

HE DOESNT PLAY
BY THE RULES

THE

Billionaire's

OBSESSION

GIA BAILEY

The Billionaire's Obsession

HIS OBSESSION

GIA BAILEY

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CHAPTER 1

Riley

I checked my lipstick one last time before getting out of the cab. Troublemaker Pink; my favorite.

The Camelia was the hottest place in town for dinner, or so I'd heard. I was more of a three-day-old left-over chow mein out the fridge kind of girl, unless I was working. Tonight, I was most definitely working.

In L.A, everyone had a side hustle. Some sold stuff online, or reviewed movies and made millions. Others were skilled in programming or gaming, or something useful. I had no skills. I'd found out the hard way, so my side hustle was a little unusual.

I was a fake date, available for hire to the worst family dinners, thanksgiving meals and ex-partner's weddings. Tonight, however, I was having my arm twisted into doing something entirely different, and out of my remit. Admittedly, I'd done it for her a few times before, but it made me nervous every time.

"Please, Riley, I'm begging you. I can't go on another of these dates. The guys hear who my father is, and they are always interested before they even meet me. I won't marry some random who is half in love with my father, and not me. I'd rather die!" Ella, my very best friend in the world, an award-worthy drama queen, announced before flopping down on my bed. She was using her helpless damsel in distress tactic to get me to agree to impersonate being her on another stuffy, mismatched blind date her father expected her to go on. It shouldn't work, except the tech valley type of guys he usually

set her up with weren't the sort to read society pages, and Ella was one of the most reclusive billionaire's daughters in all of L.A. She could be unrecognized in most places she went, since she took her online privacy seriously. Stepping in as her for a blind date had worked for us a few times in the past, but that didn't mean our luck would hold.

"I have another date tomorrow at the same place, and you know that's against my rules," I reminded her.

"Whew, if you can't break the rules now and again, what's the point of being alive?" Ella grumbled with the perfect confidence of someone who didn't have to hustle every damn day just to keep her head above water.

"It's not a rule that's fun to break. It's about self-preservation. I've yet to be recognized mid-date, and I'd like to keep it that way. Besides, I have a packed week ahead with the exhibition."

While I might not like my side hustle, it was an absolute necessity for me, as it gave me time to work on my pottery the rest of the time. Yep, that's right, I was a twenty-five-year-old starving artist, who slaved over a potter's wheel the morning, and ruined dates on request by night. The cliches wrote themselves.

"So what? You're the queen of tanking dates. You'll be in and out of there in half an hour—if you like the food, ten minutes if you don't. Please, please do this. You know I'm a terrible people-pleaser, and I'll just smile along, and he'll think I'm into him. Please, get me out of this one. It's my last request!"

I sighed, already knowing I would give in. I could never say no to my best friend. "You're not dying." I rolled away from her on the bed before standing up. "Fine, but I'm borrowing your clothes and keeping the outfit, and you're buying me that new clay I wanted."

"Done! I love you!" Ella cried and squirmed off the bed. "Let's pick something out."

NOW, WALKING INTO THE ELEGANT, UNDERSTATED CAMELIA, over on 3rd, I felt the usual pinch of nerves I always felt when doing my job. Despite what my clients might think, lying didn't come naturally to me, and it did leave its mark.

In two years of the job, I'd only once had a problem with one date who had recognized me the next day at the grocery store. It had been unnerving, and I couldn't wait to give up my little side gig. It might earn well, but it was only a matter of time before it caught up with me somehow. Ella made fun of my little rules, but they were the only thing standing between me and total humiliation sometimes.

Inside The Camelia, understated French jazz played, and the soft murmur of conversation held that feeling of wealth. Even the poorest person in here was probably about a hundred times wealthier than I was, and I felt it at moments like these.

"I'm here to meet Mr. Preston," I said, quietly checking Ella's message with the blind date's contact details.

The hostess smiled warmly at me. "Of course, Mr. Preston is already here. Please follow me."

Already here? Damn, I liked to get there early to feel more settled.

I followed the hostess through the restaurant, and toward a table in prime position, on a slightly elevated level. I'd been to enough fancy places through this job to recognize the best seat in the house. It looked like Ella's father had pulled out all the stops this time with his arranged date. The man was determined to get his heiress daughter married this year.

A man sat with his back to me. Broad shoulders, clad in a dark gray suit, and dark blonde hair, precision cut. The back of his neck was tanned. Hmm, maybe this was a date Ella would have actually enjoyed? Well, it was too late for that, seeing as I was about to impersonate her.

I rounded the table and stopped as I met the most piercing set of blue eyes I'd ever seen. He stood, unfolding to a towering height. He was built, and fit as hell, and his face was the kind to make a girl do a double take in the street. Golden

skin and slashed eyebrows, with a hint of stubble, just enough to take the edge of a jaw line you could cut rocks on. His mouth tightened disapprovingly, as he inspected me just as thoroughly as I did him. I was staring. I knew it, but honestly, it was hard not to.

“Mr. Preston?” I got out, recovering first.

He inclined his head regally. “Miss Clarke, I presume.”

“You presume right. I mean, yes, I’m Ella.” I stammered. *Crap, Riley, get a grip.* He had his hand out to shake, and I quickly shoved mine into his. His skin was hot, and his grip strong as his huge palm enveloped mine. The touch sent a shock through my entire body.

“I suppose you should call me Cole, since we’re about to eat together.”

“Cole. I’m Ella,” I said, remembering to play my part just in time.

“So, you said. Well, Ella, shall we?” he prompted, when I stood there, still as a statue, and stared at our joined hands a moment too long.

“Right, of course,” I muttered, blushing furiously. What was wrong with me? I was a professional at this. I’d never felt so much like a stumbling ingenue, as I did right now, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“I must confess, when my uncle pressed me to attend tonight, I was expecting something else,” Cole said. My eyes shot to his in a panic. Did he know what Ella looked like? She was the most attention adverse heiress around, and loathed social media. She had assured me that there was no way that Cole Preston would already know her, since he’d just moved to LA from New York, and they didn’t move in the same circles.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I didn’t want to come, to be honest, but now I’m glad I did.”

His off-hand compliment sent my heart jumping to my mouth, and I stared at him as he tapped the menu. Was that a compliment? My pulse was certainly dancing like it was.

“I didn’t know that Mr. Clarke would have such a beautiful daughter. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen you with my own eyes,” he continued, and my heart fell. Right, of course. He wasn’t interested in going on a date with Riley Delaney, fake-date hustler by night and starving artist by day. He wanted Ella Clarke, heiress to a billion dollar conglomerate. I swallowed a knot of disappointment in my throat. I was here to do a job, not swoon over a guy so rich and handsome he had to be a major player. No man who held himself like Cole Preston went lonely at night. His compliments were as practised and smooth as the man himself.

“Really? I didn’t know that Cole Preston, a supposed billionaire himself, would look to be fixed up on an arranged blind date if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, but here we are,” I said, my bright tone only just veiling my criticism.

Cole’s eyes narrowed marginally. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that I’d have thought you could get your own dates, that’s all,” I snipped, and plastered on a fake smile.

He studied me, and a thrill of apprehension ran through me. What if this guy smelled a rat? He seemed less irritated by my shrewishness and more entertained. Ok, I had to get down to business and blow this date out of the water before I got side-tracked.

He studied me intently, taking slightly longer than was normal to smile. “Well, Ella, you know how things work in our world. An arranged introduction between mutual friends is worth ten one-night hook-ups. If one was looking to get married, that is.”

“Right, married. I’ve always thought marriage was overrated,” I rambled. This guy was throwing me.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Cole said, and sipped his wine. I nodded inanely, and took a big mouthful of water, hoping the coolness would help calm my muddled brain.

His smirk deepened. “Should we just skip to the one-night hook up part in that case?”

The water exploded out my mouth in a spray, reaching across the table with a frightening speed. Cole didn’t flinch. He stared at me, then slowly brought his napkin to his face and blotted it. “Should I take that as a no?” His dry amusement settled my nerves a little. He was fucking with me, for whatever reason, and I had to get back on track.

I looked at the menu and wrinkled my nose. “Oh no, is this French food? I hate French food.”

“It is. The chef was just awarded a third Michelin star,” Cole told me.

I pulled a face. “I don’t think I can eat anything here,” I stated apologetically. Being fussy about food was always a great starting point for tanking a date, even if I desperately wanted to indulge.

A server approached at just the right moment for me to hand her the menu. “I’m sorry, I don’t like anything on the menu-,” I began.

“Tell François to accommodate whatever my date wants,” Cole commanded, making the server’s eye’s bulge. Cole looked at me. “What would suit you better?”

“Erm, I don’t know.” I frantically searched my mind for something that would be extra annoying to a haute cuisine chef. Hopefully, it would get us kicked out and Cole would want nothing more to do with me.

“A cheeseburger and fries, with a milkshake,” I announced decisively. The server’s eyes widened a little, and she looked at Cole.

He merely nodded and handed his menu to her. “You heard her, and I’ll have the same,” he said flatly.

I barely avoided gaping at him as we were left alone again. “You can’t have a burger here.”

“Why not, you are?”

“Yeah, but I’m -,” I searched for a way to explain how we weren’t exactly on the same level, before remembering that he was supposed to think we were.

“You’re what? One of the most successful hedge fund manager’s daughters in the city? I don’t know LA well, but I assume that our net worth is about equal.”

My cheeks turned an incriminating shade of red as I attempted to toss my head and shrug. “That’s not the flex you think it is. I’d like to marry a man richer than me, to keep up with my expenses. My father doesn’t let me get all the things I want. I need a husband who will,” I stated, my hands in fists on my lap, trying to seem cool.

Cole raised an eyebrow at my outrageous statement. “And what things doesn’t he let you buy?”

“A new nose, for one. I’ve already had three, but I’m tired of this look. I enjoy augmenting my body a few times a year. Last year was chest, this year ass.”

The lies spilled out of my mouth, and I waited for the customary look of concern, or disgust that talking about multiple expensive and dangerous surgeries usually elicited.

Cole merely smirked as he sipped his wine. “Good to know,” he murmured.

Jesus, was this the most unflappable man in the world or what?

“Next year, I’m thinking of that operation where they remove some ribs, you know that one?”

“I’m not familiar with it, I’m afraid,” Cole said, sounding less than impressed.

“I also don’t plan on working when I get married,” I said, deciding that the surgery angle wasn’t bothering him enough, and it was time to change track.

“Do you work now?” His tone made it clear that he expected me not to. The arrogance of it got under my skin.

“Yes, I sculpt,” I shot out, a sudden nugget of truth in the cloud of lies. *Crap, why had I said that?* Ella wasn’t interested

in art.

A gleam of interest fired in Cole Preston's blue eyes. "What do you sculpt?"

"People, mostly." Again, the truth just slipped out. Man, I needed to get it together. "Mostly er, male nudes, and that's not something I plan on stopping," I babbled.

"How interesting. I don't think I'd be opposed to sitting for you, for practise," he said, just as I took a sip of water. The mouthful exploded out, as his words shocked me, stretching across the table to spray his face again. I clapped a hand over my mouth. It was a move I'd used before, and usually it meant the end of the date. Cole simply picked up his napkin and dabbed at his skin once more.

"I'm so sorry, that was terribly impolite of me. Despite my upbringing, I struggle to remember my manners in public," I simpered. Why wasn't he running for the hills by now? What was wrong with this guy? Maybe he was super interested in the wealth that Ella would bring with her marriage? Maybe, but he looked powerful and rich as hell. Why did he need to sit through the worst date in the world?

A throat cleared beside us, and I looked up to see a fancy silver cloche being set before me. When it was lifted, the most delicious looking cheeseburger sat on my plate, plump and juicy, and begging to be devoured.

"I think everyone around us might be jealous right now. You made a wise choice," Cole was saying, as he picked up his cheeseburger, totally uncaring of our audience, watching curiously.

"Thanks," I muttered, giving in to the urge to taste it. As soon as the perfect beef and sharp tang of ketchup hit my tongue, I moaned, and then froze.

Risking a glance up, I saw Cole had also frozen, his icy blue gaze fixed on my mouth. Had I moaned loud enough for him to hear? *Kill me now.*

"It's good," I muttered, turning as red as the ketchup.

"I hear," Cole said, his deep voice strangely rough.

“I’m sorry, please excuse me. Like I said, I have no manners.”

“It’s alright, Ella, it’s fine. I liked that sound,” Cole said.

Heat hit me deep in my belly. Oh, this man was dangerous. “Why?”

“It was honest,” he said simply, throwing me completely. I couldn’t keep up with the turns and swerves in this conversation. “I’d like to be half as happy about anything as you look right now, eating that burger.”

“You’re a billionaire, living in one of the most exciting cities in the world. I’d imagine you have plenty of opportunities to be happy,” I pointed out quietly.

Cole’s mouth quirked. “You’d be surprised. I’m afraid the adage is true. Money doesn’t buy happiness.”

“But it helps—right? Money buys safety, security and the chance to do the things you want with your time, before you die,” I challenged back.

He blinked at me, tilting his head slightly to the side, and seeming to go over my words. “In that case, you must be relieved to be Ella Clarke, heiress to a great fortune.”

I met his gaze, and it felt like the entire restaurant around us fell away for a moment. There was just him and me, and the little act that I was putting on, and he was seeing right through. *You should tell him the truth*, a little voice in my head urged. He isn’t some weirdo, like some arranged dates. He’s a normal, sexy as hell guy who should know the truth. He’d probably laugh about it before leaving, and it would be done and dusted. But what if that got Ella in trouble with her father? Their relationship was rocky at the best of times. As I agonized over what to do, my phone vibrated on the table.

Ah, it was my prearranged call. My killing blow to any potential date.

“Answer it,” Cole ordered, and damn it if I didn’t comply before I could help it.

“Hello?” I shied away from his eyes as I listened to Ella babble on the other end.

“Here’s your official reason to bail! I can’t wait to hear how he reacted to your schtick. You’re really saving my life right now. I can’t even with these arranged dates.”

“Honey, I miss you too. I’ll be there soon,” I said into my cell, following the script I’d prepared earlier. No potential boyfriend liked the thought of a woman already being emotionally involved with someone else. I hung up, and grabbed my bag. My only regret was not getting to finish the cheeseburger.

“I’m sorry, something’s come up with my friend. He’s my yoga teacher and he’s just such a special person.”

“Nothing serious, I hope,” Cole said coolly, studying me like someone would a specimen in a lab.

“No, just a groin injury that needs regular massage to take away the pain. I have to lend a hand,” I said, cringing at the words. Why was this so embarrassing this time? Usually, I didn’t care.

Cole’s mouth tilted up in a smirk. “Is that right? Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you from massaging a friend’s groin. You’d best go,” he said.

I stood up, so embarrassed I wished the floor could open up and swallow me, but there was nothing to do but commit to it now.

“Yes, it’s for the best. It was lovely to meet you. Good luck with, er, business and everything,” I mumbled, surprised that Cole had stood up as well. Standing so close, I had to tilt my head back to see him. The man was a machine, and so hot it should be illegal. He smirked as he looked down at me. He reached out and took my hand again before I could pull away.

“It was lovely to meet you, Ella. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again soon,” he said, his huge hand locked around mine. His thumb ran across my palm, which made me jolt slightly. How could such an innocent touch feel so incredible?

“I wouldn’t bet on it. It’s such a huge city,” I said, tugging my hand from his, and edging away. I needed to get out of here before I embarrassed myself any further or lost my cool and confessed all. I was halfway down the stairs, tugging my coat on, face flaming, before I heard his soft words.

“Oh, I would.”

CHAPTER 2

Cole

Ella Clarke, the only daughter of Elton Clarke, was nothing like I'd expected her to be.

That was, of course, because the woman who showed up on the blind date wasn't Ella Clarke at all.

I'd already done my research on her before we met for dinner. While she wasn't a social media darling, pictures of her existed, and therefore my assistant could prepare me for the meeting. I had no intention of getting married, never mind entering an arranged one, and I didn't need an old nosy family members setting up dates for me, but Elton Clarke was interesting, and I'd entertained the idea that perhaps I could get to him through his daughter, however briefly. Also, I could admit, the first months in a new city were wearing on me. I was lonely. I'd been lonely before, I was well-suited for it, given my disposition to work all the hours of the day and night, and find little patience for those who didn't want to talk investments, but I'd decided, against all odds, to go to this dinner with Ella Clarke.

It had been interesting as hell when another woman had shown up in her place.

As I watched her shining cap of red hair moving quickly out of the restaurant, I pulled my cell from my pocket.

"Melanie, I need you to look into someone for me," I drawled, as the line connected to my assistant.

She sighed in my ear. She'd been with me from the beginning, the only assistant on the floor of the tech start-up

I'd got my first position in, who hadn't been claimed. The other managers had thought she was too old and grumpy. I'd been stuck with her, and together, we had risen through the ranks faster than anyone could have expected.

“Ella Clarke. Why? Do you finally like someone?”

“No, not Ella Clarke. The woman impersonating her, and... perhaps.”

After a year of moving cities, and setting up my company on the West coast, I was looking for a new challenge. The woman who had sat across from me tonight, sweetly lying to my face, had been intriguing as hell. She'd also been funny and smart, not to mention strikingly beautiful. A curl of curiosity that was impossible to ignore stirred in my chest.

“First, find out who she is, where she lives,” I said, signaling for the check, as I stood up. “Find out everything you can. I want to know it all.”

THE NEXT NIGHT, I KNEW I'D HAVE THE CHANCE TO ACTUALLY sample the cuisine at The Camelia, seeing as I had an important meeting there. It seemed to be that once a place qualified as a hot spot, you could depend on having to eat there a few times a week until it was pushed off the top spot for somewhere else. In my world, it was a flex to secure a seat at the hottest place in town, and my potential clients and investors knew it.

It was all so tedious and numbing; it made me wonder if there had been any point in moving from New York after all. The scenery might have changed, but my industry and the type of sharks who swam in it hadn't. Therefore, the view from the window on the East Coast was looking depressingly like that from the West Coast.

I entered that night and headed toward my party, ignoring a call from my uncle as I went. Uncle Charlie was the only family I had left, and he wasn't keeping well in his old age. He seemed to have set his sights on seeing me marry before he

died. Another reason I'd agreed to met Ella Clarke last night was to please him. I wondered what the old, eccentric billionaire would have made of the woman who'd shown up in her place. I knew Uncle Charlie enough to know that he'd have liked her at first sight. My uncle and I were cut from the same cloth, after all.

The first half of dinner droned on. The execs who were hosting the dinner were interested in how Preston Technology might build them an interactive new space for their clients, and blow the competition out of the water. About three minutes in, I knew that my company wouldn't be doing anything of the kind, considering the condescending way the higher ups referred to the public. I'd just resigned myself to another hour of boredom when I saw her.

Shining red hair that glowed under the low lighting, and creamy, pale skin, dusted with amber freckles. A green dress tonight, velvet and curve-hugging, and my fake 'Ella' had curves for days.

She entered the dining room and made for a table just out of my eyeline. I shifted my chair around the table, startling the man droning on next to me to silence.

"There's a draft." I waved away his reply and feasted my eyes on the woman who'd taken up a little intriguing corner of my mind since last night.

She shook hands with a man and sat opposite him. He smiled widely at her and passed her an individually wrapped rose. *Was she on a date?* Another couple joined them just then, and I lost sight of her. *A double date?*

"Cole, what do you think?" The sound of my name pulled my attention back to my table. I turned my gaze on the man who'd spoken. Christ, had he still been speaking?

"I think—I need to visit the restroom," I blurted, as I spied my mystery woman standing up, and gesturing in the general direction of the bathrooms. Pushing back my chair so quickly, the men sitting with me looked on curiously as I strode away from the table. Let them wonder, I didn't care. There had been so little of excitement in my life since I'd moved to the city, I

wasn't letting the one intriguing person I'd met get away a second time.

She was nowhere to be seen when I reached the corridor outside the bathrooms, so I settled against the wall to wait for her. Was she on another date as Ella Clarke, or was she herself tonight? What was her real name, and why was she going on other people's dates, anyway?

After a few minutes, she stepped out of the bathroom, brushing her long curtain of glorious hair back, and starting toward me. As soon as she looked up, my eyes locked on hers. She stopped, her petal pink mouth falling open as she stared.

"Miss Clarke? What a pleasant surprise," I called to her. She visibly pulled herself together, tightening her hands into little fists and straightening her spine in a way that threatened to drag my eyes to her chest. She looked stunning in the emerald velvet, and my hands longed to feel the supple curve of her waist in my grip.

"Is it? I'm afraid it's a little awkward," she said finally.

"Awkward because you're here on a date? I take it I'm not to call you, in that case?" I prompted her.

She flushed delicately, but her eyes remain unflinching on mine. She had grit, and I liked that. I liked it a lot. "Yes, I suppose not. I thought after last night, you wouldn't want to. We didn't exactly hit it off," she demurred.

"I beg to differ." I approached her slowly, not wanting her to feel cornered. She looked flighty as hell and I had already decided I wasn't leaving here without her real name. "I thought we hit it off just fine. Great, actually."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I disagree," she maintained.

"So, you haven't thought of me since running out of here last night? Not even once? Not even when I sent you those flowers earlier?" My question startled her, and I knew my bluff had paid off. There had been no flowers sent to Ella Clarke from me, but this little minx clearly didn't know that.

“I -I have to get back to my date,” she said quickly, clearly expecting that the conversation was spiraling out of control.

“Did you like them? The flowers?” I stepped toward her as she approached, only enough to make her hesitate.

She stopped and looked up at me, swallowing hard. “Yes.”

“Liar,” I murmured to her, unable to resist the urge to reach out and move a stray lock of blazing hair that was hanging in her eye and making her blink. “Do you make a habit out of lying?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“I think you do. Let me cut to the chase. I never go on a date my uncle presses me into without researching the woman first. I knew you weren’t Ella the second you walked in the door... so stop lying.”

She paled, and a pulse started up in her neck. I wondered what it would feel like beating against my lips.

“What’s your real name?” I pressed when she failed to speak.

Her eyes jumped to mine. “Why? It’s not illegal to impersonate someone on a date they didn’t want to go on.”

“That’s right, it isn’t. However, you’ve made me curious, and I’m a man who satisfies his curiosity, without fail. Tell me your name, or I’ll go out there and ask your date.”

She scoffed. “He wouldn’t know, anyway.”

Those words settled over me, and an inkling of understanding trickled in. “So, this is a regular occurrence for you? What is it... a service? A job? Do you get paid for acting terribly on dates and fooling them?”

“Sometimes fooling someone is kinder than flat out rejecting them, and besides, there’s nothing fair to some women about having to go on a date with a stranger because someone else tells you to,” she said, raising her chin, her conviction giving her strength. “But no, I don’t do it often. It was a favor. Tonight a gay man needs to show his judgemental boss that he’s straight, and I’m his beard. Is that ok with you?”

Relief filled me. It wasn't a proper date. Good. "I won't judge you for being enterprising, not in the slightest. However, I will know your name," I said firmly.

"Why? We'll never see each other again if I can help it, so why bother knowing my name? Are you going to sue me or something?" she demanded, her vivid eyes bright.

"Or something," I murmured, barely resisting the urge to step closer. She was truly stunning when agitated, bolts of green fire shooting from her eyes.

"Cole? I'd thought I'd lost you," an unwanted voice called from along the corridor, jolting us both. I turned to look toward the dining room, as Garth, the potential new client, approached. The woman beside me pulled away, and hardly able to grab her, she slipped down the corridor, heading for the dining room.

"The coffee's here, and then we thought you might like to go to a certain member's only gentleman's club downtown. The company is really worth the money, if you get my drift," Garth said, smiling dirtily at me, sending sparks of disgust across me.

"I'm not interested," I told him tightly, pushing past him and striding down the corridor as fast as I could. My gaze turned toward the table she's been sitting at. Its occupants were absorbed in deep conversation, and she was nowhere to be seen. She was gone. I'd missed her again, and now, my interest was only increased tenfold.

CHAPTER 3

Cole

The next day started just the same as every single one since I'd moved to the West Coast. Life in New York had been routine in a way that had started to kill me a little, day by day. I was only a few months into this cross-country move before the truth was dawning. It wasn't the city; it was me.

Wherever I was, the same problem resurfaced again and again. In L.A, I was working too much, sleeping too little, and finding my mind unable to stay occupied on subjects besides business. While it might be a good way to grow my income, it wasn't really the recipe for a happy life.

That morning, after I'd met the fake Ella Clarke for the second time, I lay in bed for ten whole minutes after I woke and stared at the dark city beyond my window. I thought about the mystery woman's smile when she bit into her burger and made that low groan in her throat that had turned me to stone. Did I appreciate anything in my day that much? I was sure I didn't. When had I forgotten how to be happy about the small, simple things in life? When had I forgotten life was to be enjoyed, not survived?

Today, for the first time in years, I felt excited to go about my day. Today, I'd find out who my mystery woman was.

Pushing myself out of my bed, I started my routine. Dressed in workout clothes, I made my way to the impressive gym housed in my building. There were two. One for employees, and one for my personal use. Yes, that's right. When I moved here, I bought one of the biggest hulking monoliths downtown and made it my office and home. I

literally had no reason to leave the office ever again. The top two floors of my building were my penthouse apartment and gym, and then the rest was for office use. My personal office level sat on the twentieth floor, and was seldom frequented by anyone other than Melanie, other senior personnel, and the maintenance staff.

After working out, I headed for a shower, and ate a sparse breakfast. It was still early. I usually worked alone in my home office, instead of heading downstairs to the office levels, but today, my apartment felt too empty. My isolation seemed to echo and distracted me.

Maybe there was a limit a soul could take on loneliness, and after that point, it rejected the very notion.

In my office, I started my computers, there were five total on the desk, and entered my sophisticated facial recognition software. An email waited in my inbox with the footage from The Camelia. Melanie had come through, like always. I opened the files and was rewarded with the sight of my imposter's beautiful face, captured in black and white.

I copied her image over to the software that had made me a billionaire under forty, and started the programme, leaning back and enjoying the way the sophisticated AI trawled through images on national databases and other publicly available information.

It only took a couple of hours for a face to pop up. A match. Looking up from my work, I turned my full attention to the image on my screen.

The green eyes, thick auburn lashes and a sprinkling of freckles across the ridge of her nose were plucked straight from my memories of last night.

Fake Ella Clarke smiled at me, wearing a cocktail dress, with her arm around no other than the real Ella Clarke.

Heiress Ella Clarke supports her artist friend at a private exhibition at The Collection, in Venice Beach.

My grin stretched across my face.

Gotcha, sweetheart.

CHAPTER 4

Riley

“I swear, I’m going to kill you. That’s it, it’s official, I’m retiring. Can’t believe I’ve lasted this long without being found out. It’s for the best,” I sighed, as I increased the incline of the treadmill at the gym the next day, Ella at my side. She continued at a leisurely pace, looking at her phone.

“Well, as sad as I am to be the case that broke the camel’s back, you’re right, it’s probably for the best. Who knew how long you could do that and not pick up a stalker, or someone crazy?”

“Yeah, a stalker like Cole Preston,” I muttered, flushing as I remembered the feeling of being stopped by him in the hall. I was pretty sure people weren’t supposed to feel so excited about being called a liar in public.

“But from the way you described him, maybe you wouldn’t be opposed to a stalker like him. Am I right?” Ella nudged me. “You practically had heart eyes as you described how he cornered you last night.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m not forgiving you that easily, so stop it.” Yikes, was my momentary little crush on Cole Preston that obvious? Probably. Ella knew me better than anyone, and it was impossible to hide things from her. Had it been terrifying to be busted on my second date in two nights at The Camelia? Yes. Had it also been heart-thumpingly exciting? Absolutely. I’d suffered a sleepless night, as I’d tossed and turned, my mind lingering on the man who was hotter than anyone had a right to be.

Ella finished her walk and stopped the machine, gulping down water and leaning on one hand as she watched me.

“He sounded kind of interested in you.”

“He was just interested in knowing who lied to him. Men like him don’t like to be played. No, let me rephrase, no man likes to be played, but especially not men like him.”

Ella raised an eyebrow. “And men like him are...”

“Rich, entitled, powerful and probably more used to women getting on their knees for them than running out on him. If he’s interested in knowing who I am, it is to extract some petty revenge for denting his ego, or he can’t wrap his head around a woman not wanting him, especially some low life grifter like me.”

Ella frowned. “Ouch, be careful, that’s my friend you’re talking about.”

“I’m just being real. Anyway, it’s probably for the best. I can’t keep up this hustle before I run into the same people. It’s time to retire, and besides, Laura says I might get a space in the Spring line up at the gallery.” Happiness and pride filled my chest at the thought.

“Shut up! You didn’t tell me that! Your next show is going to sell right out, I can tell. I’m so excited!” Ella clapped, nearly jumping up and down with excitement, making me laugh.

“Really?”

“Really! Why are we wasting time talking about men when my friend is about to get famous?”

MY STUDIO DOWNTOWN WAS MY FAVORITE PLACE IN THE world. It was a shared workspace, and I knew most of the other artists that took a studio. After the gym, I let myself into the building and walked past the first two areas, where artists were already hard at work. Lee was a painter and he was

already shirtless, with both hands wet with striking cerulean paint.

“Morning beautiful. You have a visitor,” he said, jerking his head along toward my space, right at the end of the long warehouse corridor.

“Really?”

“Really. And congratulations on the show. You’re going places, girl,” he said, giving me a wide smile.

I ducked my head, as always, a compliment making me feel odd. “I’m sure it’s just a small thing.”

He rolled his eyes at me, knowing my tendency to shy away from celebrating my wins, and let me go without arguing.

I hurried along toward my studio space. Who would wait for me? No one visited me here.

I reached the huge barn door that separated my area from others and found it open. I never locked it, so that was nothing unusual. However, the figure standing in the open space, walking slowly past my sculptures, was bizarre as hell. Bizarre because I had never imagined I’d see Cole Preston again, and certainly not standing in my studio.

I stared at him, my mouth open, thoughts scrambling frantically for purchase. He was clad in a bespoke suit again, dark gray, with a blue shirt. The artist in me appreciated his striking looks, even as I panicked about his purpose.

“I’m not really qualified to give a critique of art, but even I can see, you’re exceptionally talented.”

His deep voice jolted me. He had known I was standing there, frozen with panic, without even turning. He continued to move along the display wall I put the finished pieces on. “So, this is your actual job. I knew it couldn’t just be tanking arranged dates.”

“Actually, being a fake girlfriend is my usual bread and butter. The blind date thing was an exception for Ella.”

He turned slowly, taking me in. “Because she’s your best friend, right? For future reference, tell her to be herself and tell a guy she isn’t interested up front. She might be surprised to hear that he wasn’t interested either.”

I blinked at that. “If you weren’t interested in meeting her, why’d you agree?”

“Maybe she isn’t the only one being guilted into meeting a family friend’s single child. Rich families are the same, the world over.”

I pondered that response, feeling called out. He was right, after all.

“Why are you here?” I changed the subject, the weird reality of him having found me dawning.

Cole strolled toward me. He had the air of a man who took his time, doing things when he wanted to, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. People answered to him, not the other way around.

He stopped just short of me. “Because we hadn’t finished our conversation last night, when we were so rudely interrupted.”

“Do you mean when I ran off?”

One lip ticked upward in a smirk. “Your words, not mine.”

“Well, I think our conversation was over, so I didn’t run off anywhere. I left, as I had a right to.”

His eyes flashed with something dark and intriguing as he studied me. “Are you always like this?”

I bridled at his tone. “Like what?”

“Rebellious?” His voice seemed to stroke over the words. Now, that dark look in his eyes took on a glint of something that made my stomach drop and my skin feel tight.

“You can only rebel against someone in a position of power over you, and you aren’t, so...” I trailed off as he stepped closer. He studied my face so long that I felt my skin heat. “What?”

His eyes moved to my lips and then back up. “No one speaks to me like this.”

“Yeah, well, if you just do us both a favor and leave me alone, you don’t have to hear it again.” I pasted a smile on my face and raised an arm toward the door.

Cole chuckled and then shook his head. “Leaving you alone doesn’t interest me at all,” he said, puzzling me and the same time as sending heat tearing across my skin. “Shouldn’t you be wondering why I’m here?”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to hire you.”

That confession knocked the air out of my chest. I had been completely unprepared for it.

“Hire me?”

“You act like a fake girlfriend for events, don’t you? I need your services.”

“I’m retiring,” I said faintly. “And why would you need a fake girlfriend? Not that I want to add to the ego clogging up this room, but you don’t seem hard up for dating options.”

Cole nodded slightly. My eyes lingered on his face, from his stubble to his full lips. Christ, this man was attractive.

“Real girlfriends need attention and time spent on them. I’m not interested in that, at this moment in my life. I want a simple transaction, and I want to put the least amount of time and effort into it as possible.”

His cold, business-like words were at odds with the heated look in his eyes. Something in my chest warned me that fake dating this man was dangerous.

“I’m fully booked.” I lied, trying to figure a fast way out of this mess. If he’d intrigued me and given me the tiniest crush before this encounter, then going on a fake date with him and pretending to be his girlfriend in front of others would only make it worse.

“I thought you were retiring?” he reminded me. Shoot.

“I am, once I finish my bookings,” I rambled. “I have a show, and I need to get ready for it.”

“Don’t waste your time, then. Tell me how much your other bookings will earn you in total and I’ll match it. More money for less time.”

I stared at him, shocked. “That’s crazy. There are lots of other women who do the same who’d charge much less.”

“I don’t want other women. I want you,” he said, and surprised me by suddenly stepped closer. “And Riley, you should know now that I’m a man who always gets what he wants, so don’t waste time here and agree.”

I thought furiously about his proposal. Was he really going to double my other bookings?

“How many dates?”

“Just the one, plus one get-to-know you meeting, since my uncle will smell a rat a hundred miles away.”

“It’ll cost you a lot for one and a half dates,” I warned. “You’re throwing your money away.”

“My uncle knows my type. I can’t take just anyone. It has to be you,” he said simply.

I blew out a breath, wanting to argue more, but really, I could use the money and the freed up time. I shrugged. “Well, it’s your money to waste, I guess. Ok, we have a deal. When is this date?”

“On Saturday, oh, and didn’t I mention? It’s in Napa.”

CHAPTER 5

Cole

Uncle Charlie had been my favorite relative growing up. He'd been interesting, full of stories about travel, and he liked to tinker with old tech, which was exactly what I liked to spend hours doing, until I got old enough to program, an obsession that soon took over my life.

He'd always had more money than my parents, but we hadn't been poor by any stretch. I'd been born and bred in Colorado, only moving to New York for business school, and later, after my parents passed away in an unfortunate accident, I'd moved Uncle Charlie to Napa, the place he'd always wanted to retire. Now, he was getting old, and I felt the connection to the only family I had in the world growing thinner with every passing day, like a frayed thread, about to snap.

I wanted him to think I wouldn't be alone once he passed, so he could go in peace. I also wanted to get Riley alone.

I waited for her at the private airstrip early that Saturday morning. The small private plane that we'd be taking sat on the runway. I checked my watch, irritation growing, until I spied her bright red head making its way out through the small terminal building that sat just off the private runway.

"Yeah, I know I'm late, but in my defense, I don't want to leave L.A. for this job, so this is against my will," Riley grumbled when she got close to me. She had a small wheeled suitcase and a bag, which I immediately took from her.

She eyed me warily, like a man taking a woman's heavy bag without being asked had to be about to attack her.

“Good morning, Riley. I'm glad you're coming with me. Thank you for agreeing to leave the city.”

She sniffed and gave a half-nod shrug, and looked over my shoulder. “Where's the plane?”

I followed her gaze. “That's it.”

Riley paled. “That's the plane? I thought it was a little machine for cleaning the runway.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Nope. Don't worry, it's perfectly safe, and uses much less fuel than a bigger plane would.”

“I don't think I can get in that,” Riley said, looking panicked.

Hefting her bag, I started across the tarmac toward the plane. “Of course you can,” I called back.

“No, I really can't!”

“Let's go, we don't want to be late!”

RILEY GRIPPED THE ARMS OF HER CHAIR WITH DEDICATION AND stared ahead.

“Here, do you want a drink?” I wondered, passing her a bottle of water. She shook her head, never loosening her lethal grip on the chair arm.

“You know you're not keeping the plane up with sheer force of will, right?” I teased her. I couldn't help it. She was so adorable. She was a tumbling ball of contradictions and I found her increasingly fascinating. She was, in turns, funny and defiant, charming and creative, and stunning all the while. I couldn't look away from her. I never know what she was going to do next, and I liked it.

“Not big on planes, eh?”

“I don’t mind the big ones that much, but I’ve not flown often. You? I guess you fly around everywhere by private jet?”

“I’ve flown my fair share, but my work keeps me busy and in one place. I don’t actually remember the last time I flew somewhere on holiday, or to do something not-work related when I got there.”

Riley frowned at me. “But you’re a billionaire. You could go anywhere in the world,” she pointed out.

I shrugged. “Being a billionaire means working a lot, believe it or not, they go hand in hand.”

“That sucks. If I was a billionaire, I’d just want to travel all the time.”

“Then you might not be a billionaire for long,” I mused. “Where would you go?”

“Europe, of course. Italy and Greece first.... The pottery...” she shivered with excitement. Her eyes sparked with interest. “I’d travel all over Europe, and go to all the galleries, more than once. Then the Hermitage in Russia, and then head over to Asia.” She let out a long breath. “There’s so much to see.”

“You’ve thought about this,” I observed.

She laughed, her hands finally relaxing on the armrests as she was drawn into the conversation about travel. “More like daydreamed about it endlessly. Not that I’ll ever get to go, but dreaming is free.”

“Why won’t you ever get to go? Life is long, and you’re just young,” I pointed out.

She huffed. “I’m twenty-five. If my life was going to veer in that direction, I’m sure there’d be some sort of a clue by now.”

“Twenty-five is young. You can’t know what’s going to happen in your life at twenty-five.”

“Spoken like an old guy. How old are you anyway?” she challenged, amusement gleaming in her eyes.

“I’m thirty-seven. Is that too old for you?” I heard myself ask her. I hadn’t thought exactly what I was asking. I certainly hadn’t meant it as a proposition, and yet, it sounded just like that. Did she think I was too old for her? I suddenly needed to know the answer to that more than anything.

She laughed, not hearing the subtle overlay of curiosity. “It’s too old for not having traveled a hell of a lot, and not remembering your last vacation.”

She had avoided the question neatly.

“Yeah, well, work-life balance and I don’t really fit.”

“You need to work on that,” Riley sighed, looking out the window, her eyes lingering on the view below. “Life is short,” she said simply. Her words filled my head. The light from the window was falling on her hair, making it shine like rubies, and her smile seemed to short wire my brain. A strange feeling filled my chest at that moment, the knowledge that the perfect, light filled moment, alone with this startling, unpredictable woman, high above the world, would become a preserved moment that I’d never forget. I was completely sure of it.

It was the very last thing I thought before the alarm started blaring.

CHAPTER 6

Cole

“**W**hat’s that noise?” Riley asked, immediately looking terrified.

Worry coiled in me as I twisted to look toward the cockpit. “I’m sure it’s nothing,” I said.

“I don’t think nothing sounds like that,” Riley insisted, just as a staff member bustled out toward us.

“Simon, what’s going on?”

“Sir, it’s the plane,” Simon said quickly, his eyes darting between us. He was sweating. The sight of his wet forehead only made me more worried. “It’s having some trouble, and I think we might need to make an emergency landing.”

“An emergency landing?” Riley looked like she was going to cry. I reached out, without thinking, and gripped her hand.

“What’s wrong with the plane?”

“We seem to be leaking gas. We are losing power quickly. Something must have been missed in the pre-flight check,” Simon said, his eyes apologetic. He looked toward the cockpit. “I should help. Please make sure you’d strapped in take up the brace position if needed. I’m so sorry, sir,” he said in the rush.

I shook my head, my mouth dry. “It’s ok, just go, do what you need to do.”

I watched Simon hurry away before turning back to Riley. Long tear tracks were making their way down her cheeks, and she looked absolutely terrified. I stood up, making her yelp with fright.

“Strap in!”

“I am, don’t worry,” I said, crossing to sit beside her, instead of across from her. I sat down and snapped my belt on, and then put my arm around Riley and pulled her into my chest. It had to be testament to how scared she was that she didn’t notice at all that a stranger was holding her. Instead, she gripped my arm and hid her face against my chest. I could feel her chest moving too quickly under my hand. She was hyperventilating.

“You need to calm down, Riley. Emergency landings happen all the time. It will be routine and easy, you’ll see,” I told her, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

“You’re just saying that,” she mumbled against my chest.

“You don’t know that for sure,” I countered, trying to distract her.

“I know that if we die, it’s all your fault,” she muttered.

I rubbed a circle on her back. “Ok, you’re right. I’ll accept that. If you die, it’s my fault.”

“Good. You should feel guilty,” she muttered and raised her face to look at me. Just then the plane dipped and slid sideways as the descent started. It was, frankly, quite terrifying.

“I bet you regret working so much and never traveling now, right?” Riley said.

A surprised laugh left me as I studied her. She was so beautiful, and right now, she was seeing right into my jaded heart.

I nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Her stare held mine. “If we’re being overdramatic, and everything is fine, remember this feeling. It’s important.”

I swallowed. I had sat beside her and pulled her into my arms to comfort her, and yet she was the one who was making an impact on me. Maybe she was distracting herself? For whatever reason, for her sudden insight into my life, I knew her words would leave a mark.

“I don’t want to have regrets,” I whispered, a desire sparking too intense to ignore. I was pretty sure everything was going to be fine. We weren’t that high, and the pilot was one of the best. Yet, was there going to be a better chance to justify stealing what I wanted? What I’d wanted since the moment Riley walked into my life, sat opposite me and given me a fake name with a sweet smile.

I leaned in, feeling her surprised exhale against my skin, before my mouth closed on hers.

CHAPTER 7

Riley

He was kissing me. We were hurtling through the sky, downwards, instead of upwards, and he was kissing me. Cole Preston was kissing me, probably to distract me, and damn, it was working.

His lip pressed mine apart and his tongue swept inside my mouth, sliding along mine, filling me with slow, wet heat. I shivered, the belt tight on my middle, the only thing holding me back from jumping on him. His hand was firm, cupping my cheek, giving me no way to turn my head, and I liked it. I liked the way he took charge and gave me no choice right now but to focus on him. No regrets. I might regret freaking out and losing my mind with fear if we were going to be absolutely fine, but I wouldn't regret kissing him.

He shifted his lips against mine, pressing closer, until both our belts stopped us. The turbulence continued to shake the small plane, and I held onto Cole's arms desperately, afraid and panicked, kissing him back with an intensity born of knowing that this right here could be my last moment. Did I want to spend it crying, staring ahead at oncoming doom? No, I wanted to lose myself in this man's touch. Everything went into that kiss. All the hope and dreams for the life I didn't get to live. All the desire I'd pent up and never released, too exhausted and jaded from my side hustle as a fake girlfriend to want to date for me.

I pulled Cole's lip between mine, sucking on it gently, and he let out a groan, smoothing a broad thumb across the apple of my cheek.

“God Riley, you really are something else,” he muttered, pulling back enough to look at me like I was something he’d never encountered before. Someone rare and precious. Someone important. I drank that look down, starved for it, just before a voice came over the speaker system.

“Assume brace position. Brace! Brace!”

The pilot’s voice filled the cabin, and I got a glimpse of verdant green trees through the windows, no longer far below us, only meters away and rushing toward us quickly.

I met Cole’s eyes, and he saw all of me at that moment. My fears and regrets, my anguish over the life I never got to live, and then his hand was pushing my head down between my knees. My arms came up to cover myself, and I barely had time to grit my teeth before we hit the first tree.

FEAR OR A BANG TO THE HEAD MUST HAVE KNOCKED ME OUT, because I didn’t remember the actual impact. I’ll never stop being grateful for that. Instead, with my mind filled with Cole’s kiss, I fell into darkness.

When I came to, it was to the feeling of firm hands on my face, straightening my head.

“Riley, can you hear me?” Cole’s voice warmed me, comforting me immediately. I opened my eyes and coughed. Dust motes swirled in the air and the light in the cabin was dim. Cole was right in front of me, his seatbelt off, crouching on the ground. I lifted my neck and looked into his eyes. He had a long scratch on one cheek, and looked more disheveled than I’d ever seen him, but otherwise looked ok.

“Did we die?”

“Not yet,” he said, flashing a quicksilver grin. “But the day is young.”

“Trust you to be joking around when this is all your fault,” I grumbled, stretching my body lightly, relieved to find I wasn’t badly hurt in any one place.

“Accidents happen, sweetheart. I’m just glad you’re alright. I’m going to check on the pilot and crew. They’re awfully quiet up there. Can you wait here for me?”

I nodded, reaching for the bottle of water that was rolling around my feet. Cole straightened. He’d taken off his leather jacket during the flight, and his polo shirt stretched dangerously around his biceps. What kind of billionaire had those kinds of biceps?

I took my seatbelt off and stood shakily. Peering outside the windows, I saw trees and gravel and not much else.

Holding onto the backs of seats, I made my way up the plane, toward the cockpit. Cooler air whistled against my face as I got closer. As I got nearer, I saw why. A tree had pushed its branches through the glass at the front of the plane. My gasp drew Cole’s attention, and he turned to me.

“Don’t look, sweetheart, if you’re not good with blood,” he said grimly.

“Blood?” I peered around him, and was shocked to see that the branch had come right into the cockpit and stuck itself in the pilot’s shoulder, pinning him to the seat. I covered my mouth, shock and worry filling me.

“It’s ok, Riley, he’s ok, he just needs help. Our location should be reported. Help will come,” Cole said.

The air steward from before stood nervously in the door. “The comms weren’t cooperating either. I don’t know what was going on but I’m not sure our distress call was heard.”

Cole turned a hard look at him. “Are you saying that no one is coming?”

“No, Sir, they’ll come. I’m just not sure if it’ll be quick enough,” the man said, his eyes darting to the injured pilot.

Silence fell between all of us as we considered his words.

“Then some of us go for help. Where are we?” I asked, my voice startling everyone.

“The last co-ordinates we had put us over Henry W. Coe State park, just southeast of San Jose.”

“Ok, well, if we’re in a state park, maybe someone saw the plane come down, or there’s a trail we can find that leads to a ranger station.”

Cole was staring at me. With my announcement, he nodded, and turned back to the staff.

“She’s right. We can’t just sit around and wait. You stay here and take care of the patient, try to slow the blood loss, and don’t move him. We will go for help.”

I jolted at the feeling of Cole’s fingers sliding through mine.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

CHAPTER 8

Cole

This entire date wasn't going at all like I'd planned and yet, watching Riley walk down a trail in front of me, her long red hair swaying around her shoulders, catching the light and glowing, I couldn't regret it too badly. Except for the pilot being hurt, of course, but then, we were trying to help, which was the most we could do.

"Do you hike a lot?" I wondered as I watched her walk.

"Yeah, it's good for you and cheap, so I like it," she called back over her shoulders. "You?"

"Not really. Not since I was a kid."

"You obviously exercise though," Riley said, glancing at my body in a way that turned it to lava.

"Are you calling me hot?"

She burst out in an indignant cough. "No! I just mean, you're in shape, ah! Whatever, you know what I meant."

"I run on a treadmill and watch the news. I lift weights and work," I confessed a moment later. The sun was slanting through the trees and the entire wood around us smelled sharp and clean. A freshness I'd not experience in years. "Even when I'm exercising, I can't get out of my head."

Riley had stopped and was waiting for me ahead. My heart picked up its beat as I approached her.

"Well, that sounds like an easy fix. Make yourself go outside to exercise, or do something funner than running on a treadmill. There are a lot of fun ways to break a sweat." As

soon as she spoke, she paused a second, heat shooting to her cheeks. “Actually forget I said that.”

“You’ve got a dirty mind, Miss Delaney.”

I grinned at her, itching to get close. The memory of the kiss earlier kept running through my mind. I needed to repeat it and soon. I needed it to be a daily occurrence, in fact.

“I really don’t,” Riley called over my shoulder. “As you saw, I don’t actually sculpt naked men.”

“I know. I’m still getting over my disappointment about not being asked to model.”

Riley rolled her eyes at me. “And I’m still trying to get over my disappointment at how you invaded my privacy and found me so quickly.”

Ouch. “There was nothing illegal about it. I looked up an article about Ella Clarke, and there you were.”

“Right, whatever helps you sleep better at night,” she quipped.

That would be you, sweetheart. I knew better than to say that aloud right now.

“How can I make it up to you?” I asked her. “What about a better studio?”

She turned a shocked look at me. “I love my studio space, and you don’t have to buy me anything, never mind some kind of monthly obligation. That’s nuts.”

“I didn’t mean pay for it monthly, I meant purchase it outright, for you.”

Riley narrowed her eyes at me. “You don’t really strike me as a supporter of the arts.”

“It’s my new passion. Why hasn’t you best friend ever upgraded your lifestyle? She can certainly afford it.”

“Because I don’t need her charity, thank you very much.”

I chuckled. “Is there such a thing as charity between friends?”

“Yeah, but they don’t call it charity,” Riley shot back, stepping to the side of the trail to avoid a fallen branch. “They call it pity and it’s way worse.”

It was the last she managed, before the ground at the edge of the trail crumbled, and she disappeared from my grasping hand.

CHAPTER 9

Riley

“Riley!” Cole’s shout echoed around the valley, and I caught one last look from his worried blue eyes before everything slid away. My feet slipped, and the ground gave way, and I fell so fast, I couldn’t hold on to anything. I clawed at the ground as it shot past, roots, grass even, but nothing held. I landed hard at the bottom of a dip on a bed of rock. My ankle twisted painfully against a huge rock sticking out of the wall.

“Motherfucker!” I cried, resting back and gritting my teeth.

“Riley!” Cole called again, his voice frantic. Small rocks and dirt cascaded down the wall of dirt and dried grass beside me. His feet appeared in my line of vision, and he was sliding quickly down the side, with far less care than he should be. He landed agilely beside me.

“Be careful. One of us needs to be able to walk,” I warned him.

“Shit, does it hurt?”

“Fuck yeah, it hurts.”

“I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m so sorry.” Cole pushed a hand through his hair and frowned at my leg. “Can you move it?”

“Yeah, I can move it. It just hurts. Thank fuck it’s not my wrist.”

“We’ll fix this. I’ll fix this. I’ll fix all of it,” Cole muttered. He seemed to lose his customary cool. It was fascinating to

watch. “Shit, the first time in months, no—years, that I actually care about something, and I’m fucking it all up.”

“Wow, you really want to sell your uncle on this fake relationship thing.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he muttered, and then looked up at the trail, now far above us.

“You should leave me here. Get help, come back, I’ll be waiting.”

“No, I’m not leaving you. I don’t know if there are wild animals, other hikers, you could be in shock.”

“Cole! You can’t take me with you.” He was staring right into my eyes, and something in that look made my heart pound even harder than it had been when I was falling. Then he closed the space between us, grabbed my face between his hands and kissed me. He kissed me firmly, as if he was punctuating a sentence of a feeling. It was a full stop of a kiss. His tongue pushed against mine, and my breath stuttered as he pulled my lower lip between his teeth, before leaning back and pressing a small kiss to each corner of my mouth.

“The hell I can’t. I’m taking you with me, sweetheart, or we’re both staying here.”

With that, he stood over me and levered me up carefully. Once I was leaning against the wall, he moved in front of me and crouched down.

“Hop on, I’m carrying you.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I don’t believe in impossible. I’m not leaving you and the pilot needs help, so hop on and stop slowing us down with futile protests.”

“Maybe it’s you that’s impossible,” I grumbled, and climbed onto Cole’s back. He hadn’t even acknowledged the kiss. There was something easy and normal about it, like touching was more natural for Cole and me than not.

Apparently, this was really happening.

“Ok, let’s do this, and see those gym muscles in action,” I agreed finally, holding onto his shoulders and trying not to strangle him.

“Maybe if I impress you, you’ll show me those more exciting forms of exercise.”

“Cole!”

“Relax sweetheart, I’ve got you.”

I DIDN’T KNOW HOW LONG WE WALKED, BUT COLE HAD TO BE exhausted by the time the ranger station came into view. We’d trekked along the long stony gully, and then up a less steep slope to join the trail again. Another half hour, more or less down the trail, the ranger station came into sight.

“Holy fuck, thank god,” Cole muttered.

“You should have put me down!” I cringed.

“No, not that, sweetheart. You’re like a feather. I’m worried about the pilot. It’ll be dark soon,” he pointed out and headed toward a bench near the trail, gently lowering me onto it.

“I’m going to go just down there and hopefully find someone. It’ll all be taken care of soon.”

“Ok, I’m here.”

For a second, I thought he was going to kiss me again, but he straightened up and started down the remaining trail to the station. I watched as he knocked and waited and then went inside.

While I was waiting, I turned my face back to the gorgeous valley and the darkening sky. The air smelled sweet and unspoiled, after the LA fumes.

Half an hour later, Cole appeared again, stepping out of the station, grinning at me.

“You called for help?”

“I called all the help.” He sat beside me on the bench. I was grateful we’d been wearing casual clothes for traveling to Napa. Sneakers were the very minimum required shoes for hiking, and dress shoes, like Cole usually wore, would have been a disaster. He slid a hand around the back of the bench, and I felt immediately warmed by the gesture.

“Did you cancel on you uncle?”

“Why would I do that?” Cole asked.

“Because we’re here and clearly not getting to Napa tonight.”

He smiled at me, jolting me right down to my toes. “I told you, I don’t believe in impossible. Now, I know you’re not fond of planes, but where do you stand on helicopters?”

CHAPTER 10

Cole

I sat by a roaring fireplace and stared at the flames. A tumbler of whiskey was warming nicely in my hand, and for the first time today, I was relaxed.

We were safely at my uncle's place. The pilot was in hospital, recovering well, and Riley had had her ankle looked at, and passed out on the helicopter ride.

I hadn't wanted to wake her when we got to my uncle's vineyard. She'd looked so tired and bedraggled. Despite my glib words earlier, I felt terribly responsible for everything that had happened. I had wanted to get this woman alone, and it had ended up with an emergency landing and a twisted ankle.

"She's still asleep?" My uncle Charlie came in, his faithful dog Joe following him like a shadow. I nodded.

"You know, I'd never have believed you'd actually brought a girlfriend if I hadn't seen you carry her through the doorway myself." Charlie sat opposite me.

"Well, it's real. You confirmed it with your own eyes. Maybe now you can stop pestering me to go on these arranged dates. It's not my style, and as you can see, I met someone on my own."

"How did you two meet?"

"At a restaurant. She didn't like the haute cuisine food and ordered a cheeseburger. I thought she was the smartest person in the place and did the same."

“Clever girl. You can’t beat a good cheeseburger.” Uncle Charlie nodded approvingly. “So, you really like this one?”

I thought of Riley’s dirty laugh and teasing eyes. The way she cut to the heart of a situation, and made me question my values, and the way I was spending my time. For the first time in years, I realized I needed to make a life outside of work before it was too late.

“I really do.”

“What does she do for work?” Charlie asked me, and I imagined telling him about her side gig.

“She’s a sculptor. A damn good one.”

“I’ve never heard of her,” Charlie said. He was pretty active in the art scene, and a collector.

“You will. Right now, she’s under-funded, young, and still trying to get her big break.”

Which I’m going to make sure she gets sooner rather than later.

“Well, we all know it’s not always the talented ones who make it. You’ve got to be lucky as well.”

“Riley has the talent in spades, and she doesn’t need luck.”

“Oh?”

“She has me.”

CHARLIE WALKED ME TO THE GUEST SUITE IN THE EAST WING of the old crumbling house that came with the vineyard. It was an investment he’d made twenty years ago and promptly forgot about until he got old enough to want to escape the rat race.

“Well, sleep well. I hope your girl gets a good rest. I’m going to want to spend plenty of time with this one who’s caught your eye, finally.”

“You don’t have to remind me of my bachelor status every single second, you know, you could give it a few moments in between.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Charlie said and turned down the hall, Joe at his heels. His dark red dressing gown caught the elegant mood lighting as he went. Uncle Charlie was a character. Since he’d taken over the vineyard, he’d taken to dressing like lord of the manor. It suited him. He marched to his own beat, and I had always admired that.

I turned to the huge wooden door that concealed Riley from me, putting my hand to the latch. Riley marched to her own beat, too. She was fearless, unapologetically herself, and I admired that. I admired that a lot. She might be young, but she already knew who she was. That was sexy as hell.

I pushed open the door and went inside. Should I stay somewhere else? Maybe there were plenty of guestrooms available. Still, Uncle Charlie would know. He knew everything that went on in the house, and it would blow our whole ruse.

More than that, I wasn’t walking away from an excuse to share a bed with the woman who had crawled inside my head and become my obsession.

I COULD SMELL HER LIGHT FLORAL PERFUME AS SOON AS I entered the room. I had no idea if it was a scent she bought, or it was just her.

It’s just her. A voice I rarely listen to spoke in my head. She fits you, suits you. She’s yours.

Pushing aside my inner caveman who wanted to strip off and slide into bed beside Riley and claim her so thoroughly, she wouldn’t leave the bed until she was pregnant, I went to the bathroom to wash up.

I reemerged later in a black t-shirt and loose sleep trousers. Riley was still in her clothes from our impromptu hike, and I wondered briefly if I should wake her up to change, just as I

felt her eyes on me. She watched me from the bed and I couldn't read her emerald gaze.

"I didn't want to wake you. You seemed so tired," I told her, hoping she wasn't about to freak that she'd woken up in bed, with me looming over her in pajamas.

She stretched and winced as she moved her foot. It was soft-wrapped in a support bandage with a small splint down the sides to keep it straight.

"Asleep? I probably passed out in the helicopter because it was so scary." Her voice was extra throaty. She raised an eyebrow at me. "I take it we're sharing a bed?"

"Uncle Charlie would know if we didn't," I evaded. Would he know if I slept on the chaise longue in here? Probably not, but that wasn't information that I wanted to volunteer right now.

"That makes sense. Anyway, I'm glad you're here," she said. "I need help with something only you can give me."

The blood in my body redirected immediately to my cock, and I felt myself stiffening, desperate to bury myself in this woman. I could only hope she didn't glance down and see the rising tent in my slacks. Being a man around a woman like Riley was downright undignified.

"And what would that be?" My voice came out like ground stone pressed beneath a mountain, deep as hell, and almost a groan.

Riley's eyes danced, and I wondered if the little minx was playing with me. Surely, she had to know how I wanted her. I'd done nothing but touch her, follow her, track her down and try to get closer to her since we met. Oh, and add in stealing kisses wherever I could, and it seemed pretty obvious.

She grinned. "Food. I need food. Can you help me? You're my only hope."

Yep, she was a minx alright. Through and through.

CHAPTER 11

Riley

To my surprise, Cole knew his way around the kitchen. Considering it was an extremely well-stocked kitchen helped, I supposed, but I was still impressed when he plated a perfectly fluffy cheese omelet for me and slid it across the counter.

I inhale the aroma of perfectly cooked egg and melted cheese. My mouth watered immediately.

“This smells amazing, better than sex,” I muttered, a common line Ella and I used as a joke, seeing as she was well aware of my virgin status.

Cole raised an eyebrow at me. “I don’t know who you’re sleeping with, but I’m sure he can feel the burn from here.”

My cheeks warmed under his scrutiny and the fact that I’d just brought up the very topic I shouldn’t have around a man that was far too sexy for his own good. No wonder I’d brought it up. I was primed for it, considering it kept crossing my mind every time I looked at Cole.

I took a bite of omelet and barely resisted moaning. I didn’t manage it clearly, as Cole smirked.

“I’m understanding how to get you to moan... feed you melted cheese.”

“That’ll do it,” I said, and offered him a mouthful.

“No thanks, I’m full. I ate with Charlie and fumbled through a hundred questions about you.”

“Oh really? We never had our get to know you session.”

“Should we have it now?”

I paused, looking to the clock. “It’s late, isn’t it? Maybe just a few things.”

“Ok, I can work with that. Where did you grow up?”

“Just outside LA. I’d have thought you found that out already with your digital snooping.”

“I only found out your name, and where you worked on your art. I just needed to make contact. I didn’t want your life story from anyone other than you. Well, however much you want to share with me.”

I studied him for a moment and found him genuine. “It’s not very exciting. I met Ella at university. We’re unlikely friends, given how rich she is, and how poor I am, but some people just click. It helps that she does everything in her power not to come across as rich, or course.”

“What, the heiress wants to be like everyone else?”

I nodded. “Yes, she does. Maybe I started as her in to the common people, but then we got closer than that. How about you? Who’s your best friend?”

He was quiet for a long moment. “As much as it pains me to admit it, probably Uncle Charlie.”

“What?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, and looked slightly sheepish, if a man as charismatic and confident as Cole could ever be such a thing. “I don’t have friends. I have business acquaintances and rivals. I have old classmates, who I don’t see. Only Uncle Charlie isn’t competing with me. He’s the only one who cares if I die alone.”

I stared at him for a long moment, my heart softening horribly toward the man who had come into my life like a hurricane and upended it.

“Hey, didn’t you say that pity from friends was the worst? Don’t look at me like that.”

His soft admonishment sent my emotions scattering.

Pulling myself together, I nodded, and then rolled my eyes for full effect. “Please, you think I’m going to be feeling pity for a billionaire who looks like you? Not going to happen.”

“Who looks like me?” Cole repeated, focusing on the over share portion of my statement.

I waved a hand in his general direction. “You know, like this.”

“Like this how?” Cole asked, taking my empty plate in the sink’s direction. My cheeks flamed, and I was glad it was pretty dark in the empty kitchen.

“Whatever. Are you seriously going to pretend not to know how hot you are? You must have women telling you constantly.” My annoyed huff was interrupted as I turned from the counter and gasped. He wasn’t at the sink anymore. He was right in front of me.

“Are you calling me hot, Riley?” He advanced toward me, and there was literally nowhere to go, when his hands landed on each side of my body, caging me against the counter.

“You know you are,” I evaded, my pulse shooting through the roof.

“Since I met you, I don’t know anything,” he muttered. “How was it I looked again?”

I blew out an irritated breath. He wasn’t letting this go. “Hot, ok? You look hot, you are hot, you’re a gorgeous, built billionaire and I refuse to believe that single eligible women aren’t lining up to tell you that, or dropping to their knees to worship you.”

My words made Cole grin. There was something wolfish about it as he leaned in, ducking his head down to be level with mine. My face was burning. I was worried the skin might actually crawl right off. The heat from his body was immense, making me feel like I was standing too close to a roaring fire. I was, wasn’t I? Cole Preston wasn’t someone I could handle, was he?

“Why are you putting me on the spot like this?”

“Because I like the way your voice sounds when you call me hot, and I enjoy knowing that I affect you, even just a fraction of the way you affect me.”

“Meaning?” I barely dared to breathe as I asked it.

“Meaning that since the second we met, you’ve crawled inside my head, and I can’t get you out.”

My breath hitched, and I felt dizzy with want. I gripped the counter behind me, and I could swear he was leaning in, closing the space between us.

“That’s impossible.” I muttered. It was, right?

Cole tutted softly and brushed his lips against mine.

“I don’t believe in impossible, remember sweetheart?”

And then he kissed me.

CHAPTER 12

Cole

The stolen kisses of earlier had nothing on the devastating effect of really kissing Riley. I'd been picturing the moment since we met in the restaurant, and now, finally, she was pressing her curves into my arms, and moaning my name.

I wasn't going to go easy on her until she was screaming it. I would not let up until she knew better than to call us impossible.

I pushed her up on the counter, pressing her thighs wide so I could step between. My hand cupped her heart-shaped face, and I kissed her like I was a man starving, and that was about right. I was starving for her.

She opened her lips to me shyly, letting me inside. Her hands fell to my chest as I sucked and nibbled at her bottom lip, my body hard as a stone and ready as hell to be free of the pajama pants chafing against me.

"I need you upstairs now," I bit out, while pressing kisses along her jaw. She clung to my shoulders and gave the most adorable whelp of surprise when I pulled her into my arms and wound her legs around my waist.

As I turned us out of the kitchen, she leaned back a little and looked around us.

"You're going to carry me upstairs?"

"Why not? I carried you downstairs."

"That was because of my ankle, and it wasn't so... lewd."

A laugh rumbled in my chest. “Lewd? Sweetheart, if you think me carrying you like this is lewd, I can’t wait to see what you think once I get you into bed in our room.”

Her breath hitched, and I wondered if it had been the implications of the imminent sex, or calling it our room. It had been the latter for me. It sounded damn right to say.

I took the stairs two at a time, careful not to jostle Riley, and then entered our room. The bed seemed to rush to meet us as I placed her on the mattress and kissed her again. Her body was pressing against mine, and her hands roamed my abdomen, bravely traveling across the hard-on that was pushing insistently upward.

She inhaled sharply, and then rubbed her hand in a slow, deliberate circle over the top of my cock.

“Christ, I need you naked, right now. I can’t wait any longer.” My hands went to the hem of her shirt, and then I was tossing it away. Her bra went next and then I was tugging down her jeans. For her panties, she suddenly seemed shy, keeping her knees closed, and making it difficult.

“You’re awfully shy for an artist who sculpts male nudes all the time,” I teased her. She smiled, and the tension eased.

“Right. But then I told you I didn’t, and in fact, I’ve never had a nude man on my hands before.”

I was busy untangling her panties from her feet and shooting them into the corner, where hopefully she’d never find them again. Her meaning took a while to hit me.

“You mean... you’re not in men all this time? You’re about to change my views on impossible things.”

She laughed and shook her head. She was naked now, and I was already pushing down my pants. My cock sprang up my stomach, slapping my bellybutton, drooling and ready to go.

Her eyes fixed on it and widened in the sexiest possible way.

“No, I’m not into girls that I know of. I meant... you know.”

“You’re a virgin,” I said the words disbelievingly. All kinds of emotion crowded in on the back of that news.

“I’m a starving artist, remember? I don’t have time for real dates. I go on too many fake ones. Seeing that world through my job, I just didn’t feel inclined to try it for myself. And no, I’ve never felt interested in banging someone without dating. I need more than the surface stuff to like someone,” she said, raising her chin and holding her head like a queen. She was a queen, and I was going to make sure everyone knew it.

“And you like me enough, for more than just surface stuff?” I knew that there was a huge grin on my face. I felt like I’d just been picked first by the only person who mattered. I felt like I could fly. She nodded slowly, and licked her lips unthinkingly, making my hunger roar for her.

“First time is a big thing,” I said, losing my t-shirt too. Her artist’s eyes roamed over me, taking in every line and hollow.

“Is it?”

“According to some people.” I’d never fucked a virgin. It seemed messy and needlessly complicated. That I’d been without female company for so long was a testament to how little complication I wanted in my life.

“Well, I’m not some people,” Riley said, and tossed her head. Her red hair flashed like rubies in the low lights on the bedside table.

“I’m aware, sweetheart. Shit,” I paused my slow prowling across her naked body, a terrible thought occurring to me. “Does that mean you’re not on birth control?”

She shook her head, and my heart sank. “No. I’m not dating, so... no.”

I was frozen halfway across her, holding myself on corded arms, as the reality of what she was telling me sank in.

“Don’t you have condoms with you? I thought all men carried them all the time, just in case,” Riley pointed out. She brought her hands up to my chest and slid them over my pecs, lingering on my nipples. I shuddered. I wanted nothing more

than to sink between her legs and push inside her tight pussy, but I couldn't, not without protection.

“I don't have any. I don't sleep around, sweetheart. A woman hasn't caught my eye in years. You're my exception.”

She blushed, and a smile played around her lips. She'd liked that confession. Then she frowned. “So, does that mean we're just going to sleep?”

“Hell no. You won't sleep until I've heard you begging my name.”

CHAPTER 13

Riley

I stared at Cole, barely able to rip my eyes from his chiseled body for long enough to take his meaning. He didn't wait, however, and simply moved across me and latched his lips around my nipple. His other hand cupped my other breast, and he played with it, caressing and tugging at the peak, while his tongue dissolved me into pieces. He rolled the nipple between his teeth and sucked on it, latched it, doing everything he could to make me pant and writhe against him.

When my chest was red and pink with his attention, he moved lower.

"What are you doing?" I asked, nearly scooting off the bed. I could have managed it if he hadn't clamped his hands onto my thighs and kept me in place.

"Eating you, sweetheart. All I need you to do is lay there and take it like a good girl," he muttered. His words made my cheeks heat and a gale of desire storm through me. I nodded my agreement, as he leaned in between my legs and pressed his tongue against my centre. The feeling was wild. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before, and none of my electric friends could keep up now, not when I knew what was possible.

He pressed my thighs apart, baring me for his mouth, and wasted no time diving in. His long, hot tongue slid up my slit, from my clit to my entrance, fucking shallowly inside, until a long finger replaced it. While he pressed his fingers into me, his mouth settled on my clit, and rubbed over the bundle of nerves until it was twitching madly. I was rising fast in his arms. I couldn't stop myself. I was a clueless virgin, and he

was a man who had no mercy for my feeble cries. When I told him it felt too good, he only grinned against me, and went harder. The bastard. The glorious, wonderful bastard.

When I came, my whole body seized up. Cole anticipated it, and held my legs apart, so I didn't strangle him with the contractions of bliss pulsing through me. He also kept his tongue on me, working me through every single moment of ecstasy, until I was a melted puddle of a person.

"Stop, I can't take anymore," I panted, as he finally moved his face from my pussy and kissed his way up my body.

"You can, and you will, but I'll give you a minute to recover."

"What, you mean you're going to do it again?" My panicked voice made him smirk.

"I'm going to do it all damn night."

I stared open-mouthed at him for a long moment, my brain lagging.

"Well, what about you?"

He was still on top of me, somehow holding his weight off me and far from my ankle. He was considerate, even when we were losing our heads.

"I want to make you feel good."

"Believe me, Riley, feeling you come in my mouth makes me feel good."

"No, I want to reciprocate. I want to go down on you, too."

He stared at me, hunger making his blue eyes dark.

"You'll hurt your ankle-," he started. I sighed, and wriggled up the bed, sliding my body carefully out from under his and leaned against the headboard.

"Kneel here then. No ankle hurting involved."

Cole sat back on his knees. His cock jutted up in front of him, intimidatingly long and thick.

"You're sure?"

“I’m sure, though you might have to tell me what to do, since you know... first time and all.”

“Christ, woman, you are trying to kill me,” Cole muttered, as he moved himself up my body until he was straddling my waist. He gripped onto the headboard behind my head and pressed forward until his dripping length brushed my lips.

I gave the tip a lick, and he groaned.

“It’s so soft and hard at the same time,” I muttered, fascinated by the texture and shape. I could already imagine trying to sculpt such a thing, and how hard it would be to show the steel beneath the velvet. I licked around the head of him, and then sucked him inside my mouth. Cole went still as I bobbed my head on him. The angle was a little tricky and I couldn’t take all of him, but even on my best day, I wouldn’t be able to. He was so long, and thicker at the base. My mouth wasn’t up to the task.

I would do what I could, however. I brought my hands to the part I couldn’t fit, and circled him, pumping up and down, while my mouth bobbed on him. Glancing up, I saw him watching me with rapt attention.

“You’re so beautiful, Riley, sucking me off.” The words made me feel filthy and turned on all over again.

Cole brought a hand to stroke my cheek. “I never thought I’d have a thing for being first, but knowing that this is the only dick you’ve allowed inside your hot, smart little mouth destroys me.”

I hummed an answer, and he growled at the vibration. His hand moved to my head, guiding my rhythm. He was pushing me faster, and I could feel him swelling in my mouth. He was going to come. I’d done it.

The last few seconds were sloppy, as his hips stuttered and my hands and mouth drove him on until he burst in my mouth. He came a lot, or so it seemed to me, as his dick pulsed jet after jet of come down my throat. I swallowed quickly, trying to keep up. I’d die if we left a mess all over his uncle’s guestroom bed. I felt wicked, bobbing on him, cleaning up the

slightly salty, musky come, until there wasn't any left, while Cole watched me the entire time. When I pulled back, my lips were shining with his spend, and he rubbed a finger across them.

“How was that, teacher?”

“Unfucking believable.” His voice was hoarse. He gave me a wicked grin. “Now lie on your front and spread your legs. It's your turn.”

CHAPTER 14

Cole

I woke before Riley. Despite sleeping as little as usual, I felt more rested than I could remember ever being before. She was facing away from me, curled against my front. I traced the ribbons of red hair lying across the white pillows.

I felt complete. The thing I had moved to LA to find, I'd found in her. A reason not to work so much. A life to live. For me, it was all Riley Delaney.

Rising carefully so as not to wake her or jostle her ankle, I headed downstairs. Uncle Charlie's chef, Rosa, had just put a pan of freshly baked croissants in the oven. She smiled warmly at me as I poured a cup of her signature hazelnut roast coffee and headed out the double doors to a huge terrace that overlooked the vineyard.

The sun had just broken the horizon, spreading long tendrils of gold across the sleeping vines. The air smelled like lavender and night jasmine, just fading from the air.

"It was this very view that sold me on this place, you know." My uncle's voice wasn't a surprise. He had always been an early riser, just like me.

He braced a hand on the stone wall that surrounded the terrace and we drank our coffee in silence for a long moment.

"It'd be a great place for an artist to live," Charlie muttered.

I narrowed my eyes at him, turning to see his expression.

“I’m just saying I won’t be around forever. I’m eighty-five, Cole, though I know I don’t look a day over fifty. I’d like to know that someone I love enjoys this place. It’d break my heart to know that it sat empty and neglected, while you try to get away from work for an odd weekend, once a year. This place is meant to be lived in.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not ready for you to leave me, so don’t plan on it right now. About this place, yeah, I could imagine a life here.”

Charlie’s surprise showed on his face. Then he nodded, a smile playing on his lips.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, just there’s only one thing that could cause such a dramatic change in such a driven man, and I guess she’s sleeping upstairs.”

I chuckled. “I guess she is.”

Both smiling into our cups, we drank in companionable silence.

WE DROVE BACK TO THE CITY, EVEN THOUGH IT COST US FAR more time than I’d planned for the entire trip. Honestly, I’d have cycled if it meant having Riley to myself for longer. She and my uncle had hit it off spectacularly, just like I’d known they would. The highlight of my year had been listening to them talk about art. I’d known that Charlie was a great art supporter and enthusiast, but I hadn’t understood the depths of his passion.

“Your uncle is so amazing. The places that he’s been, the museums and galleries, he’s inspiring.”

“Yeah, well, he’s officially too old for you, so stop sighing over him before I get jealous.”

She grinned. “Combined, you’d be the perfect man.”

“That isn’t an image that I want in my head, and besides, sweetheart, I think you just called me an art idiot and I’m not sure I like that.”

“Well, I know nothing about tech stuff, and you clearly do. Considering the difference in our net worth, I guess it’s obvious which of us is smarter.”

“You’ll get your break. You’re too talented not to.”

She sighed. “Maybe. I’d just be honored to be an up-and-coming sculpture that a collector like Charlie buys. Someone in the scene, you know. I don’t have to be anyone outside of it. I’m not looking to be a household name or anything. My dreams are very modest.”

“Are you bargaining with the universe right now?”

She laughed and looked up at the roof of the car. “Did you hear that universe? I don’t need to swim in milk and honey, I’d just like to make rent consistently!”

Still smiling, she leaned her head on her hand and played with the radio.

“I know you’re joking, but you know you don’t have to worry about rent anymore, right?”

“Why? Does Uncle Charlie want to be my sugar daddy?” Riley’s tone was teasing, but there was an edge just beneath.

Unease stirred in my belly. “Hilarious. Of course, I’m talking about us-,”

“Don’t.” The single word was so charged with tension, it sent my anxiety sky-high. My hands tightening on the wheel, I risked a glance at Riley. She was staring straight ahead, her arms folded over her chest.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t make me feel like a whore, or worse, an idiot. I’m not some starry-eyed little fan. I can take care of myself, and I have my entire life. I don’t do charity, or pity, remember?”

Her words didn’t compute to me. I couldn’t even begin to make sense of them. They were so at odds with what I felt. I

signaled and pulled over to the side of the road, flipping the hazards on. We'd passed an easy nine hours in the car, stopping at scenic places here and there on the way to take a picture and kiss like horny teenagers. Now, we were on the outskirts of LA and night had fallen. I turned to Riley, her face illuminated by the lights from the dashboard. I wished I could see her better and try to figure out what the fuck she was thinking.

"What is going on? Did you just accuse me of calling you a whore? Are you being serious right now?"

"Well, what else is it when you sleep with some guy you barely know, and he pays you after?"

"Some guy you barely know," I repeated, feeling the blow to my chest.

She swallowed. "Sorry, that was harsh. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just—overwhelmed. I'm not used to this. I've never had sex before. Turns out it's not just a physical thing, it fucks with your head too. I feel... needy and emotional and weird as hell. I probably just need some alone time."

It wasn't an unreasonable thing to say, and yet, it hurt. I'd already hoped to convince Riley to crash at mine, since it'd be late by the time we made it into the city proper. I'd wanted to wake up with her, and then talk her into never leaving.

"Look, Cole, I get it. You're rich, you're used to using money in a way that I can't even fathom. Maybe rent for some hook-up isn't a lot to you, but it's more money than I can imagine. Why do you think I've never let Ella buy me anything? Do you really think my best friend hasn't tried?"

"So, it's a pride thing? I'm supposed to watch my girlfriend suffer to get by, and not do a damn thing about it, because she's too proud to accept help?"

"Yeah, well, I sound pretty dumb and pathetic from your point of view, don't I?" She let out a bitter laugh that twisted my heart.

"I didn't mean it like that."

“It might be hard for you to understand when you’ve dedicated your entire life to the pursuit of it, at the cost of having an actual life, but money isn’t the most important thing in the world for everyone.”

Those words stole my rebuttal. I stared at her, the words I wanted to say, and didn’t know how to building up behind my lips.

“I’m exhausted, and my ankle hurts. Can we go, please?”

I pushed my frustration down, grinding my teeth, a habit I thought I’d given up in college, and checked the road behind, before pulling out without a word.

CHAPTER 15

Riley

Did I feel vindicated when I woke alone in my bed, after crying myself to sleep the night before? No, not at all. However, it still felt necessary. I couldn't let Cole take over everything hard in my life when we'd only known each other for a week. That just wasn't smart, and besides, the money was the least interesting thing about Cole. I wished he could see that.

I dragged myself to the studio that day with difficulty, considering my ankle. It was getting better, but it still ached after standing on it too long.

I sat at my wheel and felt my heart ache just as much as my ankle. I hadn't been lying about the emotional effect of finally sleeping with someone. No, not someone. Sleeping with Cole. He was the defining characteristic. He made everything different. Because.... I had somehow fallen head over heels for him in the space of a week.

Well done, Riley. Everything I knew about keeping my heart safe had flown out the window and now I was feeling all the things I hated to feel. I'd seen stories of broken hearts often enough, thanks to my side hustle. The number of dates that I went on where I was to be the new girlfriend to show off in front of the ex was higher than any other situation. So many broken hearts, so many people who never got over losing the person they'd loved. There were a million ways love could go wrong, and that was for people who lived in the same world, not opposites, like me and Cole.

I worked terribly, distracted and irritable, before calling it a day early.

At my apartment, when I'd just dragged myself up the endless stairs, my cell chimed in my pocket. It was embarrassing how quickly I ripped it out of my pocket.

My heart fell as I took in the message. It was a reminder from one of my regular clients that we had a date tonight. He booked me once a month to take me out to eat at his corporate dinners, since the love of his life, the ex he couldn't get over, worked at the same company.

I seriously considered replying that I couldn't come, but a quick check on my banking app changed my mind. Crap. I was really low on funds. Cole hadn't paid me for the weekend, which made sense, considering our argument last night. He probably thought it would offend me if he paid me, considering what had happened on our date. I'd been relying on that money, however.

Since I wasn't going to be calling him and asking for him to pay me, the only alternative was to get off my ass and work, like I always had. Cole thought it was a pride thing that made me wary about taking money from others, but it wasn't. Other people could be flaky and you could only rely on yourself. I'd learned that as a kid.

I might have been a passing fancy, a walk on the other side of the tracks for a billionaire like Cole but I was the one who'd have to pick up the pieces after, if I leaned too much on someone else, and they changed their mind about me.

THE FUCKING CAMELIA. WERE THERE NO OTHER RESTAURANTS in LA? I perused the fancy menu, every entry reminding me of Cole and the cheeseburger. It hurt my heart now to remember how I'd acted. I hadn't known I was sitting opposite that man who would come to mean so much to me.

I listened to the boring business babble of the other people around the table. There were so many attendees that their

company had split the booking into smaller tables. I was sitting at a four-seater with my client, and opposite us were two business bros I'd never seen before. My god, it was dull. I picked at my fancy food and fought tears. I was being pathetic, and it wasn't a good look. My client kept glancing at me, no doubt wondering why I was a second away from crying into my salmon en croute. I forced a smile. He wasn't paying me to look like I wanted to kill myself, and I needed the money. This was our last date. I hadn't been joking to Cole. I really wanted to retire. I needed a different side hustle. This one was too stressful, and after meeting Cole, it felt horrible.

I was on the dessert course when I saw him.

He entered the restaurant with a couple of other men. His blonde hair glowed under the lights, and most of the female diners followed him with their hungry eyes. Of course, they did. He moved with confidence and power. Even if I didn't know him, I'd stare. He was magnetic.

He sat at a table right across from me, and like terrible luck, or fate fucking with me, he looked up and met my eyes right away. He jolted, surprised to see me. His look of surprise faded as he took in my company at the table. His powerful jaw clenched, and he ignored whatever the men with him were saying. He stared at me, his eyes drilling into me. My mouth went dry.

Suddenly, unwanted tears pricked at my eyes.

"Excuse me, I'll just be right back," I muttered to my company and client, and made for the restrooms at a pace just short of a run. Well, run was generous, considering my painful ankle. Hobble was more realistic.

Inside was empty, and I could lean on the vanity mirror and stare at my reflection, willing my tears to disappear into thin air and not mess with my make-up.

I had about two seconds to compose myself before the door banged open.

Cole stalked into the room, looking like an angry god.

He studied me for a long moment without speaking. It felt like waiting for a verdict that I might never recover from.

“Wow, you must really like this restaurant,” I ventured, when the tense silence became too much for me to bear.

“I might say the same. Are you seriously working your side hustle right now, after flouncing out the car the other night once you were done ripping my fucking heart from my chest?”

His words made my pulse quicken.

“Are you seriously barging into the women’s bathroom to call me into account for working? Rent is due. I don’t have the luxury of canceling paying jobs.”

I couldn’t focus on his bleeding heart admission. It made me feel things I didn’t know how to cope with. It made me want to throw myself into his strong arms and just agree to whatever he had planned, for however long he wanted me. But the practical, fearful part of me had a firm grip.

“What do you want from me?”

He stalked toward me and hauled me into his arms. “Everything. I want everything from you, Riley, and I want to give you everything in return.”

His hand slid up to my face, and he cupped it like it was something precious.

“Can you not be so extra right now? I’m serious. I like you, as you probably figured out, but I can’t just explode my life after one date.”

Cole’s thumbs pushed along my jaw, back and forth. “I’m not a patient man. When I’ve wanted something in my life, I’ve gone after it relentlessly until I’ve achieved it.”

“I’m not a thing to achieve,” I pointed out.

Cole studied me a moment longer and nodded to himself. “No, you’re not, but you are mine, Riley, whether you’re ready to admit it. I’ll give you time to realize that. I can try to do that.” He leaned in and kissed me and it felt like breathing again after a day of suffocating. I swayed into him, heat

blossoming in my belly as he stroked his tongue against mine. All too soon, he was pulling back.

Then, with one last kiss to my forehead, he pulled back, turned on his heel and strode out the restroom, leaving me breathless and more confused than ever in his wake.

CHAPTER 16

Riley

I dragged myself through the next day. The good news was I made rent. The bad news was that Cole didn't call or message me all day.

After an unproductive day of moping at the studio, I hobbled outside as evening was falling. I turned toward the subway, noting a conspicuous town car sitting at the curb. You didn't see cars that nice in this neighborhood. As I made to pass it, hobbling toward the subway, the door opened and a driver got out. He was wearing a smart jacket and had a name tag on it.

"Miss Delaney?"

I eyed him warily. "Yes?"

"I'm here to take you home."

"Sorry, but who are you?"

"David, Miss."

"Ok David, why are you here to take me home?"

David smiled. "Right. Mr. Preston sent me."

"Oh, did he?" Warmth filled me. It was part excitement that our little argument last night hadn't entirely put Cole off, and part annoyance at his high-handedness.

"Yes. In cases of a work related injury, the company takes full responsibility. I was actually waiting for you at your residence this morning, but I must have missed you."

A sinking feeling filled me. “So, you’re saying this is a company policy or something.”

“Yes Miss, HR and legal are very clear about how injuries occurring in service of Mr. Preston or the company are to be treated.”

“Right. Well, let’s go then.”

I got into the car and gave David a tight smile. Company policy. That made sense. A company like Cole’s had to protect themselves against lawsuits. I could only imagine what the hell a judge would think of the case, if I tried to take Cole to court for compensation for an injury that occurred when I was pretending to be his girlfriend for money. I pulled my phone out of my bag and checked it. Still no messages or missed calls. As I stared at my phone, the little battery icon in the corner flashed red and the whole screen died. Well, at least I couldn’t check it every ten minutes now.

So, that fight had been as devastating as I’d feared it was. Cole Preston liked to be in charge, and I was someone who wouldn’t give up my autonomy for a potentially fleeting love affair.

I closed my eyes against the tears threatening to break free. God, I felt so pathetic. If I was protecting myself and my future, why did it hurt so much? Shouldn’t preventing future disappointments feel like winning? It didn’t. Right now, it felt a lot like losing. It felt like being afraid.

I kept my eyes closed, fighting tears, battling with myself and the small voice inside that whispered that all my proud words and independent woman ideals were covering fear.

‘Miss? We’re here.’

I opened my eyes and peered out the tinted windows. I didn’t recognize the street we were on.

“Sorry, where are we?”

“Home,” David said simply, like it was totally normal not to recognize your own street.

“I don’t live here,” I said slowly, peering outside. “This is the Hollywood Hills. I think I’d know if I lived in the Hills.”

“This is the address I was given to bring you to.”

“By Mr. Preston?”

David nodded. “I’m sorry, if there’s a problem you’ll have to take it up with him.”

“Fine, I will,” I muttered, and dragged my phone out my bag again, just to remember that it was dead. “Can I use your cell?”

“I don’t have it on me, I’m afraid.”

David refused to meet my eyes at that.

Just then, the door opened.

“It’s ok, David, good man. I’ve got it from here,” Cole’s deep voice floated in from outside. I pushed myself out of the car, and onto the street with some difficulty. Cole swept me into his arms without so much as a word of warning.

“What are you doing?” I nearly shrieked, butterflies dancing in my tummy.

“Making sure you don’t injure your ankle even more. HR would be right on my ass if you sued,” he said, with a perfectly straight face. He kicked the car door closed behind him.

“My coat is in there.”

“You can get it back later,” he said, uncaring.

“What? Where are we going?” I protested mildly, as I looked around the neighborhood. It was so quiet and clean, it felt stately somehow and safe.

“Like David said, home.”

“I don’t live here,” I pointed out again.

Cole hit me with a lopsided grin that made my heart pound. Fuck, why’d he have to be so handsome?

“You do now. Welcome home, Riley.”

Then he started forward, deaf to my follow-up questions and demands for an explanation. He carried me through an enormous gate and up a gravel driveway. A house sat in perfectly manicured gardens. It was beautiful and the view beyond it was of sprawling LA, lit up like constellations.

“So, it’s not got much personality, but that means you can do what you want with it,” Cole was saying as he punched a number into the keypad and pushed open the door.

“I don’t understand what’s going on.” My voice was faint. Too many feelings were rushing through my chest as Cole carried me through a beautiful open-plan kitchen where a wall of glass was pushed open to the night. Out the back, an inviting swimming pool glowed. He carried me down the steps.

“Here, this will feel good for your ankle,” he said, placing me carefully down by the pool edge and pushing my skirt up a little. I watched the side of his face. How had this crazy, controlling, brilliant man worked his way so effortlessly into my guarded heart? I’d never stood a single chance against him. He was right. The cool water felt amazing against my swollen ankle. I leaned back and studied him as he sat next to me, and put his feet into the pool.

“You know, all the time I’ve been in LA, I’ve never ventured out of the same three-mile radius until going to Napa with you. I was working too hard in New York. My world had become too small. So I moved out here and did the same thing.”

“What’s going on? You need to tell me.”

He sighed and swished his powerful legs through the water.

“I thought about what you said. I considered your concerns and issues with me, and the way I do things.”

“And?” I prompted, when he fell silent.

“And, I don’t agree.” His words jolted me. He was looking out at the magnificent view. He looked relaxed and at ease, like he had at his uncle’s house.

“You don’t agree,” I repeated.

“I considered what you said, and have concluded that I don’t agree. I won’t let you struggle to make rent, or work in a crappy area in a badly secured studio at night. It’s not going to happen.”

I stared at him, dumbstruck by the audacity of his words. “It’s not your decision to make!”

“Debatable, but I’ve also decided that I don’t care.”

“You don’t care? You don’t care if you’re a pushy, control freak billionaire with no regard for other people’s opinions.”

He shrugged. “Nope.”

I turned back to the pool, outrage and the urge to laugh warring inside me. His words pissed me off, but they also made me lighter in a way I wouldn’t have imagined.

Then I did the only thing I could think of right then, to act on the indignation rising in my chest. I pushed him into the pool. One minute he was sitting, looking at the stars beside me, the next he was disappearing under the water.

Laughter, thick and infectious, filled the air as he surfaced a few metres down the pool. It was the lightest I’d felt in days.

He walked toward me, looking like a Bond hero emerging from the sea. His white shirt was see-through, sticking to every perfect muscle on his torso, and his face was open and relaxed. I could have stared at him for hours. Maybe I really could take up human sculpture, with such a model.

“I’m sorry for messing up the pool,” I said. Probably full dressed people weren’t meant to get into it.

“Don’t be, it’s your house.”

“Excuse me?”

He floated in the water just before my legs. His blue eyes looked the same colour as the water.

“It’s your house, bought and paid for. The deed is in your name.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.” And I’d thought him paying my rent after taking my virginity had been embarrassing. I didn’t know what the fuck to feel about this.

“How about thank you,” he teased me, ducking to the side as I kicked water at him.

“It’s your payment for making Uncle Charlie so happy, which was your job, and for reminding me that there’s more to life than work.” His grin was undiminished.

“Yeah, because the going rate for that is a million-dollar house.”

“Know your worth, Riley.” Then his expression grew more serious. “Before I met you, I was drowning. I had no air. I’d lost sight of the surface. You brought me back. You saved me, sweetheart. Let me save you.”

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

He nodded. “That’s ok. You don’t have to say anything or accept anything. It’s done.”

He swam closer to me, his hands landing on my bare knees. He slowly pushed my knees apart and stepped between. I only had a skirt on, and now my panties were bared to Cole’s eyes.

“What happens now?”

“Now, you ask me to live with you, because I’ve fallen head over fucking heels for you and the last few days have been torture without you.”

I laughed, happiness feeling light and bubbly in my chest. He was crazy.

“Live together, after knowing each other for a few weeks?”

“Hmmm.” He slid a wet finger over the front of my panties, soaking them through, then leaned in and kissed up my thigh. I shivered, falling back on my elbows.

“Shall we just cut to the chase and get married then?”

“Cole!” My protest was strangled when he hooked a finger around the elastic of my panties and tugged it aside. His face

pressed against me, and his tongue licked a long, hot stripe up the center of me, burrowing between my folds to find my clit.

I arched my back, and protests flew from my head. I couldn't keep my arguments intact when he was licking at me with such enthusiasm. His tongue lathed my clit, and he eased a long finger inside me. It was embarrassing how fast I came. One minute he pumped that thick finger in and out of me, circling my clit with an insistent tongue, and the next I was coming apart in his mouth. He held onto my hip as I tried to wriggle away from the sensations, the pulsing of pleasure too much.

"Just so you know, there are condoms in the bedroom. A plethora of protection, just for us," he said as I floated back down from the heights he had shot me to.

"Someone's prepared," I mused, watching Cole boost himself out of the pool. Water cascaded from him. His body was ridiculously hot with wet clothes plastered to every muscle.

"Damn right this time. I've got the protection, I've got the ring, I've got the house, hell there's even a fully done out studio around the side," he ripped his shirt off and then went for his pants. I stared as he stripped naked by the pool, before his words registered.

"A studio?" I cried as he pulled me up and pressed against me.

"I knew you'd like that more than the ring," he grinned, and then picked me up.

"Hey! You don't have to carry me over the threshold. We're not newlyweds," I laughed as he bust into the house and headed down a warmly lit corridor, barely giving me any time to look around.

"Not yet, no, but soon." His look was so concentrated as he carried me, and his face was so dear. I'd missed it so much. I traced my fingertip along his square jaw and then over his soft lips.

"What if I want a tour first?"

“After,” he growled in return. I shivered at the look in his eyes.

His hands tightened around me. “First, I’m going to fuck you so long, and so well, that you can’t even think about sitting on a date with another man.”

“Hey, that was work, you know that.”

“I don’t care. I wanted to kill him,” Cole admitted, reaching the bedroom and heading inside. An enormous bed sat in the middle of the room, and I sank into a mattress soft as a cloud. Cole went for my clothes, and I took the chance to admire his naked body.

“But you didn’t.” The words were more to reassure me than anything. A crazy part of me liked that he’d been jealous, not my best moment, but a bigger part of me liked that he’d controlled that inner caveman. A scene on the last date with my client would have been beyond embarrassing.

“No, I didn’t, because I trust you.” My last piece of clothing fell to the ground, and I was naked before him. My skin hummed with the need to press against his. He reached out and slid fingers between my legs, sliding through my slick folds.

“Do you trust me, Riley?”

I nodded without hesitation.

“Good girl. You’re still wet and ready for me, sweetheart,” his voice was tight, as he reached for a condom beside the bed.

I giggled. “You really are prepared.”

He grinned, rolling the condom down his long, thick length. “I’ll never not be prepared with protection again. Until we decide to try for kids, that is.”

My breath hitched. “You’re crazy.”

“About you, yes. Lie back, sweetheart.” He prowled across me, moving between my legs. The tip of his dick brushed my inside thigh, so hard and blunt it felt like a threat.

“I really don’t think that whole thing is going to fit inside me,” I whispered, as he seated his body against mine, his hips slotting into place, and the very tip of him pressing just inside me.

“I’ll fit,” he said, his voice sounding tight with restrained tension. He was going slowly, and it was costing him.

“I think it’s impossible,” I muttered, as he nudged further inside. Fuck, he was big.

“I don’t believe in impossible, remember? Just relax, sweetheart.”

He pressed further inside, and there it was, a twinge, not much really, compared to the feeling of my walls being stretched. He worked a hand between us and circled my clit again, still sensitive and puffy. The feeling made me wetter than ever, and I relaxed further into the bed.

“That’s it, Riley, let me in,” Cole said in my ear, fingering me as he thrusted gently, sinking deeper and deeper each time.

He groaned when he was finally all the way inside me, his finger still circling my clit, as he held himself over me on one powerful arm. I felt warmed from the inside out; the pain fading to the slick heat that the feeling of him inside me sparked, as his finger moving insistently on my tender flesh. He was still, simply rubbing my clit with his cock stuffed inside.

The pain fled as I adjusted. I wanted more. I moved, impaled on his dick, squirming about as his fingers chased me higher.

“Cole,” I panted, digging my nails into his shoulders, panting for something. I didn’t know what.

“Hmm, sweetheart?”

“I want you to fuck me,” I murmured in his ear. “I’m ready. It feels so good.”

“Yes, it fucking does,” he murmured tightly, and moved. He slid out of me and then pressed back in, lighting my body up with pleasure. It was new, foreign, and intoxicating. His

movements were purposeful and controlled, pushing me forward, lifting me higher. My hips rose to meet his as his rhythm increased. I was so wet, I could feel it on the skin of my thighs.

When he flipped us over, I lowered myself onto him and shuddered. Sitting on top of him, his dick felt like it hit even deeper inside me.

“Fuck me, Riley, my sweetheart. Take what you want,” Cole grunted.

I moved. His hands closed on my breasts, teasing the nipples as I rose and fell, experimenting with the feeling. He groaned after a few minutes and grabbed my ass with one hand, the other returning to my clit. He rubbed it quickly, and I cried out.

“I’m going to make you come now, sweetheart, before I fucking lose it.”

I nodded, my head falling back, my body losing coordination and control as he pounded into me from below, his hand working me furiously.

I screamed so hard when I came my throat hurt. I wasn’t a loud person. I wasn’t an out-of-control person. But in Cole’s arms, it seemed I was.

I contracted all around him, my world caving in and expanding all at the same time. Pleasure rolled through me in waves. I was dimly aware of him losing his head, his rhythm failing. He went rigid against me, and I wished I could feel him coming inside me. Maybe I should go on the pill if I had the chance of having this every night?

He pulled me down to his chest, his spent cock still hard and buried inside me. He kissed my forehead as I twitched with pleasure.

His hand stroking down my hair was the most comforting, precious feeling in the world. I felt safe and cherished. I didn’t feel alone. The last few days of distance from this man had felt like torture. Sure, I’d stood up for myself, but in the end,

hadn't I just been scared? Scared of relying on someone who might not love me as much as I loved them.

I heard the dim sounds of him pulling open the bedside drawer. Then he was picking my hand up off his chest and fiddling with my finger.

I lifted my head to look at the engagement ring on my finger. It was beautiful, catching the light in just the right way to dazzle me.

“Lift your head, sweetheart.”

I turned to look at him. He fastened a shining chain around my neck with a pretty little locket.

“Your ring fits in there, nice and safely, for when you're sculpting.”

Tears clutched at my throat at his thoughtfulness. I stared at the man who had entered my life like a whirlwind and blown down all the walls I'd carefully built.

“You're taking a sledgehammer to my rules, Cole Preston. While you're blowing up my life, you must be doing the same to your own.”

“No, because I didn't have a life before you, Riley. My happiness starts and stops with you.”

“That's not healthy. It's too much pressure.”

“Let's get married and have at least five kids then. That'll spread the load,”

“Cole!” My swat at his chest was intercepted. He kissed the back of my hand, distracting me.

“You seriously want to get married after knowing each other a few weeks? That's impossible!”

“Not for me. I want to spend my life with you, Riley, and I knew that from the night we met. Tell me you don't feel the same way?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but there were no words to be found. He was right, crazy or not, he was right.

He grinned as I snapped my mouth shut without disagreeing.

“Now, let’s get you in the shower to clean up. I need to fuck my soon to be wife against the wall in there.”

“Cole! Stop,” I admonished him.

He laughed and pulled me up into his arms.

“Never.”

Epilogue

2 YEARS LATER

Cole

The sun rose hazily over the horizon, drenching the rolling hills with gold. Lavender and rosemary, a hint of jasmine, met me as I settled into the wicker chair I preferred, and sipped my hazelnut roast coffee.

Curls of steam escaped over my hand, as I heard the sound of shuffling steps.

“Harvest starting today,” Uncle Charlie said, appearing at my elbow, Joe the dog silently faithful at his side. He lowered himself into the chair next to mine.

“I can’t wait. Riley’s putting on a huge lunch for the local helpers, and workers and their families. Everyone she can find.”

“Good woman. So she should as well. Owning a place like this isn’t just about having a great view and a good product. It’s about the community around it.”

“I invited the Chiaravelli’s too.” My casual admission made Charlie’s eyes shoot up.

“You’re biggest competitor? My, they do business differently where you’re from, don’t they?”

“They aren’t a competitor if I’m not competing. I’m a tech guy. This is my budding passion. Sales are just the icing on the cake. Besides, Riley thinks I should try and have more friends.”

Charlie laughed. “I should have know it would be Riley’s influence. Isn’t she bringing some big city girl up here for the harvest?”

“Hm, her friend, Ella. The real one.”

I’d told Uncle Charlie all about the real first time I met Riley. Now we were married, and had made our home at the vineyard, with Charlie, I didn’t want to keep secrets from him. He’d laughed until he was red in the face.

“Well, that’ll be interesting.” Charlie was beaming.

“You look like you plan to enjoy it.”

He grinned. “What can I say? There’s so much to look forward to these days.”

I found myself nodding. “Yes, there is, isn’t there? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go and visit a certain resident artist.”

I LEFT CHARLIE AND JOE TO ENJOY THE SUNRISE AND HEADED toward the back of the property. We’d fixed up an old outhouse, and by fixed up, I mean I’d ploughed money into it, making sure it was warm, comfortable, and good enough for my wife. We still stayed in the house in the Hollywood Hills when we visited LA, and I sometimes stayed in my penthouse in the building I’d make my office in downtown, but whenever we could, we stayed here. Napa had become home.

I entered the studio quietly. I hated to interrupt Riley when she was in full flow. Luckily for me, she was cleaning up her workspace, and setting a stool in the centre of the floor.

“Oh good, you’re here.” Her grin did things to me, just like when we’d first met.

“I’m here, as promised.”

She eyed my clothes, folding her arms over her chest. “I don’t have to point out that you’re wearing far too many clothes, do I?”

“No, you don’t.” My hands went to my sweater, grabbing my t-shirt at the same time, and I pulled the entire lot off. She smiled appreciatively at my body as I stripped off, wrapping a towel around my hips. Ever since we’d been to Florence, she’d been itching to sculpt something different.

A nude male sculpture.

Today was the day.

“Now, Miss Preston, I don’t have to remind you of the terms of our agreement, do I?” I cocked my eyebrow at her, making a faint blush rise in her cheeks.

She shook her head and pointed at the stool.

“I get to stare at you, sculpt you, for as many hours as I want, and in return... you get to do whatever you want to with me, for the same amount of time.”

“That’s right, sweetheart. Now, let’s get started. I can’t wait to get to my turn.”

The sun rose gradually past the windows that lined one wall, showcasing the dramatic drop of vines that rolled away from the estate. The distant sound of laughter and chat from people on their way to work drifted by us. The light caught Riley’s hair, lighting her up in a blaze of red.

It was the start of another, perfect, ordinary day, in a life I couldn’t wait to live.

I dropped my towel and sat.

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About the Author

Gia Bailey loves to write steamy, sweet, short romances to keep her warm during the cold Scottish nights

She loves writing possessive, obsessive alpha males, who go OTT for the women they fall for

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