was a disaster.

Her laughter rang inside the car. “Not that kind of bun.”

“Then what?”

“A baby. We’re going to have a baby.”

My head swam with excitement. “Are you sure?”

“I am. The anaconda did a job on me.”

I kissed her as we arrived at the hotel. “Well, Mrs. Knight. Are you ready to begin our lives together?”

“I’ve never been more ready than now.”

I was the luckiest man on earth to have this woman walk beside me as my wife. Our lives together wouldn’t always be easy, but my heart knew things would be wonderful with Ravina.

# Epilogue



LANDRY

INSECURITY RUSHED THROUGH ME AS I STOOD OUTSIDE OF THE Dark Cave. This sensation was foreign to me as trying something different usually didn't affect me. This place was 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 a sex club. Christ, I loved sex, lots of it, sometimes too much. But fucking around like this was something I'd never been interested in. 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 wasn't my concern. I'd never brought a woman home, so I could leave her when I wanted. That usually happened after she fell asleep. I enjoyed my one and runs, as that served my purpose without creating any entanglements or complications. But Brady had been right about something. I'd been working like a demon lately, with work 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 masks that covered your eyes.

“Hey, you’re looking good. Are you ready?” Brady asked, walking up behind me.

“I feel like an idiot wearing this get up.” My hands aimed at my pants and mask.

“That’ll change once you get inside and see everyone else. Let’s go.”

We entered and two huge dudes stood guard. One asked to see Brady’s membership card and they scanned it. He told them I was his guest, so we proceeded to the next level of security. There was a window with another dude behind it. Brady gave his name, and the guy typed it into his computer. “This is your guest?” he asked. Brady 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 hundred-dollar bills. “This card will work all night. After that, you’ll have to wait for an invitation to become a member.” He handed me the card and once he cleared me, we went to the third layer of security, which was an elevator that Brady’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 of where to go to, but I continued to follow Brady. 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 and all kinds of kink were on display. The walls

were equipped with chains and cuffs, several X-shaped crosses, and whips, canes, 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.

Padded benches and weird shaped chairs were 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 Brady 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 saw one that was topless wearing a chastity belt. Another wore a leather thong and had her eyebrows, nose, ears, and lips lined with piercings. These people were sure into pain, it seemed.

Brady 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 him in this area. Maybe he was one of those dudes who whipped their girlfriends. Then he said, “Wait until I show you the cage room.”

“Cage room?”

He laughed and said, “Yeah.”

I happened to glance over the bar to see a huge cage suspended there. Inside, two couples were 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 another guy in there. He was laying under the woman, his mouth performing oral sex. This was insane. The more I saw, the less

interest I had. My tastes were one on one, and I didn't want to share. I loved sex... hard core, rough, and lots of it. Only I wanted it privately.

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. This mask didn't completely hide my identity, as hers didn't either. Each time I took a drink, I eyed her surreptitiously. There was a vague familiarity about her.

Then her eyes widened, and she stalked toward us in her black stilettos. She was hot. Gorgeous, really. Long, thick auburn hair fell down her back in waves. Her amber eyes were such an unusual shade and that's when it hit me. She reached us, but as I went to greet her, she turned a scathing glance on Brady.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she spat.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Brady's response was equally as caustic. "This is no place for you."

"Oh, and I suppose it's fine for you to be here?"

What was going on between these two? I didn't want to interfere, yet I had to speak to her, so I said, "Shiloh, is that you?"

She flinched when I said her name. "Sorry, you must be mistaken. My name is Dusty."

"Dusty, my ass," Brady said.

She leaned in and spoke to us in a hushed voice. "Shut up. In here, I'm Dusty and I'm working, for your information."

Brady nearly fell on his ass. "You work here?" He all but shouted.

"No, you idiot. I'm here undercover. Now stop doing your best to attract attention," she hissed. Ooh, she was pissed. And undercover? Did she really achieve her goal?

"Fuck, I'm sorry." Brady was sincere.

Then those glorious eyes turned on me. "And you are?"

“You don’t remember? I’m Landry Baines. And I never knew you two were brother and sister.”

“Landry? Jeez, I haven’t seen you in ages! And this moron is my stepbrother.”

That explained it. “I can’t believe this. Brady, why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Tell you what? I had no idea you two knew each other.”

Shiloh leaned in and said, “We need to speak in private.”

We followed her up a flight of stairs where she took us to a private room. Then she visually scanned the room, searching for something. Afterwards, she slipped her hand under the leather strip she wore as a skirt and pulled out a device. Where the hell had she hidden it in there? She aimed it all around the room. When she appeared satisfied, she said, “You two need to leave. Now.”

“Leave? Why?” Brady asked.

“I’m working tonight. That should tell you enough, but if you stay, you’ll be putting me in danger. I’ll call you later. But do me the biggest favor in the world and get out of this place *now*.”

She was dead serious. Brady’s lips pressed together, but then he nodded. “Fine, but if you don’t call me by midnight, I’m coming over and I’ll break down your door if I have to.

We left the room and headed for the entrance. I was hesitant to leave. What if something happened? Shouldn’t we stay and help?

“Brady, stop. We can’t just leave her in here alone.”

“She’s not alone. She probably has help surrounding her.”

I still didn’t see it that way. Leaving a woman in there, helpless, was not on my agenda. Regardless, I followed him out of the club.

When we got a block away, he asked, “Where did you park?”

“I Ubered here. My car’s at work.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m going back in.”

“You can’t. You heard what she said. Being there will jeopardize her operation. Shiloh’s been undercover for a couple of years now.”

“For the police?”

“No, the feds. She’s involved with human trafficking. I hate it because she puts herself in extreme danger, sometimes posing as a teenager to entice attraction.”

“No offense, but she doesn’t have to try to entice a thing. She’s gorgeous.”

“True, and that puts an even bigger target on her back.”

The more I thought about it, I knew he was right.

“By the way, how do you know her?”

Laughing I said, “We were childhood friends. She used to climb the fence that bordered our property, and we’d secretly ride my horse together.”

“Yeah?”

“It was a long time ago. But I still have great memories of then. She was a friend when I needed one the most.” As I thought about her, I hoped she was safe tonight. I’d hate for anything to happen not to add the interest she’d sparked in me. She was a grown woman now and I’d love to get to her know again.

“Well, don’t get any ideas for the two of you. No way could I let my sister date you.”

I gave him a curious look. He didn’t catch it because it was dark. “Why do you say that?”

“Because I don’t want her to become one of your toss aways. You forget how well I know you, Landry.”

That statement pissed me off. “Brady, you know nothing about any of the women in my life. For the past couple of years, I’ve only—”

“Dude, she’s my sister and I know how often you get your rocks off. You’re a one nighter and that isn’t what I want for her.”

“She’s your stepsister, and we were friends before I even knew you.”

“Still... don’t get any ideas. Besides, she’s so focused on her job, she won’t have time for you.”

This conversation was done as far as I was concerned. Brady was a great friend, but I would never let him dictate anything to me. I didn’t speak another word as we stood there.

Then he said, “You coming?”

“No, I’m going to stay.”

He pretty much growled back, “I mean it, Landry. Shiloh is off limits.”

“And I mean this. No one tells me what to do. You, of all people, should know that.” I turned and stalked 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 Brady Conner.” 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 Shiloh. It took me a few minutes to locate her, but when I did, I went directly to her.

“Why are you still here?” Annoyance etched her features.

“I couldn’t leave you here in danger, by yourself.”

Her jaws clamped together. “This is my job. I’m not in danger.”

“Shiloh, you’re a woman, and...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Don’t even start with that line of thinking. Yes, I’m a woman, and thank you for noticing, but I could probably whip your ass in no time.”

My brows shot up. Whip my ass? She may be fit, but so was I. “I seriously doubt that.”

“Too bad I won’t get the chance. Now scram. I mean it.”

I hadn’t expected this reaction. She’d changed from the Shiloh of old, who had been my best friend.

Only I’d also changed and wasn’t giving up that easily. I followed her and as we made it to the bar, she swung around and said, “I swear, I’ll make a scene here if you don’t leave. You are jeopardizing everything.”

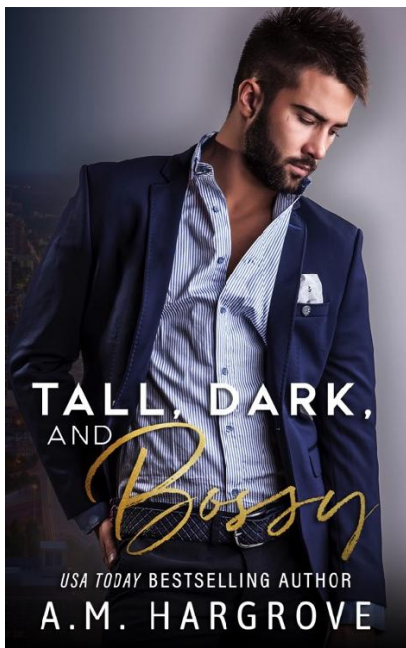
I almost staggered backward. “Jeopardizing? I’m trying to help.”

“Let me be clear. You. Are. In. The. 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 my help, I certainly wouldn’t force her. But this wasn’t over. Some way, somehow, I’d find a way to get in touch with her.

Read more in *Tall, Dark, and Dirty* when it releases in 2023!

**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 alphahole 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

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# About The Author



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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To my readers... none of this would be possible without you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. <3