



# THE MERGER

BUSINESS AND PLEASURE: BOOK THREE

KIMBERLY  
CARRILLO

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Business and Pleasure

Book 3

**Kimberly Carrillo**

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*To Tracy Black for having my back through this entire book.  
My sister may have caused me to write this series, but you are  
the one who pushed me to finish it.*

*And to Linnea Valle who is always there to help me pick up the  
pieces and find the ones I'm missing.*

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# Chapter One

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## Sabrina

Seattle in the spring was a temperamental mistress. One day she smiled at you, the sun warmed your face, and the city teemed with life. The next day she wept, the skies opened and everyone hid under awnings and umbrellas. It matched my mood perfectly. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Except for the days I had to walk home in the rain.

I'd had a rental car for the last few weeks since my car died. That was until the mechanic said it would cost more to fix it than it was worth and my insurance cut off my rental allowance. The timing couldn't have been worse. Spring in Seattle meant rain. Lots of rain. Sometimes it came down in torrents, turning the gutters into rivers, but most often it came as a relentless drizzle. Tonight was the latter, but I couldn't imagine it would be possible to be more soaked than I already was.

Inside my apartment, a puddle formed around my feet as I dropped my keys and purse on the entry table. I was exhausted from a long week at work, enduring the weather every morning and evening as I walked to the office. It wasn't just the long hours or the walk. Life just wasn't turning out the way I had dreamed it would when I was in college.

I was twenty-six and working for my step-brother as an executive assistant. He paid me well, way better than the average, but Seattle was an expensive city to live in. Stubborn to a fault, I wouldn't let him do more for me than pay my

inflated salary. I accepted that because I worked my ass off for him. Especially for the last week.

Colter managed to not only marry my best friend in secret but also drive her away. She'd been gone for nearly two months, but finding her wasn't the problem. Malcolm, my childhood best friend, told me where she was within days of her arriving in New York.

It concerned me because even though she hated Mal, she'd been trying to get a meeting with him. I could only guess what she was up to. She was far from stupid and it only took me a little digging to find out he was up to some shady shit. My guess was if I knew, so did Jana.

I didn't idolize Malcolm. He was an asshole and a user to everyone, except me. I'd been disappointed in him plenty over the years, but he was also the one person who had always been there for me. For the sake of our friendship I'd long ago decided to neither interfere, nor stand up for him. Of course, that was before he was mistreating my best friend. I knew Jana had to be desperate if she was willing to deal with Mal. They dated briefly in high school, and it didn't end well. None of his relationships ever did.

People have asked me over the years why Malcolm and I never dated. No matter how attractive he was, I wouldn't let myself believe I was different from all of the other women he left in tears. I'd never been special. My own mother mostly ignored me. Accepting his friendship was safe, and honestly more than I expected to have after more than twenty years.

When I told Colt's best friend, Beckett Anderson, where Jana was, we hatched a plan. He would work on sobering Colt up, while I kept tabs on her until he showed up. I showed up and played the carefree party girl, a persona I'd long since grown sick of.

During college I spent my time with my head buried in books, and I had very few friends. Being alone all of the time wore me down, and once I started pretending to enjoy going clubbing and flirting, I made friends. None of them were genuine, but at least I didn't spend all of my time alone.

It wasn't until I met Jana and Evie that I learned what having a real friend looked like. Even with them I kept up the ruse. It was exhausting having no one see the real me, but I was afraid to lose the people I had in my life by showing them who I was. What if they only liked the fun-loving Sabrina?

Beck's and my plan worked, and Colt whisked Jana away to a private island so they could work through their issues. Of course, that meant I had to keep things running back at the office. Having worked with him since I graduated college, it wasn't hard for me to clear his schedule and handle emergencies as they came up. That didn't mean it wasn't a lot of work.

I groaned in relief as I finally slipped off my heels and changed out of my work clothes. While I was drying my hair with a towel, I heard the door squeak open, and I jumped. Everyone with a key to my apartment was currently out of the city.

"You left New York without saying goodbye." I relaxed hearing Malcolm's voice boom across my apartment.

"You were preoccupied with Waverly. I didn't think you'd notice." He'd never cared before, especially when my sister was around to keep him distracted. And, I left over a week ago. If he cared so much, why was he just showing up now?

Malcolm huffed, bringing my attention back to him. Waverly was always a sticking point between us. My sister and I weren't close and not from a lack of trying on my part. As hard as I tried to form a connection with her, the only one she had any real affection for was Colter. He spoiled her and I didn't blame him, not really. Out of the three of us, Waverly was burdened with two of the most self-absorbed parents on the planet. At least Colt had his mother and I had my father.

Sure, Waverly could have had me, but to her I was competition. She saw me as a threat to her relationship with our mother and to the attention of her brother. She established herself as the princess, and I was cast as the black sheep. What she never seemed to realize was that my mother's love wasn't

a prize. It came with conditions, and I had no desire to play her games.

Waverly, though, games and manipulations were all she had ever known. For example, when I stupidly introduced her to my best friend, she made it her mission to take him for herself. Her worldview didn't support my happiness. If she caught wind I might be even a tad satisfied with my life, she sought out to rip the foundation from underneath me. Only when I was miserable did she feel like her view of herself as being better than I was justified.

"You know it's over between Waverly and me. We never should have happened in the first place," Malcolm said, bringing my attention back to him.

"And Jana? Are you done chasing after her? She belongs with my brother."

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't think I've ever heard you call him that."

I shrugged. Call it the Jana effect, but there was a familiarity that had grown between Colter and me since they got together. "We've gotten closer. A lot of that is thanks to Jana. I don't know why you're interested in her all of a sudden, but I'm asking you to let it go."

"What makes you think it's all of a sudden?"

I blinked and studied him for a moment. "Remember, I've known you longer than almost everyone. You're my best friend and I love you, but that doesn't mean I don't see you for who you are. If you cared about her, you never would have started up with that bitch Matilda."

"I was eighteen for fuck's sake. Show me a teenage boy who could resist a hot chick when she was throwing herself at you."

"Like you're so much different now. Don't lie either. You haven't maintained a relationship for more than a few months and they always end because you cheated."

"It was never serious with any of them. You know that and you know why," he said. His eyes held mine, saying all the

things we'd ignored for years.

The thing was, Malcolm and I had bad timing. I knew he thought he had feelings for me, but I wasn't about to be another woman who fell for his charm only to be discarded when the boredom set in.

He came toward me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Why won't you give us a chance? We could be good together."

"We were just talking about your track record with women, and you think I should trust you? You literally just told me you were interested in Jana."

Malcolm shot me a look that told me he thought I was being stupid. "Surely you've noticed the strong resemblance between the two of you."

I crossed my arms. "What am I, a replacement for her? She's unavailable so you move along to the next best thing?"

He shook his head. "For a smart girl, you're pretty obtuse."

Malcolm took a deep breath. "You're my best friend. You don't throw away a lifetime of friendship for sex. When I was a teenager I knew all I wanted was a quick fuck, but the problem was I couldn't get your face out of my head. I did the next best thing, and found a way to scratch that itch without risking what we have."

"I'm going to ignore the fact you treated one of my best friends like a scratching post. Why now, Malcolm? If you spent years screwing random women who reminded you of me—which ew, by the way— what's different now?"

He groaned. One thing he hated above almost everything was explaining himself. Tough shit, when it came to the fate of our friendship, he could give me an explanation.

I didn't let him off the hook while his anxiety built. He paced back and forth and shoved his hand through his hair mussing up his carefully coiffed blond locks.

"I'm twenty-eight, almost twenty-nine. I'm done fucking around. I'm ready for more. I didn't want to risk anything

between us, still don't, but don't you think we deserve a chance at having more? Because I don't think I can have more with anyone but you."

My heart pounded in my chest, and part of me, a big part, wanted to take the leap. There was just one lingering issue. "What about Waverly? We might not be close, but she's still my sister."

"You're giving her too much credit if you think she'd give you the same consideration. She knew how I felt about you from the beginning. She pursued me anyway. It worked for a while because Waverly doesn't have emotions like a normal person. We used each other."

"I don't know, Mal—"

"Give us a chance," he begged.

I took a deep breath. I hadn't allowed myself to think of him that way for a long time, but I couldn't **refute** that the curiosity was always there, in the back of my mind. "If we're going to do this, we take it slow. We start with one date, and if it doesn't click we talk to each other and save our friendship."

He held out his pinky to me. The corner of his mouth curved up. "I swear." I hooked my finger around his and we shook on it like every agreement we ever made until I was ten.

"I'll pick you up tonight," he promised and left before I could find a reason to postpone for another night.

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**I** stared in the mirror while I got ready for my date with my best friend. Halfway through curling my long blonde hair, I heard Waverly enter the apartment. She always came in full of drama, as she did everything. Like, if she wasn't noticed every second she might disappear.

She huffed outside the door, but I continued to ignore her. Giving her attention was like feeding a stray animal. Once she had a little taste, she'd be yowling for more.

Fed up with my lack of attention, she pounded on the door. “Are you almost done? Ugh, I’ve got to get ready.”

“Calm your tits, I’ll be out when I’m out,” I snapped. Damn Colter and his insistence I let Waverly live with me. It wasn’t worth the portion of the rent he was paying for her.

She made it a full five minutes before starting her pattern of banging on the door and sighing again. I grabbed my phone and shot Colt a text.

Me: You owe me big. Waverly is a giant pain in my ass.

He wouldn’t answer because he was still with Jana in the Florida Keys to try and win her back. I had faith they’d work it out. They were both stubborn idiots, but they loved each other.

I put the last few curls in my hair and then ran my fingers through it to soften the look. I wanted to look slightly more put together than when I usually hung out with Mal, but not like I was trying too hard.

Once I was satisfied with my look I exited the bathroom. I’d chosen a knee-length dress with three-quarter sleeves. It was a vibrant blue and made my eyes pop.

Waverly scanned me up and down. “You’re several hours late for high tea.”

I rolled my eyes. She liked to think of herself as some kind of fashion expert, but her fashion choices tended to look more like lingerie than anything else. Don’t get me wrong, I liked to put on a sexy little dress when I went out to a club, but my clothing choices had more thought than how much skin I could legally show in public.

I shook my head. This wasn’t me. I wasn’t a judgmental cow who slut shamed other women, let alone my own sister, but Waverly brought out the worst in me. Hell, bringing out the worst in people might be her superpower.

“The bathroom is all yours,” I said, and dramatically swept my arm across the doorway.

Malcolm knocked on the door while Waverly was still in the bathroom. I thought I'd escaped a showdown with her until she opened the door and stepped out. Of course, she looked runway ready. It was unfair how some people's outsides didn't match their insides.

Waverly's soul was tarnished by years of both neglect and indulgence. In a way she never stood a chance to be a better person. We shared a mother, but she didn't have the luxury of having my father. I wondered who I would have been without him.

My mother had always been selfish. She fancied herself a woman of society long before she had the resources to actually be one. My father made a good living. He was a well-respected professor, an expert in American Military History. He was one of the few who hit the bestseller's lists with his books. The royalties from those publications augmented his more modest salary from the university.

Being comfortable wasn't enough for my mother, and problems grew between my parents. Her ambitions drove her into the arms of an older man who was more interested in a pretty young face than the wife who'd stood by him for over a decade.

Colter and I remained with more stable parents. Waverly wasn't so lucky. While he and I grew up in homes with love, she grew up with two parents more interested in appearance and the accumulation of wealth. I was only two when she was born, but Colt was fourteen. He tried hard to offset the horrible example set by our parents, but I'm afraid we all see now that his spoiling her hurt her in a different way than the emotional neglect she lived with at home.

She smirked at me when Malcolm knocked again. "Ah, dinner with the bestie, I see. You should probably let him in, his attention span isn't very long."

I ground my teeth together. I'd ask her how she even knew he was the one I was seeing, but Waverly was a notorious snoop. I wouldn't put it past her to have gone through my messages, or hacked into my calendar.



It would be a lie if I said their history didn't bother me. But, I also hated the fact there was some truth to her words. Hadn't Jana said virtually the same thing? He was smitten with her, until his boredom set in and he strayed. Thanks to my mom, I hated cheaters. I mean, it's not like there was anything to love about cheating, but I knew firsthand the devastation that kind of betrayal caused.

"You know I can pick a lock," he called through the door, growing impatient. He was probably lying about that, but the last thing I needed was for him to get arrested because I was taking too long to open the door.

I opened the door and stepped aside so he could enter. I held my breath waiting for him to notice Waverly leaning against the doorway of the bathroom and change his mind about our date. My nerves eased when he never took his eyes off of me.

I watched his blue eyes darken as they traveled up my body. He reached out and took my hand, bringing it to his mouth and pressed a chaste kiss against my knuckles. "You look beautiful," he said, low enough to keep Waverly from hearing.

With our hands still connected, he guided me back toward the door. I snagged my jacket from the hook on our way out. Before we exited my building, Mal took my jacket from me and held it open for me to slip my arms in. It turned out to be the perfect excuse for him to drop his arm around my shoulders.

I smirked up at him. "That was a pretty smooth move."

He winked at me. "Only the best for my girl."

# Chapter Two

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## Sabrina

**D**inner was strange. Not uncomfortable, the opposite really, but still weird. First dates are usually filled with awkward questions to get to know each other. We didn't need to do that. Not that I knew everything about him, like there were things he didn't know about me, but the important details were already written into my life's story.

There were awkward lulls in conversation, which we'd had before. Navigating from friends to something more was different. I'd stopped seeing his physical features long ago. Partly because I was convinced he'd never see me as anything more than a little girl with scraped knees and pigtails. Never in my wildest fantasies did I believe Malcolm would actually see me as a woman, let alone a woman he was romantically interested in.

Still, we managed to flirt a bit more than normal. There was enough chemistry between us that when he leaned in for a kiss at the end of the night, I didn't turn away. It was a decent kiss, but it didn't spur me on to invite him up.

I might have, if he'd done more than pull in front of my building. Parking in Seattle was difficult. My building didn't have a parking garage and I was happy not to have to walk from the lot down the street, but it wasn't very romantic.

There was a heaviness sitting on my shoulders. Every relationship I'd entered for the last several years went the same. The beginning was exciting, and I told myself this one would be different. I'd be able to find that missing spark, but it never came.

The last guy I dated, Aaron, was sweet. He made it clear he liked me and was constantly doing small things to let me know he was thinking about me. I couldn't manage to drum up enough enthusiasm to continue seeing him. He worked in finance at Anderson Global, and when he was sent to head a project at the Portland office, I allowed our relationship to fade.

After we parted ways I was convinced there was something wrong with me. The truth I hadn't told anyone was, I hadn't been intimate with anyone since I was twenty. I was waiting for something or someone. I was sad to admit that for a while I'd convinced myself it was Malcolm. Now, I was starting to think maybe that part of me was broken.

There was no tragic backstory. I hadn't been abused or attacked. The only thing wrong with me was an overly romantic heart. I wanted that moment of instant lust that makes your heart race and builds to a lifelong love.

I owed it to myself to give Malcolm a real shot. We had history. He cared about me, and I was attracted to him. So, when he called the next day, I took it as a sign he wasn't playing games with me.

Over the next few weeks, we continued to see each other. It wasn't really any different than hanging out as friends. He held my hand more now, but we had barely moved beyond that. I could tell Malcolm was getting frustrated with my tepid response to him, but I told him I was just having a hard time letting go of the way things were.

I tried to bury myself in work, but I was an executive assistant to a man who was not only a secret genius but family as well. Colt worked to live and refused to let me make work my life as well.

He knocked on the open door of my office. "Have you even taken lunch?"

I shook my head. I told Malcolm I had a lunch meeting with Colter, and then I felt too guilty to step out.

“Jana said she asked you to join her, and you told her you were busy?”

Taking a deep breath I prepared myself to tell Colt I was seeing Malcolm. If we were going to stand a chance as a couple, it would only be if we didn't hide our relationship.

“Malcolm asked me to lunch, but I told him I was busy in meetings with you.”

Colt frowned. “I know he's your friend. You don't have to hide that just because I don't like him.” He scratched the side of his head, messing up his dark, wavy hair. “I thought we were getting closer. You know you can talk to me, don't you?”

I smiled, a tiny curve of my lips, but I still ducked my head to hide my reaction. He was right, we had grown closer. I placed the credit for that on the shoulders of his wife. Prior to their relationship Colt and I existed in a half space where we were friends with familial connections. Now I saw him as more of a brother than I did growing up.

Thanks to Jana we spent more time together. It was a blessing and a curse. He was more observant now. All the things I'd hidden from him over the years, my loneliness because of my difficulty connecting to people and especially my fear of failure. He'd started pushing me to want more, which was my curse. Wanting more was never my problem, it was the fear I'd reach for it and find it still out of my grasp.

I cleared my throat. I was the fun one. Light-hearted Sabrina, never too serious. All of it was a front. When everyone saw you as happy, no one looked too deep below the surface. Showing emotion was a flag that garnered more attention than I was comfortable with.

“We have gotten closer.” I wrung my hands in my lap. “Malcolm and I started seeing each other.”

I looked up at him where he was still standing in the doorway. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down, but I watched him swallow the words he clearly wanted to say.

After pausing for a moment, he crossed the room and sat in one of the chairs by my desk. “And he's treating you right?”

I nodded.

Colt knocked his knuckles against my desk. “Good. I don’t need another reason to kick his ass, but it’s good to have one not to. Jana would prefer I stay out of jail.”

“How is everything? I’ve barely seen either of you since you came back from opening Evie’s foundation.”

His smile widened, hinting at dirty secrets I didn’t want the details of. “It’s been fantastic.” He pointed at my face. “I see that look. I’ll spare you the details, but I will say if you’re missing seeing us, why did you turn down Jana’s invitation? Or better, why did you turn down Malcolm when he asked you to lunch?”

Bullseye. Further proof Colter was finally looking beyond my façade. I sighed. “Real answer?”

He chuckled. “That would be great for a change. I think we’ve all let you pretend everything is perfectly fine for way too long.”

“Stupid happy people have way too much time on their hands,” I grumbled under my breath.

Colt’s smile slipped. “No, we just weren’t paying attention to you the way we should have. And you were happy to let me. I was too caught up in my own problems, and you were too willing to shove Waverly under my nose any time I wasn’t. Now I see I paid attention to the wrong sister for so long, there’s no ignoring that anymore.”

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on my desk, and I knew I wasn’t going to get out of it this time. “Give it to me straight, Brina. Why did you really tell him you were busy?”

“Because even with him I still don’t feel *it*,” I admitted.

“It?”

I sighed. This sounded stupid in my own head, but I could see Colt wasn’t going to let me off the hook. “The spark. I just keep waiting for that moment that takes my breath away.”

I looked away. “It’s silly, just ignore me.”

“It’s not silly. The first time I saw Jana I found myself rubbing the center of my chest. There was an ache I didn’t understand. I found myself pissing her off just to get her attention. Anything to make her focus on me for just a minute. I still feel that way, only I’m trying to piss her off less and scream my name more.”

I covered my ears. “You’re bordering on too much information.”

Colter chuckled for a second before becoming serious once again. “Just because you’ve known Malcolm practically your entire life doesn’t mean he’s the one for you. There are many kinds of love in the world, and you can’t force one kind to change into another just because you want it to.”

His words sank to the bottom of my soul. Was that what I was doing? Trying to force myself to feel something that wasn’t there and never would be?

“It’s more than that. I can’t explain it, but something changed in me several years back and I’m not sure what. I feel like I’m missing an important puzzle piece but I don’t know what shape it is.” I waved the thought away. “I’m not making any sense.”

“Don’t hide away from us just because you are avoiding him, yeah?”

I nodded. “I won’t.”

He rose from his chair and fixed the button of his jacket. “Good. We want you to come over for dinner this weekend.”

Another nod. I could do that.

---

**T**he office cleared out earlier these days than it had when both Beck and Colt were single. Anderson Global was a well-oiled machine. They hired the best people and trusted them to do their jobs. It was a pleasant place to work, and part of the reason I had settled into my role as an executive assistant despite having studied marketing and event

planning in college. I actually minored in mathematics, but that was a deeply guarded secret.

It was closing in on five and since I'd skipped lunch, I decided to pack up early and grab some dinner on my way home. A knock on my door had me setting down my bag.

"Sabrina, I'm glad I caught you before you left," Fitz Anderson chirped cheerfully.

I gave him a warm smile. One of the few genuine ones I'd handed out all day. Fitz was a bit odd, but a genuinely good man. I'd known so few of them in my twenty-six years.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Anderson?"

He scoffed. "Don't be so formal dear. I thought I made it clear we're family here, you included. Call me Fitz."

"Okay, Fitz, how can I help?"

"I've been speaking to Jana. With her new company getting started and for various other reasons, she has no desire to run Easton Corporation. I suggested to Beckett that we merge her company under the Anderson Global umbrella."

"That's a good idea, we've been lacking an inroad into luxury brands. Why do you need my help?" I asked.

"I took the liberty of looking into your background more. You graduated with honors from the University of Washington. Your work here has been exemplary, but I fear we aren't using your skills in the manner we should."

"Thank you, that means a great deal from you."

His brow furrowed. "There was one thing that came up that I'm a bit confused about."

I frowned. I'd lived a rather boring life to be honest. Typical behavior from a child of divorce. Either they act up to get attention, or try hard to be perfect to keep the parent who stayed. I fell into the second category.

"You'll have to explain it to me. I'm afraid I'm fairly boring," I said to Fitz.

"Have you ever been married?" Fitz asked out of the blue.



A laugh burst free. “Married? I haven’t had a relationship last longer than a few months.”

He scratched his chin. “Hmm, well. I must have gotten your data crossed with someone else’s. The information my investigator dug up said you were married at twenty-one, but there wasn’t a divorce certificate or an annulment on record.”

“That’s bizarre. Twenty-one?” I thought back. There was one thing that was out of the norm for me. One trip to Vegas for my twenty-first birthday stood out. It was the typical hedonistic celebration of turning the legal drinking age.

I’d gone with a group of college girlfriends, none I kept in touch with. We drank, gambled, and returned home. Granted, I had the hangover from hell on the flight home, and some missing time I was never able to account for, but I arrived home in one piece and thought it was stress related.

“I took a trip with some girlfriends to celebrate my birthday. I came home with a hangover and a lighter bank account, but certainly not a husband.”

“Does the name Stryker Lawson ring a bell?” he asked.

I scowled. There was a familiarity, but I couldn’t place it. “I’m honestly not sure. I don’t think so.”

He pulled up a picture on his phone and held it out to me. “What about his face?”

He showed me a shot taken without the subject’s knowledge. It looked like he was leaving Jana’s office building. I certainly wouldn’t have forgotten this man. He was tall, judging by the background. He had broad shoulders and a trim waist. He was built like a linebacker and seemed out of place in a suit.

His hair was dark, and shorn close on the sides. It was longer on top and slicked back, but still gave him a bad-boy vibe I imagined made him intimidating in the boardroom.

I swallowed hard. “That’s not a face you forget, but I don’t know him.”

Fitz seemed confused but accepted my reply. “Well, you will soon enough. He’s the interim CEO of Easton Corp. Jana has asked him to stay on and run the company following the merger.”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure what any of this has to do with me, to be honest.”

“Right, yes, of course. I’m getting things backward. I’d like for you to assist him.”

“What about Colter? He needs an assistant. I can’t do both jobs.”

“Of course not. There are plenty of employees who are due a promotion. What we need you to do with Mr. Lawson is more than being an executive assistant. He’s going to need an Operations Manager, and we want someone from the family to step in,” Fitz explained.

“It comes with a raise,” he added.

I cocked an eyebrow. Thoughts of a Waverly-free apartment danced in my head, but most of all I didn’t want to let down Fitz. “If you need me, I’m in.”

He smiled at me. “I knew I could count on you.”

Never had praise made me feel so worthy.

# Chapter Three

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## Stryker

**F**ive years was a long time. I thought it would take a few months to get my shit together, but a few months turned into six, and then a year, and before I knew it half a decade had passed.

Actually, I was ready after a year and a half, but doubt wiggled in, and I convinced myself I needed more before I came for her. So, for the last few years, I set out to conquer the world, at least the business side of it. Finally, I realized I could spend forever trying to accumulate wealth, but the girl I met didn't value those things. It was time for me to go after what I really wanted in life.

Sabrina Lake was mine. My wife, at least according to the state of Nevada. She could have annulled the marriage or served me with divorce papers. I expected them at first, but it didn't take long to realize she didn't remember anything.

I watched through her social media while she lived her life. Did no one see how lonely she was? Sure, her pictures featured her smiling face, but her eyes, those deep blue pools, never reflected the joy she tried so hard to fake.

She was my kindred spirit. Another person who felt alone in a crowd of people. I watched while she made a couple of good friends, and was happy when some of her photographed smiles seemed more genuine. It was harder to see pictures of her with a boyfriend. I almost came for her each time I saw those, but then I noticed her lack of interest.

“Are you ever going to tell me who it is you have been cyber stalking?” Caroline asked, surprising me.

I grunted. She was pretty much my only friend, and even she knew very little about me. When you were raised as a dirty secret and shunned from knowing your own family, it was hard to trust anyone enough to consider them a friend. Caroline tried harder than the others and for that, I owed her loyalty.

“Okay, since you can’t seem to use actual words, then you can listen. You’ve heard me talk about my friend Colter Greyson?”

I grunted again. It wasn’t my most articulate response, but at least I didn’t ignore her like I did most people.

“All right, I can see I’ve got grumpy Stryker today. I’ll cut to the chase then. Colt’s wife, Jana Easton, inherited her family corporation, but she doesn’t want to run it. They’ve decided to merge it into Anderson Global, and they’re looking for someone to handle the merger.”

My interest peaked. I was ready to be done saving failing companies. I’d only done it for as long as I had because I wasn’t ready to settle down without Sabrina by my side. That time was drawing to a close. But having already met Jana Easton, I knew she was friends with Sabrina. Maybe one last assignment could help me finally get closer to Sabrina.

“I need an answer using actual words, Stryker.”

“Okay, I’ll take this one last assignment. But, I’m not talking about my personal life. I like you, Caroline, you might be the only one, but I’m still not opening up about private things.”

“Not what Jana said. She likes you. I’m guessing you didn’t show her the growling caveman side of yourself?” she teased.

“She’s different. Not like the prissy society bitches I’ve met. I found myself telling her things I’ve never told anyone,” I admitted.

Caroline laughed. “Yeah, she’s special. She’s certainly changed Colter Greyson.”

“I’m assuming there was a point to this visit and not to discuss the fact I’m not a complete asshole. If it was just about the job offer you’d have called.” I recognized my method of changing the subject proved I was mostly an asshole.

She sighed. “One of these days you’re going to meet a woman to soften all your jagged edges.”

“Looking forward to it,” I admitted, although I’m sure she thought I was being sarcastic.

“Jana wants you to stay on when Easton merges with Anderson Global.”

I nodded. “I know. She called me and asked if I was interested before she moved forward.”

Caroline slapped my arm. “If you already knew why are you putting me through all of this?”

I shrugged. “Shits and giggles. We grumpy bastards have to get our fun somewhere. What about finding me an Operations Manager?”

While my slip in telling Jana personal information was out of character for me, and I wasn’t lying that there was something about her, it still served a purpose for me. She was friends with Sabrina, and it was necessary for her to like me.

Not only that though, it was necessary under the circumstances. My half-brother, Malcolm Graham, was being used as a pawn by her father. He was a narcissistic bastard, but his self-interest was easily engaged for our gain. The fact he got something out of the deal irked me, but it was more expedient.

Jana and I bonded over our mutual dislike for my brother, and I learned something very important, she wanted Sabrina to be free of him as well.

Something shifted in the last few weeks. Sabrina and Malcolm’s usual hangouts turned into dates, and for the first

time I saw a real risk that Sabrina would finally let someone into her heart.

It was time I stopped waiting, if not for myself, then for her. Malcolm was too much like our father. Narcissistic, vain, and incapable of loving anyone as much as they loved themselves. Sabrina deserved better.

Turning back to Caroline, I asked, “Did she happen to tell you my terms?”

Caroline’s face reflected her confusion. “I didn’t even know you knew about the job. What are the terms you insisted on?”

“I want Sabrina Lake to take on the role as Operations Manager.”

Caroline’s mouth fell open. “You really expect me to ask Jana for Colt’s assistant as your Operations Manager?”

“Sabrina is his step-sister, graduated college with honors, and is wasted as an assistant,” I said through my teeth. Caroline didn’t deserve my irritation, but she often caught the brunt of my grouchy moods.

“Well, I knew there was someone. She’s the one, isn’t she? The one who has had you twisted up all of this time?”

There was no point denying it. She’d see for herself soon enough, so I gave her another nonverbal answer and nodded.

Her phone signaled an incoming email. She checked her phone and her smile widened. “Good thing Jana went straight to Fitz Anderson then. He’s got a knack for meddling when he thinks love is involved.” She waved her phone around as if I could see the email from here. “She says he jumped at the chance. We should know her answer soon enough.”

I didn’t have to wait long. Fitz called soon after Caroline left, letting me know Sabrina accepted the promotion.

“I turned up something in my search,” he began.

I held my breath, knowing that the way this conversation went could decide how much I’d have to fight to get a chance with my wife.

“My investigator found a marriage certificate from Nevada for you and Sabrina. I asked her about it, but she didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. I let it go, but I need an explanation.”

I sighed, it’s a long story. My mind drifted off as it had many times back to that fateful day five years ago.

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**T**he conference I was forced to attend was a complete waste of my time and talent. My father had me placed in a sales position, not even the head of a division, just another cog in his company. As his bastard, I was supposed to be grateful for the opportunity.

I shouldn’t have been surprised, after all, he hadn’t even given me his name. Arthur Graham was an insufferable prick who demanded perfection, even though he himself was as flawed an individual as ever existed.

Here I was, thirty-one years old, working alongside people just out of college. I never expected to be handed anything, but I’d thought I would have been given the opportunity to work my way up. It seemed my father was more content to punish me for his mistakes.

While the rest of the sales team hit up a strip club, I sat alone at the hotel bar nursing a beer, waiting. I wasn’t sure what for. Inspiration? A bolt of lightning? My finger rubbed the glossy surface of a business card. Caroline Cartwright was a corporate attorney. One of the many people I’d met during the networking event put on by the conference. I was supposed to be forging connections to help my father expand his business, but that wasn’t her offer.

In front of me were two different paths. I could abandon the life I knew, one that pushed me down at every turn, or I could forge a new way. It wasn’t really a choice. I knew I was going to call her, accept her offer. But, change was terrifying, and a little liquid courage would make the leap easier.



“You’re thinking awfully hard over there,” a musical voice sang out a few seats down the bar.

I grunted, not much for making small talk. That was, until then. I turned to face her, and a low chuckle escaped me. I’d said I was waiting for lightning to strike and fuck me had it ever.

I turned toward her voice and saw sunshine made flesh. Long golden hair spilled down her back, reflecting all the colors present in a beam of light; pale yellow, silvery white, and a deep gold. She watched me with dark blue eyes, the color of an evening sky. Her porcelain skin glowed, even under the anemic light in the bar.

“I guess I am,” I said at last. “Distract me.”

She smiled, and for a moment I felt like I couldn’t breathe. “And what do you suggest?”

The first chords of “Dear God” by Avenged Sevenfold started to play in the background. “Dance with me.”

She took my hand, and I felt something click into place inside of me. I’d thought love at first sight was bullshit. Maybe this was lust at first sight, but people have created a life around less.

I listened as the lead singer sang about longing to be with the woman he loved, and felt a sense of foreboding.

I pulled her closer, swaying to the music and held on tight to this momentary reprieve from all the doubt plaguing me.

When the song ended, I kept her hand in mine. “Why are you here alone?” I asked.

She looked around, as if she only just noticed her friends weren’t present. “My friends were gambling, but I didn’t have any luck. I already lost the money I set aside. They were supposed to meet me here.”

“I’ll wait with you. This isn’t the city for a woman to wait alone.”

She bit the corner of her mouth and nodded. “I can think of worse ways to spend my evening.”

Her phone buzzed from her pocket. She pulled it out and scowled down at the device.

“Your friends?”

She nodded. “Apparently they decided to go to a club.” She swallowed. “Without me.”

One of her delicate shoulders moved up in a shrug. “I guess I’m not spontaneous and fun enough for them.”

“Fuck them.” My anger on her behalf was softened by gently brushing her hair away from her face.

“They aren’t wrong. I’m cautious and boring,” she stared at her feet while she spoke.

With my finger under her chin, I tipped her face back up toward mine. “You can always change, but only change for yourself.”

Her blue eyes opened wide, assessing me. “How do I do that?”

“Just like with anything else. One decision at a time. What’s your name, Sunshine?”

“Sabrina,” she answered shyly. “Why sunshine?”

“Because you appeared in a dark moment like a sign from the heavens. I’d like to do the same for you.”

Sabrina licked her lips, making the natural pink deepen to a darker red. “It would help if I knew your name.”

A smile pulled at my lips, revealing the lone dimple in my right cheek. “Stryker.”

Her shoulders rolled back, and her chin tipped up. “Well, Stryker, let’s go live like tonight’s our last.”

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**I** lived an entire life in that one night. I had no idea it would have to sustain me for five long years.

It started out innocently enough. We rode roller coasters, walked along the strip talking about everything and nothing. We drank a little as we went along, but I knew she was what had my head swimming.

Our touches grew from innocent handholding to heated kisses. I drank her in, not knowing if I was growing drunk from her touch or from the tequila coursing through my blood.

“I need you,” she spoke against my lips.

“Then you’ll have me. Whatever you need, it’s yours,” I swore to her.

We hurried back to my room. The moment the door closed behind me, we started stripping out of our clothes on our way to the bed.

“I want to give you slow and romantic, but I’m too lost in you to hold back,” I warned her.

She let go of the arm holding up her dress and let the soft fabric slide down her body. “I don’t want slow and romantic. I want fire and passion.”

Tangling my fingers in her hair I tugged and pulled her head back, exposing her neck. Licking and sucking a trail down her neck, I pressed my teeth into the space where it met her shoulders.

“You want me to fuck you, Sunshine?” I growled into her skin.

A shiver wracked her body. “Yes,” she sighed.

“If I do, you’ll be mine.”

“Yes,” she agreed again.

“Show me.” I stepped back from her and unzipped my pants. “On your knees,” I demanded.

Sabrina dropped down in front of me and freed my cock from my boxers, a drop of precum already leaking from the head, eager to feel her hot mouth wrap around my length.

I took her hair in my hand and held it. There was no force or coaxing. She took me into her mouth eagerly. Her moves

weren't practiced, but her enthusiasm and curiosity made every move sexier.

Her cheeks hollowed as she took me deeper into her mouth. When I hit the back of her throat, she gagged but tried again. Soon she had me deep in her throat and hummed around my dick. I threw my head back and roared as I came.

My cock slid from her mouth with a pop. Sabrina sat back on her heels and wiped off her mouth with the back of her hand. The satisfied grin on her pouty lips had my cock twitching again with desire.

“Your turn,” I taunted, and I tossed her onto the bed.

My fingers pressed into the skin of her knees and guided her legs open. Her pink flesh glistened. I couldn't wait to taste her. Settling between her legs I swiped my tongue through the lips of her pussy, flicking across her clit until her legs began to tremble around my head.

I ate her relentlessly. My tongue speared into her channel while I put steady pressure on that eager bundle of nerves with my thumb. She was so tight I needed to stretch her before she took my length. Retracting my tongue I fucked her first with one finger, then two.

I felt her walls squeezing my fingers and imagined my cock in its place. Despite just having had a release I was hard and ready to feel her muscles contracting around me. I let her climb higher and higher before I sucked on her clit, ripping a scream from her throat.

Retrieving my pants, I pulled a condom from my wallet. I tore the foil packet with my teeth and sheathed myself while she watched. Her heavy tits heaved in anticipation. I lined myself up with her opening and entered her with one hard thrust.

Sabrina pulled her legs up my sides, and I pressed them further against her chest.

“You. Are. Mine,” I grunted.

Her nipples puckered to hard points beckoning me to feast on them. I sucked one of the tight buds into my mouth and

pinched slightly with my teeth. Words escaped us from that moment, replaced by grunts and moans.

I took her mouth, plunging my tongue past her lips, and tangling with hers. She fisted her hands in my hair, clinging to me as much as I clung to her. Sabrina might not have said the words, but I got her message. I was hers as much as she was mine.

“Stryker, yes!” she screamed. “Harder, please!”

A dark chuckle rumbled in my chest. She really was perfect. How she knew I was holding back, I didn’t know, but I gladly gave her what she asked for.

Even bolted to the wall, the headboard started up a rhythmic thumping. Her nails scored my back, urging me to slam into her harder and faster. My fingers dug into her hips and yanked her down my cock.

“Come now,” I demanded as I felt my balls pull up into my body.

Sabrina screamed and her cunt became impossibly tight as her body drew my release from me. I joined her in falling off the ledge and we laid spent in a sweaty tangle of limbs.

We held each other as our breathing calmed and our heartbeats slowed back to normal. I still hadn’t regained the ability to think, which was why the next words slipped free from my mouth.

“Marry me. Let’s do one more crazy thing before the night is over.”

She kissed me sweetly on the lips. “Okay.”

We drank as we dressed, on the way to the chapel, and more after we said our vows.

After the sun began to rise, I dropped her off at her hotel. We were seriously tipsy, but she needed to pack before meeting me at the airport.

Had I known her friends would still be celebrating when she arrived, or that she’d drink to the point of blacking out, I’d never have let her go.

I thought about going to her many times in those first few weeks. Caroline wasn't wrong about me following her social media. It was how I knew she'd forgotten our night altogether, and how I reassured myself over the years she hadn't moved on.

Now the final part of my plan was in place. I'd have her back at my side and could finally remind her of the promise she made to me. She was mine.

# Chapter Four

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## Sabrina

When I got home after work Malcolm was waiting for me on the couch. I almost questioned how he got in until I heard Waverly making noise in her room. For a small woman, at least compared to my five-foot-seven, she moved around like a herd of elephants.

She moved with grace but made a lot of noise while doing it. I think she did it so we wouldn't forget she was around. I understood it. Growing up in that house, the one Colt and I both were able to escape from most of the time, she had to fight to be seen.

My attention returned to Mal. "This is a surprise. How long have you been waiting?"

His eyes flicked over to Waverly's door before they returned to me. "Not long."

"Have dinner with me," he said. It wasn't a question, more like a demand.

Malcolm rose from the couch and crossed the room to me. He took my face in his hands and kissed me softly on the lips. "I should have started with that."

I smiled despite the fact kissing him was exactly like kissing my best friend. Comforting, familiar, and platonic. "Dinner sounds nice," I croaked.

Mal took my hand and together we made our way to his car. I searched for something to say to fill the awkward silence. For the first time in over twenty years of friendship I came up blank.



We went to a restaurant Malcolm was a partner in. It was trendy, which meant that the portions were tiny and fussily presented. I'm sure many women would have found the ambiance romantic. All of the tables were staged so they seemed to have some privacy. The linens were fine and complimented the decor perfectly.

Still, I would have preferred a casual diner with burgers and shakes. It felt like we were trying to force romance when we should have been building off of what we already had.

"How is work?" he asked.

I placed my cloth napkin in my lap. For some reason I was hesitant to share this with him. "I got a promotion."

"Do you have another brother who needs an assistant?" he chuckled. I didn't find the joke as funny as he seemed to.

I clenched my teeth to keep from lashing out. He'd always had a dismissive manner and a callous sense of humor. This was the first time it had been directed at me though.

Taking a deep breath in through my nose I relaxed my jaw. "I'm to become the Operations Manager of Easton Corporation to help during the merger."

I watch his face turn stone cold. "Who is stepping in as interim CEO?"

"Stryker Lawson. I haven't met him yet." I shrugged. I wasn't sure how any of this could possibly have caused his change in temper.

"No," he said.

"What do you mean no? I've spoken to Jana. That is the name I was given."

"I mean, no you can't take the job. You can't work with that bastard," he said, his fists sitting rigidly on the top of the table.

I toyed with my wine glass. We hadn't ordered, and yet I wanted to leave. "Maybe we should try this again another time before either of us says something we can't take back."

Malcolm leaned forward. “You don’t understand. Stryker is my brother.”

Falling back in my seat, my mouth opened and closed, but I couldn’t find words. I’d known Malcolm practically my entire life. Never once in all the years of his friendship had I heard about a brother.

“You’re an only child,” I managed to squeak out.

Malcolm shook his head. “Not technically, although Stryker is just my father’s bastard. His mother was a maid, not someone worth mentioning. Certainly not someone he could leave my mother for. They’d been struggling to conceive, and their marriage was on the rocks.”

There was so much wrong with what he said. Mostly the way he casually excused his father’s cheating and abandoning a child because his mother didn’t have the right pedigree. This was the world Waverly lived in and the one my father had worked so hard to keep me apart from. I had a hard time reconciling this information with the man who’d been my father’s best friend for years.

Malcolm pointed at my face. “I see the judgment even if you aren’t saying the words. You don’t know Stryker. He grew up in the gutter and hasn’t bothered to leave it.”

“He was left there,” I said through clenched teeth. I wanted to go home now more than ever, and worse I was less interested in repeating this night.

This was the reason I’d never really entertained a relationship with my best friend, even if only subconsciously. He might step out of his ivory tower from time to time, but it was clear to me he was comfortable there. It was easier to overlook his snobbery when we were just friends. Now those aspects of his personality were nearly all I saw.

He shrugged his shoulders. “All of this happened before I was born. Stryker is eight years older than me. He was a teenager when I first learned of his existence, so don’t look at me like any of that was my doing.”

I set my napkin on the table. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. I’m going to go do that, at home.”

Before he could argue with me I got up and walked out of the restaurant. Not wanting to wait out front for an uber, I walked around the corner to one of the hundreds of coffee shops found all over Seattle. Malcolm started blowing up my phone before I had a chance to order a ride.

There were people I could call for a ride, of course. Any of my found family would come to my aid without hesitation, but I didn’t want to see the look they’d give me. The one that said, “I told you so.” It wasn’t a secret they didn’t care for Malcolm. So, I called for a ride and ordered a coffee while I waited for it to arrive.

They had valid reasons for their dislike. Malcolm had a reputation as a playboy, one he’d more than earned. One of his dalliances was with Waverly. I found out about them after their brief relationship had gone sour. Unlike Colter, I didn’t set the blame solely on Mal’s shoulders. Waverly had her own history with toying with her paramour’s affections.

She collected and discarded lovers the way Jana did shoes. Actually, I think Jana cared more for her shoes than my sister ever did for a man she dated. Malcolm was just one in a series of rich boyfriends. He had access to exclusive clubs, long before he opened his own, and she did love to be seen in the right places.

It didn’t take her long to find a richer, better connected admirer, and Malcolm was left in the dust. Of course, she managed to squeeze out a few crocodile tears and spin a story about how he mistreated her. He flirted with other girls and ignored her. All of that was probably true, but I doubted she cared as she was doing the same thing. She certainly moved on fast enough not to believe she didn’t have her next boyfriend lined up.

I don’t think anyone expected them to end up together long-term. Waverly was only eighteen at the time, and Malcolm was twenty-three. Way too young to think they’d last, at least not with the maturity they both possessed at that

time. I was starting to wonder if either of them had matured in the last five years.

Malcolm's dating history wasn't a concern when we were just friends. Aside from the occasional dirty looks shot my way by women he'd been involved with, I rarely thought about it. Perhaps I dismissed his past too easily. Suddenly, I was surrounded by red flags and needed to think.

Not only had he been able to dismiss women so easily, but apparently being his own flesh and blood didn't guarantee his affection. These were thoughts I could ponder in my apartment with a pint of ice cream, hopefully alone.

The car pulled up outside the cafe and I hurried inside. Once the door was closed I exhaled in relief. I wasn't sure if Malcolm cared enough to hunt me down, but I was sure I didn't want to be found. And that said a lot, didn't it?

# Chapter Five

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## Stryker

**M**y hand shook as I raised it to knock on Jana and Colter's door. I was late leaving the office, which meant Sabrina was likely already inside. I have often wondered if her memories would return if she saw me. If she didn't remember, did that mean that night meant more to me than it did to her? Now that I was about to find out, I was afraid to know the answer.

I finally gathered my courage and rapped my knuckles against the door. The clack of heels approached, and a moment later Jana opened the door.

I handed her a bottle of wine and followed her inside. My breath caught as Sabrina rose and turned to greet me.

Her blue eyes widened and held mine. "Stryker," she said breathlessly.

I nodded, my throat too choked with anticipation to push out any sound.

Her hand trembled as she raised it toward her neck. "I feel like I've met you before."

I wouldn't lie to her, but I didn't know how to come out and tell her either. Jana was watching us, and I had a sinking feeling that the information was going to come out whether I said the words or not.

I opened my mouth to say something, I wasn't sure what exactly, but Colter interrupted the moment by handing me a beer.

“Why don’t we have a seat in the living room where we can chat,” he said.

“Sabrina said she felt like she’s met you before, and she has, hasn’t she?” Colter cut to the chase.

I nodded.

“When?” she asked hesitantly.

“Five years ago,” I admitted.

Sabrina turned to Jana. “What Fitz said…” she trailed off.

“Fitz Anderson?” I was missing information.

Colter grabbed a manilla folder off the coffee table and slapped it against his palm a few times. “I know a private investigator. We used him when Maxwell Easton had Jana locked out of her apartment to find out what he was up to. He’s the one that found her grandpa’s will that gave her the company, and since he’s done such a good job in the past, Jana and I decided to pay him a visit this morning.”

He slapped the folder against his hand one more time to remind me it was there. “Do you know what he found?”

“Not really,” Sabrina said.

“No, but I bet Stryker does,” he said and tossed the file down in front of me.

I didn’t need to pick it up to know he’d found our marriage certificate. When I didn’t move to grab it Sabrina picked it up.

Time seemed to crawl as I watched her open the folder. When it started shaking I knew she’d gotten to the signature lines and saw her name next to mine.

Jana reached out and placed a hand over Sabrina’s to stop her trembling.

Sabrina looked over at her. “So, not a coincidence then?”

Jana shook her head. “No, I’m afraid this is very real.”

“What I want to know is, why haven’t you said anything about this?” Colter pointed an accusing finger at me.

He was pissing me off, but I reminded myself Sabrina actually liked her brother. Step-sibling or not, they had a tighter bond than the nonexistent one I had with Malcolm.

“There’s an explanation, but it’s for Sabrina, not you.” I meant to speak more respectfully, but being an asshole to people was second nature to me now.

“She doesn’t know you,” he pushed back.

I shook my head. “She doesn’t remember me.”

“Is there a difference?” Colter demanded.

“A part of her is familiar with me.” My words were directed at Sabrina as I stared deep into her midnight blue eyes. As if I could will her to remember our night together.

Colter grabbed his phone off a side table. “I’ll call Caroline and we can get this annulled.”

“She won’t help you,” I told him.

Of course, he didn’t listen to me and started going through his contacts. Jana slid the phone from his hand and set it down on the table.

“If anything is going to happen, it will be Sabrina’s choice. Besides, Caroline is Stryker’s friend too. It wouldn’t be fair to ask her to take sides here.”

Sabrina sat still, barely blinking. She was in shock, which was exactly the reaction I feared. Jana reached out and enveloped one of Sabrina’s hands between both of hers. “Brina? What do you want to do?”

She blinked several times and seemed to snap out of her stupor. “I don’t know,” she said softly.

“Can we talk?” I asked her. She nodded.

Jana stood up and walked in front of Colter. “Come help me check on dinner.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but she shook her head. “Now, old man,” she demanded.



Colter rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath. “You’re still a brat.”

“Maybe I’ll let you punish me later.”

That got him moving, and he chased after her. Before she made it out of the room he tossed her over his shoulder and swatted her on her ass.

“Are they always like that?” I asked Sabrina, hoping to ease her into a conversation.

She chuckled. “Now they are.”

“That’s good to hear. She was a wreck when I met her.” I took a deep breath. “We should talk.”

“Not here,” she said, looking over into the kitchen where Colter and Jana were pretending not to be listening to us.

“Take a walk with me,” I suggested.

“After dinner, okay?” She seemed nervous.

I took a risk and moved to sit next to her. “I don’t like to see you upset.”

She exhaled. “How could I be anything else? I just found out I’ve been married to a perfect stranger for the last five years. Why don’t I remember? I was drinking that night, but I wasn’t drunk. However—”

I hung on her next words, hoping I’d finally have the answer to why she hadn’t met me the next morning like we had planned. She was supposed to return to her room and speak to her friends.

We were all leaving the next day since it was Sunday. She was returning to college, and I was supposed to go back to my father’s office for work. I waited for hours until I had to catch my flight.

Unfortunately, we never exchanged phone numbers, or I’d have called her when I realized she was late. It wasn’t until a few days later I realized she had forgotten our night together. I didn’t have an explanation for how. Like she said, she hadn’t

been drunk. We were both a little tipsy nothing close to blacking out.

Many times I'd considered approaching her. Sometimes it was to see if she remembered me at all and take time getting to know each other. Other times I thought maybe I should tell her what happened and discuss an annulment. I kept tabs on her, trying to figure out the best way to handle either of those scenarios, but the more I watched her, the more I wanted to keep her.

Not that I'd ever speak those words out loud. They sounded creepy as fuck even in my head, but I couldn't deny wanting her. Not just because she was beautiful. And she was the most stunning woman I'd ever laid eyes on, but it was her grace, kindness, and humor that had me falling for her.

I wasn't insane. Love at first sight seemed like a bullshit concept. There was a lot I wanted to learn about her, and she had everything to learn about me. It wasn't love at first sight, but I did feel like my soul recognized hers. That wasn't something I was prepared to walk away from. Especially since I was a fairly unemotional man normally. Well, except for irritation. I experienced that emotion quite regularly.

She still hadn't finished her thought. "Sabrina, it sounded like you remembered something. I've got to tell you, Sunshine, I've waited a long time to find out why I sat alone in a diner for four hours waiting for you the next morning."

She licked her bottom lip and pulled the flesh between her teeth before letting it pop free. "I...did we dance?"

Was she starting to remember? "Yes," I confirmed, my voice sounded like gravel to my own ears. "I was sitting at the bar in the lobby of the hotel we were both staying at. You came in alone. You said your friends were gambling, and you got bored. We talked for a bit and danced to a song playing over their sound system. Your friends left you—"

"To go to a club. I remembered not being upset with them. I've always thought that was weird. It was my birthday, and they ditched me." She pressed her fingers into her temples.

“There’s plenty of time for us to discuss our night together. What I’ve been dying to know for years is why didn’t you join me in the morning? How did you forget?”

She shook her head. “I have a guess. I only know what my friends explained the next morning. They’d gone out to a club without me, thinking it wasn’t my thing.”

“You go out to clubs all the time,” I interrupted.

Her eyebrow raised. “How would you know that? Have you been stalking me?” There was no anger in her tone, but I did sense a wariness. I couldn’t blame her. It was strange, but it was also the only way I could know anything about her life.

“Not physically. I followed your social media,” I admitted.

She shrugged. “Considering it seems we’re married I guess I can understand that.” Sabrina took a deep breath. “I do go to clubs now. After that trip, something changed in me. I was a bit of a bookworm prior to my twenty-first birthday. Afterward, I stopped worrying about what everyone else expected or thought.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear you’ve started living for yourself,” I praised.

She stared straight into my eyes, and I knew she was going to say something I didn’t want to hear. “Your brother had a lot to do with that.”

“I guess that’s one reason not to hate him. I’m glad he’s been a good friend to you.” The words tasted sour in my mouth, but I wouldn’t put her in the middle of my feud with my brother.

“Back to that night. My friends came back from the club around three,” she continued.

“About an hour after I dropped you off. You were going to try and catch your friends, and tell them about us. Then we were going to meet at nine the next morning in the hotel restaurant.”

“Why didn’t you come up to the room if you dropped me off?” she asked.

“I did. I knocked for several minutes. Long enough that someone came out of their own room and told me they’d seen you all leave a little before I came up.”

Her hands went back to massaging her temples as if she could force the memories to break free. “Right, we went to the doctor.”

My fists clenched. It was years ago, I reminded myself, but it didn’t do much good. The idea she was hurt or ill and I wasn’t the one to take care of her didn’t sit right with me. “Why?”

“I need to go back to that night to explain that. After they left the club they walked around for a while. Kasey got one of those fruity drinks from a tiki bar on the strip. The giant kind that hangs from a lanyard around your neck. They told me that Kasey shared it with me. Courtney and Allison were each sharing one as well. They thought we were all drunk and didn’t think anything of the fact Kasey and I passed out not long after. In the morning they tried to wake us up for breakfast and some last minute shopping. Except, we were still out of it.”

“And?” My heart raced. I suspected what she was going to say, but I still wanted to hear the words.

“Allison and Courtney managed to get Kasey and me into a cab and to an urgent care clinic. The doctor thought we’d likely been drugged. Since we had been safe in our room and our vitals were strong we chose not to go to the hospital. Somehow, someone slipped something into Kasey’s drink. Allison said Kasey had been talking to a guy at the bar. They’d planned to stay there for a bit, but Courtney got a bad feeling and wanted to go home.”

“Are you okay? You’re shaking,” she asked me.

My hands were still clenched tight, and I was shaking. I could feel my entire body vibrating with rage that had no outlet. I couldn’t track down some faceless asshole in a city full of assholes that came and went whenever the urge to engage in hedonism hit them.

“I could have lost you when I’d only just found you,” I whispered. The words tumbled out of my mouth without thinking.

Sabrina shook her head. “You don’t have me.”

“Yet,” I promised her.

# Chapter Six

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## Sabrina

I sat in stunned silence. I wanted to ask him what he meant by the insinuation he didn't have me *yet*. Surely he didn't expect us to pick up wherever we left off five years ago, especially since I couldn't remember where that was.

I had to admit, there was a familiarity. It was more like a tingle, or itch in my mind. I remembered dancing with him. I remembered him making me laugh, but like most of that night, the memories disappeared into a fog. But, a part of me wondered if the reason I wasn't able to connect with a man for the last five years was because somewhere deep in my mind I knew he existed.

Finally, I gathered the courage to say something. Not sure what would spill out of my mouth when I started talking, but not speaking wasn't going to resolve what was lingering between us. I opened my mouth to speak, but my brother stole my opportunity by walking into the room.

"Dinner is ready," he said, watching us with a concerned gaze.

I nodded and followed him over to the dining area. Their apartment wasn't overly formal. Unlike other penthouse apartments, there wasn't a designated dining room. The only rooms enclosed behind separate walls and doors were the bedrooms and the bathroom. The rest of the apartment was a large open space with sprawling views of the city.

Jana set the last of the serving dishes down on the table. Her eye for design led her to lay out a beautiful table setting.

The lights were dimmed and candlelight added to the ambiance.

An awkward silence stretched between us as we all sat and filled our plates. I didn't really want an audience for the conversation Stryker and I needed to have, which left me at a loss for what to say. Jana, thankfully, broke the silence.

"Are you still living at the hotel?" she asked Stryker.

He nodded as he brought his fork up to his mouth. After he swallowed he replied, "Usually my assignments are temporary."

"Where do you live?" I blurted out. It wasn't that I was thinking of the two of us living together, but we were married. The fact he'd done nothing about that in the last five years meant he must have wanted to stay that way. How would that work if he was bouncing all over the country?

Stryker set down his fork and focused all of his attention on me. "Most of the assignments I take are here in Seattle or Portland. I prefer to stay in the Pacific Northwest, but I have taken the occasional job in New York and Chicago. That's all in the past now."

"Because of me?" I slapped a hand over my mouth. "Forget I asked that. I'm just rattled."

Jana chuckled. At least someone was finding this amusing. "He's no longer the interim CEO. I'm stepping away from the company permanently to develop my app with Hans Schneider."

"The head of that car manufacturer in Germany?" I asked.

Colt scowled while Jana nodded. "Doesn't he already have a full-time job?" I asked.

"Exactly," Colt grumbled and brought his beer up to his lips.

Jana rolled her eyes, but her smirk said she was more amused at Colt than annoyed. "He does, but like me, it was a family company. He never got to choose the path he'd take. Lucky for him he really loves technology. Anyway, we are



building my virtual assistant together as a joint venture between Woten Automotive and Anderson Global.”

I turned my attention to my step-brother. “I thought you liked him?”

He shrugged. “He’s all right. I’d like him a lot better if he hadn’t gone into business with my wife behind my back.”

Jana reached over from where she sat next to him and patted his hand. “That was when you were being a dumbass. Nothing was done behind your back. We weren’t together.”

Colt’s jaw clenched. “For a brief period of time we were residing in different places, but there was never a single moment I was going to let you go. I told you that when we said our vows. You are mine. You were then, you are now, and you always will be.”

I felt Stryker’s eyes on me and turned to face him. He didn’t need to say anything. The way he looked at me I had a feeling he felt the same way about me.

---

**T**he rest of dinner went by much easier. It didn’t take long for Colt to see that Stryker was nothing like Malcolm. They discussed business, both of them had a love of numbers that piqued my inner geek, but I didn’t contribute, because I loved watching them connect. I didn’t want to look at why too closely.

Colter and Stryker worked together to clear the table after dinner, leaving Jana and me alone to chat. “How are you holding up?” she asked.

I blew out a breath and shrugged. “I’m not sure. This whole thing is wild.”

I could practically see Jana biting her tongue. “Whatever you want to say, just spit it out,” I insisted.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want to interfere. This is something you’ve got to figure out on your own.”

A small growl escaped my throat. “Malcolm and I had a fight last night at dinner.”

Part of me wanted to keep this from her. She already disliked Mal, and anything I said would only reinforce that. Not only that, but her opinion mattered to me. It wouldn't be hard for her to influence me, especially after the side of him I saw last night.

Jana clenched her hands around the edge of the table. “Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “No. He was dismissive. Tried to tell me I couldn't take the promotion. When I first told him about it he asked if I had another brother that needed an assistant.”

“What the fuck did you say?” Stryker had walked into the room. His tone was hard and cold, but it warmed me at the same time.

“It sounds like you heard me,” I mumbled.

Stryker extended his hand. I took it and he pulled me to my feet. His night-dark eyes locked on mine. He was the direct opposite of his brother.

Malcolm was good-looking, in a pretty boy kind of way. He was tall, and lean with a swimmer's build. His hair was a rich golden blond, always perfectly styled. His eyes were the clearest blue. I was only just starting to realize that even the brightest eyes could hide darkness.

I only got a peek at what was inside the man I'd thought was my best friend. Maybe we'd move past this, but I didn't think we'd do it together. Not in a romantic sense anyway. Certainly not while I was legally married to his brother.

Stryker stood still, his hand still holding mine. I'd heard he was an asshole when I asked around about him, but I hadn't seen that side of him tonight. I'd never have thought he and Mal were brothers if they hadn't both confirmed it. Stryker was taller and broader. His hair was dark, nearly black. The sides were shaved close to his scalp while the top was left long. It gave him a roguish look, that fit more with the grumpy persona than the one I saw.

He pulled on my hand, moving me closer to his side. He dropped his arm around my shoulders, and for a second I let myself lean into him. Stryker leaned down and pressed his lips to the top of my head.

“I know this has been a lot. Why don’t we have that talk later? Can I help you get home?”

“I walked here.”

The look he gave me was full of a mixture of concern and irritation. “You walked here? Alone?”

I stepped back and held my arms out. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll walk you home.”

Shaking my head I moved to the hall and grabbed my jacket and purse. “I’ll be fine. I walk all the time.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way...”

“Then don’t say it,” I snapped. “Don’t try and tell me what I can and can’t do because I’m a woman.”

Stryker tensed. “I’m going to ignore that because you don’t know me very well. I was raised by a single mom. I watched her struggle to provide me with everything I needed, all by herself. Believe me, I know how strong women are. But, I also know that there are horrible people out there. Men who prey on women because it makes them feel more powerful. It isn’t fair, but it’s a fact. I don’t want you out there at night alone because of that reason alone. Nothing else.”

I hated that he was right. Every time I walked at night I kept my senses sharp and my purse tucked close to my body. There was no such thing as a peaceful stroll as a woman, not even during the day.

“You’re right. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

Stryker nodded. “I’ve got my car here. Do you mind if we drive instead of walk?”

“No, it sounds fine.” At least there wouldn’t be too much time to talk. He was right, my brain needed a break. I needed

time to let some of this sink in before I could even begin to consider how I felt about it.

Together we walked down to the parking garage and the guest parking spots. I expected him to head to a sleek sports car. Something flashy, black, and fast. Instead, he headed straight for an older sedan. I raised an eyebrow as he used a key to unlock the passenger door.

The corner of his mouth curved up. “Expecting something else?”

I lifted one shoulder. “Most of the men I know seem to be obsessed with cars that are more sex on wheels than—“

“Rust and rubber?”

I chuckled. “You said it, not me.”

“But, you were thinking it.” The curve of his lips spread into a full smile. “I’m a little overfond of this beater. Caroline says I’m too sentimental for my own good. I’ve got the money to buy something else, but I’ve never seen the point of parting with things that have been reliable.”

“Why do I get the sense you’re that way with people too?”

“Because you know how to read people. Loyalty is a gift not many people give. When you find it, it should be rewarded.”

His words struck me. I was starting to see how a younger, more reckless version of me took a leap and married him. I couldn’t be sure if I’d make the same choice today, but I at least owed him a discussion. Later.

Tonight, I needed to retreat to my own space and think.

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**D**ropping my keys on the side table by the door I flicked on the light and screamed when I noticed a person sitting in the dark. Golden hair and blue eyes registered, and I put my hand over my heart to keep it from pounding out of my chest.

“Mal, you scared the shit out of me! What are you doing sitting in the dark in my apartment?”

Shock played across his face, but it was gone in a flash. I realized he had a drink in his hand and had likely been here for a while. “I wanted to talk to you,” he finally replied.

“Well, turn a light on next time. Or better yet, don’t wait alone in my apartment.”

His eyes flickered over to Waverly’s door. That was when I realized there was light coming from her room. I took a step back and reminded myself what I was going to say to him. I hadn’t planned on having the conversation now, but it was as good a time as any. We were better off as friends.

“I see,” I croaked. “You aren’t here alone, are you?”

It didn’t escape my notice that this was the second time I found him alone with Waverly in my apartment. Add in their romantic history, and I was more than suspicious.

“I’m alone out here waiting for you.” He brought his glass to his mouth and took a large swallow. “We need to talk.”

Exhaling, I placed my purse down with my keys. “Yeah, I guess we do,” I agreed, casting another glance at my sister’s room.

Malcolm leaned forward. He rested his elbows on his knees and focused all of his attention on me. “What the hell was that last night?”

I felt my anger rise to the surface, but I put a lid on it and forced myself to calm down. “Be more specific,” a small hint of anger was still present in my voice.

The muscle in his jaw ticked. “You left the restaurant before we even ordered. I don’t think that’s giving us a chance.”

My teeth clenched. “You were condescending. What did you expect me to do?”

Malcolm stared at his drink, swishing the remaining liquid in the glass making the ice clink off the side. “It was a joke, Brina. I didn’t realize you were so sensitive.”

“Implying that I only have my job because of my brother? You find that funny?”

“I don’t want to fight with you,” he sighed.

I dropped down next to him on the sofa. “Me either.”

Malcolm put his hand on my knee and slid it up my thigh. “Good. There are so many other things we could be doing.”

I tensed up. He didn’t know I was married to his brother. Stryker and I weren’t together, but we were legally married.

“We still need to talk,” I insisted, moving my leg away from his touch.

He closed the small space I put between us, and put his hand on the side of my face. “We’ve spent most of our lives talking. I want you. We can talk later.”

Every inch that Malcolm moved closer, I retreated until I was nearly on my back and he was hovering over me.

“No, Mal,” I protested. His lips met mine, but I continued to try to squirm away.

Hot, burning rage built in my chest. It was the restaurant all over again. Malcolm didn’t listen to me last night, and he wasn’t listening to me now. I worked my hands between us and shoved.

The coffee table screeched across the floor as he toppled off me, crashing first into the table and then onto the floor with a thud.

“What the hell, Brina!” He straightened out his clothes as he rose from the floor. “Yeah, I guess we do need to talk. I thought we were starting something here, but every time I make a move you freeze up.”

My lip curled. “I’m not a possession, and you can’t treat me as one even if we’re dating.”

“You say that as if you aren’t sure if that’s what we’re doing.”

And there it was. The line that could take us from whatever we were to nothing at all. “I thought that was the

point in dating, to figure out what is happening between us.”

His eyes latched on to mine and held. “Be honest with me. Do you want me? And, not as a friend.”

“I don’t know. That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” I answered him. I sounded like a broken record, but he refused to hear me. A voice in the back of my head told me now was the time to tell him I was married to his brother. But the way he reacted when he found out I was only working with his brother made me think that the moment he found out I’d lose him. As a friend, as a lover, everything, he’d be done with me.

Malcolm grabbed his jacket off the back of a plush chair and angrily shoved his arms in the sleeves. “Wrong answer. You do know, and you show me every time you push me away.”

I stood silently watching as he stomped across my apartment. Malcolm stopped at the door. Without turning around he said, “I need you to make up your mind.”

He rapped his knuckles against the doorway. “We’ll talk later. Can we try dinner again? There’s something here, Brina. Let me show you.”

He left without hearing my answer, perhaps because he wasn’t sure he’d like it.

---

**J**ana pulled out her chair the next day at the cafe we liked down the block from the AG offices. “Lunch twice in one week? I’m glad you aren’t avoiding me anymore.”

“I know. I was being stupid.” I took a deep breath and twisted the cloth napkin in my hands.

Her eyes narrowed as she watched the emotions play across my face. “Did he do something else since the other night?” her voice was low and angry.

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t talked to him, but I still feel like I owe that to myself and to him to say it out loud.

She took a long slow breath in through her nose. “I know you want to see where this is going.” She took another pause, struggling with how to talk to me about Malcolm without pushing me away.

I held up a hand to stop her. There was no reason for her to struggle so hard. “I know I sound like one of those women who make excuses for the man who treats them like shit. I should write him off and be done with it, but I need closure.”

Jana nervously tapped on the table. “What I want to know is how does he keep getting in?”

“Apparently Waverly is letting him in.”

“Didn’t they have a thing a few years back? Why would she let him in without you being home? It isn’t like they knew when you would be coming home last night.”

“Huh,” I breathed out. While I’d thought it was weird and intrusive that he was in my apartment twice, especially after we argued, it never occurred to me there was no way either he or Waverly knew what time I’d be back. Hell, I hadn’t even expected to return home that soon. Had it not been for the huge revelation about my marital status I would have stayed longer. I usually did.

I swallowed, because as much as what she said would have been an important thing to ponder, it wasn’t after what he did.

The words were even harder to force out than recounting the argument. I still wasn’t sure where my head was at, but I couldn’t deny that Malcolm had basically tried to force himself on me.

I told her everything. The way my heart raced for a moment while I was pinned underneath him. How I panicked and shoved him off of me when he wouldn’t listen. The sounds of his body hitting the table before falling to the floor.

When I was done the look on her face said so much without any words. Anger, shock, and concern. I don’t know why I was worried about telling her. Jana had always proven she had my back, and this time was no different. Part of me



expected an “I told you so,” but of course, Jana didn’t operate that way.

“Are you okay? Do you feel safe in your apartment?”

Another thought I hadn’t really considered. I took a moment, and although I’d had a hard time falling asleep the night before, I didn’t fear him. Not physically. Of course, I knew there was no more chance of us being together. I wasn’t even sure if we could still be friends. But, I didn’t feel unsafe in my apartment. Unfortunately, I couldn’t say I was comfortable there either.

“I’m fine. I don’t think he’s going to try anything again. Plus, I’m going to have to put an end to this experiment in dating. We aren’t a good fit.”

“Considering you’re married to his brother, I don’t think you should be dating him either.” There was a smirk pulling at the corners of her lips. I wondered how long it would take her to tease me.

“Only I could manage to be accidentally married to the brother of the guy I was trying to date,” I grumbled.

Jana pointed at her chest. “Married my best friend’s dad, remember? There’s no judgment here. I am worried about you, though. I know you don’t think Malcolm will try something again, but he shouldn’t have tried the first time.”

I hung my head. Shame that I knew I shouldn’t feel, pressed down on me. “I know. I promise I’ll be careful, and if I feel uncomfortable at all at home, I’ll leave.”

She nodded. I could see she wasn’t pleased, but she would never push me to do something I wasn’t comfortable with.

# Chapter Seven

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## Stryker

A light knock tapped on my closed office door. I wasn't one of those bosses who had an open door policy. I didn't like people on a normal day. Listening to petty bitching made my eye twitch.

The knock sounded on the door again. I suppressed a groan and bit out, "Come in!"

Jana poked her head in. "Are you sure? You don't sound like this is a good time."

"It's your company," I grumbled.

She entered the office and closed the door behind her. "Are you okay? I know you've got a reputation as a grumpy asshole, but I don't usually get to see this side of you."

"I'm sorry. I'm not good with people, and all your employees keep coming to me with problems."

Jana rolled her eyes at me and dropped into one of the chairs in front of my desk. "Would you stop calling this my company?"

"But, it is *your* company, and these are *your* employees." I needed to remind myself where I belonged. Always on the outside.

Jana reached down and grabbed her briefcase. "That's actually why I'm here. I've got a contract for you to sign."

She handed me a legal document. "You don't mind if I have Caroline take a look at this do you?"

Jana shrugged. “No problem. She’s the one that drew up the documents.”

“And what do these documents say?” I asked while I took the packet from her.

“It’s your official job offer to be the CEO of Anderson East.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re changing the name of the company?”

She chuckled. “Fitz called it rebranding. I call it a giant fuck you to my father.”

The corner of my lip curled up. “One of my favorite messages to deliver.”

Jana looked over her shoulder at the window in the door. “Did your secretary just walk past your office for the third time since I’ve been here?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I mentioned that I hate people right?”

Reaching over I pushed the intercom button on my phone. “Sheila, is there a reason you’re pacing in front of my office?”

“Sir, uhm, I know you don’t want to be interrupted when you’re in a meeting, but there’s someone here to see you,” she rambled.

I swallowed a growl. “Did you happen to get a name?”

“What is your name again?” I heard her whisper away from the intercom.

“No, you can’t just go in!” I heard Sheila screech outside.

The door burst open and my secretary chased Sabrina into my office. “I’m sorry Mr. Lawson. I told her you were in a meeting, but she refused to wait.”

“Thank God you’re here,” Jana mumbled.

“Sheila, meet Sabrina Lake, our new Operations Manager, and your immediate boss,” I said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Ms. Lake. I didn’t know,” Sheila fumbled.

“I suppose me telling you that I needed to see Mr. Lawson because I’m the new Operations Manager was too subtle,” Sabrina replied deadpan.

I watched Sheila get more and more flustered. “That’s all for now,” I said dismissing her before she had a complete meltdown.

“Hey, Jana,” Sabrina greeted her. “Wasn’t expecting you to show up today.”

“I had documents for Stryker to sign, and I’m hiding from Colt.”

“What did my dumb stepbrother do now?” Sabrina said without heat.

“Nothing. He’s just freaking out about you leaving and apparently he locked himself out of his calendar,” Jana said chuckling.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “If he would have let me hire my replacement this wouldn’t be happening.”

“I think he thought I would pity him and he could play naughty secretary with me during office hours.” Jana shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m going to find someone old and cranky like Beck’s secretary. Speaking of which. I’ve got interviews set up this afternoon, so I better head back and get ready for them.”

She grabbed her briefcase and headed to the door. Pausing in the doorway she looked back over her shoulder. “Caroline will take care of the documents once you’ve signed them. Let’s have dinner again soon. A little less exciting next time though.”

---

**S**ilence stretched between us as I fought every urge I had to reach out and pull her into my arms. She was wary of

me. We hadn't spoken for a few days, not since having dinner with Colter and Jana.

She exhaled, and her shoulders slumped. "How do we do this?"

"Depends on what you mean by this?" I asked. "Work together, talk to each other, or deal with the fact we're married?"

She looked down and pulled at an errant thread on one of the buttons of her jacket. "Any of those. All of them. I meant work together, but we'll have to handle all of it."

I walked around the desk and sat in the chair next to her. "What do you want to do?"

Sabrina threw her hands up and jumped out of her chair to pace in front of the large window. She spun around to face me, and my breath caught in my throat. Standing in front of the window in the morning light, her golden hair glowed. She was the embodiment of sunlight, and she lit up my life.

"I don't know what I want to do." She continued to pace. "Colt said we should get an annulment, but—" She took a deep breath and sat back down in her chair. She rubbed at the center of her chest. "What if that would be a mistake?"

I'd held my breath until she spoke those words. Emily Dickinson wrote, "hope is the thing with feathers that perches in your soul." I understood that poem now. Hearing her sound like she was willing to give us a chance made my soul feel like it could soar.

"We could date," I suggested.

Her face tilted up, eyes wide with surprise. "But we're married."

I shrugged a shoulder. "So we do it all backward. We had sex before we got married. Now we should date, spend some time getting to know each other."

Her head bobbed up and down. "Yeah, okay. Wow, I figured that we, uhm, you know. I, don't remember."

I tried to hide my disappointment hearing that, but I'm sure she could tell. "I figured that out."

She took a deep breath. "Pushing that aside for now. I think your idea could work. I need to talk to Malcolm first."

My jaw clenched, but I nodded. "I've waited five years, what's a few more days?"

She blew out a breath. "Well, want to show me around the office?"

"Might as well." She followed me out to the main part of the office.

"Sheila," I shouted when she wasn't at her desk.

"Is your secretary hiding from you?"

I scowled at the empty office. "She might be. Wouldn't be the first time."

Together we searched for her, but most of the staff weren't at their workspaces. "I hope Jana won't be pissed off when I fire most of the employees," I bitched.

Sabrina bit her lip, something that would normally make me want to bend her over the nearest flat surface, but this time it made my chest clench with trepidation. "Do you think maybe they're scared of you?"

This was not a side of myself I'd ever tried to temper. Being ruthless made me good at business, but it might also scare her away. "Maybe," I admitted. "That's why I need you, Sunshine."

"Then let's find them and get started," she said, her blue eyes shining with determination.

It took us much longer than it should have, but between a couple of conference rooms and the break room, we managed to find the missing employees. Sabrina stepped up and corralled everyone in the large conference room. She introduced herself, and let everyone know she'd be the point of contact for them going forward.

Their relief was palpable. A few of them even sighed. Whatever it took to make them stop hiding from me and do their damn jobs was great. If only they didn't make me look like a giant asshole in front of my wife.

After the meeting, everyone got back to work, freeing me up to finish giving Sabrina a tour. We finished back where we started. I took a key out of my pocket and opened the door next to mine. "This is your office."

I showed her into the space, larger than her previous one. "Do you like it?"

Her mouth fell open as she looked around wide-eyed. "You know, I don't think the whole promotion aspect of the job hit me until just now. This space is crazy."

I'd been so good at keeping my distance, giving her space to decide whom she wanted to be without me steamrolling right over her. But, here she was, right in front of me, and I couldn't not touch her. I let my fingers slip through the silken strands of her hair, and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "You deserve this," I whispered next to her ear.

She shivered and all the blood rushed to my cock. Someday soon I'd send chills over her entire body, and I'd use more than my voice to do it.



# Chapter Eight

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## Stryker

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Jana rolled her eyes at me and dropped into one of the chairs in front of my desk. "Would you stop calling this my company?"

"But, it is *your* company, and these are *your* employees." I needed to remind myself where I belonged. Always on the outside.

Jana reached down and grabbed her briefcase. "That's actually why I'm here. I've got a contract for you to sign."

She handed me a legal document. "You don't mind if I have Caroline take a look at this do you?"

Jana shrugged. “No problem. She’s the one that drew up the documents.”

“And what do these documents say?” I asked while I took the packet from her.

“It’s your official job offer to be the CEO of Anderson East.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re changing the name of the company?”

She chuckled. “Fitz called it rebranding. I call it a giant fuck you to my father.”

The corner of my lip curled up. “One of my favorite messages to deliver.”

Jana looked over her shoulder at the window in the door. “Did your secretary just walk past your office for the third time since I’ve been here?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I mentioned that I hate people right?”

Reaching over I pushed the intercom button on my phone. “Sheila, is there a reason you’re pacing in front of my office?”

“Sir, uhm, I know you don’t want to be interrupted when you’re in a meeting, but there’s someone here to see you,” she rambled.

I swallowed a growl. “Did you happen to get a name?”

“What is your name again?” I heard her whisper away from the intercom.

“No, you can’t just go in!” I heard Sheila screech outside.

The door burst open and my secretary chased Sabrina into my office. “I’m sorry Mr. Lawson. I told her you were in a meeting, but she refused to wait.”

“Thank God you’re here,” Jana mumbled.

“Sheila, meet Sabrina Lake, our new Operations Manager, and your immediate boss,” I said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Ms. Lake. I didn’t know,” Sheila fumbled.

“I suppose me telling you that I needed to see Mr. Lawson because I’m the new Operations Manager was too subtle,” Sabrina replied deadpan.

I watched Sheila get more and more flustered. “That’s all for now,” I said dismissing her before she had a complete meltdown.

“Hey, Jana,” Sabrina greeted her. “Wasn’t expecting you to show up today.”

“I had documents for Stryker to sign, and I’m hiding from Colt.”

“What did my dumb stepbrother do now?” Sabrina said without heat.

“Nothing. He’s just freaking out about you leaving and apparently he locked himself out of his calendar,” Jana said chuckling.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “If he would have let me hire his replacement this wouldn’t be happening.”

“I think he thought I would pity him and he could play naughty secretary with me during office hours.” Jana shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m going to find someone old and cranky like Beck’s secretary. Speaking of which. I’ve got interviews set up this afternoon, so I better head back and get ready for them.”

She grabbed her briefcase and headed to the door. Pausing in the doorway she looked back over her shoulder. “Caroline will take care of the documents once you’ve signed them. Let’s have dinner again soon. A little less exciting next time though.”

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**S**ilence stretched between us as I fought every urge I had to reach out and pull her into my arms. She was wary of

me. We hadn't spoken for a few days, not since having dinner with Colter and Jana.

She exhaled, and her shoulders slumped. "How do we do this?"

"Depends on what you mean by this?" I asked. "Work together, talk to each other, or deal with the fact we're married?"

She looked down and pulled at an errant thread on one of the buttons of her jacket. "Any of those. All of them. I meant work together, but we'll have to handle all of it."

I walked around the desk and sat in the chair next to her. "What do you want to do?"

Sabrina threw her hands up and jumped out of her chair to pace in front of the large window. She spun around to face me, and my breath caught in my throat. Standing in front of the window in the morning light, her golden hair glowed. She was the embodiment of sunlight, and she lit up my life.

"I don't know what I want to do." She continued to pace. "Colt said we should get an annulment, but—" She took a deep breath and sat back down in her chair. She rubbed at the center of her chest. "What if that would be a mistake?"

I'd held my breath until she spoke those words. Emily Dickinson wrote, "hope is the thing with feathers that perches in your soul." I understood that poem now. Hearing her sound like she was willing to give us a chance made my soul feel like it could soar.

"We could date," I suggested.

Her face tilted up, eyes wide with surprise. "But we're married."

I shrugged a shoulder. "So we do it all backward. We had sex before we got married. Now we should date, spend some time getting to know each other."

Her head bobbed up and down. "Yeah, okay. Wow, I figured that we, uhm, you know. I, don't remember."

I tried to hide my disappointment hearing that, but I'm sure she could tell. "I figured that out."

She took a deep breath. "Pushing that aside for now. I think your idea could work. I need to talk to Malcolm first."

My jaw clenched, but I nodded. "I've waited five years, what's a few more days?"

She blew out a breath. "Well, want to show me around the office?"

"Might as well." She followed me out to the main part of the office.

"Sheila," I shouted when she wasn't at her desk.

"Is your secretary hiding from you?"

I scowled at the empty office. "She might be. Wouldn't be the first time."

Together we searched for her, but most of the staff weren't at their workspaces. "I hope Jana won't be pissed off when I fire most of the employees," I bitched.

Sabrina bit her lip, something that would normally make me want to bend her over the nearest flat surface, but this time it made my chest clench with trepidation. "Do you think maybe they're scared of you?"

This was not a side of myself I'd ever tried to temper. Being ruthless made me good at business, but it might also scare her away. "Maybe," I admitted. "That's why I need you, Sunshine."

"Then let's find them and get started," she said, her blue eyes shining with determination.

It took us much longer than it should have, but between a couple of conference rooms and the break room, we managed to find the missing employees. Sabrina stepped up and corralled everyone in the large conference room. She introduced herself, and let everyone know she'd be the point of contact for them going forward.

Their relief was palpable. A few of them even sighed. Whatever it took to make them stop hiding from me and do their damn jobs was great. If only they didn't make me look like a giant asshole in front of my wife.

After the meeting, everyone got back to work, freeing me up to finish giving Sabrina a tour. We finished back where we started. I took a key out of my pocket and opened the door next to mine. "This is your office."

I showed her into the space, larger than her previous one. "Do you like it?"

Her mouth fell open as she looked around wide-eyed. "You know, I don't think the whole promotion aspect of the job hit me until just now. This space is crazy."

I'd been so good at keeping my distance, giving her space to decide whom she wanted to be without me steamrolling right over her. But, here she was, right in front of me, and I couldn't not touch her. I let my fingers slip through the silken strands of her hair, and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. "You deserve this," I whispered next to her ear.

She shivered and all the blood rushed to my cock. Someday soon I'd send chills over her entire body, and I'd use more than my voice to do it.

# Chapter Nine

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## Sabrina

**M**y body felt heavy as I let myself into my apartment. It was dark and quiet when I set my keys on the table. I knew Waverly wasn't in her room, since it too was dark and the door was open. No one was waiting inside.

I exhaled. It was a long day of getting settled into my new role at work. Stryker thought the employees were afraid of him, and they were, but I got the sense there was more to their ineptitude than fear. I'd have to ask Jana if they'd managed to weed out all of her father's cronies. Maybe it was paranoia, but I'd seen enough Machiavellian boardroom tactics since Fitz decided to try and force Beck to get married not to recognize when employees were working against the company.

Evie and Beck were happy, and it worked out in the end, but when Fitz threatened to split up Anderson Global if Beck didn't get married, he opened the company to opportunists trying to take over. One of them was Jana's father, Maxwell Easton. He tried to encourage one of Beck's cousins to buy shares and force a hostile takeover of the company. Of course, the cousin was only a pawn whom he planned to screw over.

Maxwell saw his company, Easton Corporation, as a competitor of Anderson Global. The truth was he wasn't anywhere near the same level. As it turned out, he'd badly mismanaged Easton Corp. Combine that with some shady accounting and it was Jana's family business that was ripe for a takeover.

Jana's grandfather had left the company to her. Her father had made certain the revised will was hidden, but nothing ever stays secret forever. Colt fell for Jana and with his help, she took control of the company, or whatever you'd call the disaster parading as a business her father managed to turn it into.

Maybe I was biased because she's one of my two best friends, but I knew she was capable of bringing the company back into the black. The thing was, she didn't want to. There was too much pain caused by her family. So she did what Maxwell had been so unsuccessful in accomplishing with Anderson Global. She took over the company and called in Stryker to clean the mess her father left.

I laughed to myself as I moved through my bedroom, shedding my constricting work attire in favor of tiny shorts and an oversized t-shirt. It was an old book-themed shirt with Fate written in big loopy letters. The rest of the quote had long since faded. Ironically it was a lot like my life. Fate had barreled into me, but the rest of the context had long since disappeared. I might never remember completely how Stryker came into my life, but the fact that all of these circumstances piled up to bring him back, I couldn't help but feel I was on the precipice of something monumental.

The sound of a key scraping at the door lock filled the apartment. I went out to the living room to see Waverly stumble through the door. She bumped into the entry table and started giggling.

I sighed and looked at the clock on the wall. "Wave, it's only six-thirty and you're drunk."

Waverly hopped on one foot while she tried to take off her designer heels. Of course, she didn't have the coordination for that, so she fell again, knocking over the lamp.

She glowered at me like I knocked her down. Her hair had fallen out of the sophisticated updo she usually only wore to society events. I took another look at her and realized she was wearing a gold cocktail dress that set off her dark hair and eyes.

Waverly looked so much like Colt that she could have been Evie's twin. A fact that irked her to no end. She did not like sharing her brother, not with me, his wife, and especially not his daughter. I always thought it was a big reason Colt and I weren't closer growing up. That, and I'm about twelve years younger than him, but then again so is his wife.

Waverly was the same age as Evie, Colt's daughter. None of us, including Colt, knew she existed until a little over a year ago. My stepbrother was a bit of a player, apparently losing his first love before he could even drive messed him up. It also left him with a daughter he didn't find out about until he was accused of having an affair with her. That had to be the most confusing paternity test ever administered. How many times has a paternity test informed both men they were a father? Probably just this one time. Beck found out Evie was carrying his child, and Colt learned Evie was his daughter.

Needless to say, we were a very complicated group. Take my best friends, for example, Evie and Jana. Evie was technically my step-niece and Jana was my sister-in-law. Basically, our weekends were mini family reunions.

Waverly should have been right there along with us, but she declined every invitation issued to her. I didn't know why she preferred to be alone when she seemed so jealous of the close bonds we'd all formed. I couldn't help but fear it had something to do with me.

I tried to tell Colter when he insisted Waverly move into my spare bedroom that it wasn't going to work. While she and Colt looked like their father, I had the golden blonde looks of my mother, a fact she's never forgiven me for. Not because she was self-conscious, or wanted to look like me, but because she did not want me to look like our mother. In fact, I believe Waverly would be happier if I didn't exist at all.

"Are you going to answer me? Why are you drunk at six-thirty?" I pressed.

She huffed out a breath, trying to blow away a lock of hair from her face. "Why are you talking to me? I'm drunk because, unlike you, I've got a life. You know, something

more than wearing rags and padding my hips with a pint of ice cream. Maybe if you tried getting drunk once in a while it would dislodge the stick from your ass.”

“I worry about you,” I said. I shouldn’t. Lord only knew she didn’t care about me.

“Well, don’t. You might look like her, but you’re not my mother.”

“Our mother,” I snapped.

She looked me up and down, a sneer on her pretty face. “Like she claims you.”

My phone chirped in my bag, distracting me from going after my sister. Digging it out I saw a text from Stryker.

Stryker: Did you make it home okay?

Seeing his name on the screen made my heart thump.

Me: I did. Thanks for checking in on me.

Stryker: What are husbands for if not checking on their wives?

Me: Stryker

I typed as a warning. I hoped he took it as a warning.

Me: I thought we were going to get to know each other?

My phone started ringing. I pressed the green button and put the phone to my ear. He sighed before I even said hello. “Five years Sabrina. How much slower can we go?”

“For you it’s been five years. I just found out about this the other night.”

“There isn’t a part of you that knew? Some part that felt something missing? Because I’ve kept tabs on you, and you never had a relationship last longer than a couple of months.”

“That doesn’t sound creepy at all,” I muttered.

He chuckled into the phone. It was a dark sound, not denying what I said. “I’ve got a confession to make, but I don’t think you’re ready to hear it.” His voice was still low and growly. It sent tingles up my spine and a throbbing between my legs.

I sucked in air as my mind raced through all the possibilities of what he might say. I should ask him what he meant, but I was painfully aware he was in complete control over this conversation.

“Do you want to know? I’ll tell you. All you have to do is ask me.”

Again, I pondered if I wanted to know. Maybe. No, I definitely wanted to know. “Tell me.” My voice was breathy with anticipation or arousal. I wasn’t sure which. It had been a long time since I was this affected by a man.

“You haven’t asked me how I’ve spent the last five years. Don’t you want to know how I spent my time, or who I spent it with?”

He was baiting me, seeing if I cared what he’d been up to. Or, I guess, who. “We weren’t together. What you did and who you did it with is none of my business.”

“There isn’t a thing about me that isn’t your business. Five years is a long time, Sunshine.”

That was the third time he’d pointed out how long we’d been married. “A long time for what?” I couldn’t help myself. My curiosity got the best of me, and I couldn’t help asking.

“Not to touch a woman. To go to bed every night alone, with nothing but your memory and my hand to keep me company.”

I gulped. “You haven’t been with a woman in five years? Why?”

“Because we’re married, and I take that seriously.”

Feelings of guilt rose up in me, and I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t done anything wrong. “I do too, but I didn’t know we were married.”

His breath puffed, and I got the sense he was trying to comfort himself. “I’m not upset that you’ve dated other men. Been intimate with them. Not even that you’ve been seeing my brother. At least I’m trying hard not to be. If anyone is to be blamed for that, it’s me, because I didn’t come to you sooner.”

“I—” Wow this was harder than I expected. Even though he’d admitted the same thing, I was struggling with opening up to him. My voice was small when I was able to speak. “I haven’t been with anyone in years.”

“How many years, Sunshine?”

“Since my twenty-first birthday,” I whispered.

This time it was Stryker who sucked in a breath. “Was I the last man you’ve been with?”

A nervous giggle escaped me. “And I don’t even remember it.”

Stryker’s breathing sped up. “Have you eaten?”

“No,” I breathed into the phone. “But, before you ask. I don’t think we should see each other tonight. I still need to talk to Malcolm, and I want to take this slow.”

“Nothing about us is slow,” he said.

“You’ve waited five long years to even speak to me again. I promise, we won’t take it that slow,” I laughed again.

He growled and I had to admit, it was sexy as hell. “Soon, Sunshine. I’m picking you up for work tomorrow.”

“I have a car,” I argued. Technically it was true. He didn’t need to know it was currently broken down.

“And you have to park it blocks away from your apartment. We worked late tonight. I don’t like you having to walk that far in the dark. Can I please pick you up?”

I could argue with him. Demand to preserve my independence, but he wasn’t wrong. There’d been more than one occasion where I’d felt uncomfortable on my short walk from the parking lot where I paid for a spot, to my apartment building. Not everyone had a fat bank account like my best

friend turned niece or my stepbrother. My apartment was in a nice neighborhood, but I lived on the third floor in a building without an elevator or a dedicated parking space.

“Okay,” I finally agreed. “I’ll wait for you out front.”

“Good girl,” he purred into the phone.

Hearing those words in his grumbling rasp of a voice increased the throbbing between my legs. I squeezed my thighs together to try and alleviate the ache.

I struggled to find something to say back, but his words kept banging around in my head.

“Goodnight, Sunshine. Sleep well,” he said before I could speak.

“Night,” I mumbled in return.

For the first time in years, my body hummed with desire. I felt electrified and alive. Not at all tired, but I forced my eyes closed soon after hanging up just so I could see him sooner. I was in trouble.

# Chapter Ten

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## Stryker

“Everyone is staring at us,” Sabrina whispered after we stepped off the elevator together in the morning.

I should have thought about what it would look like to the staff when we arrived together. I hadn't really considered it might look shady considering we'd been married for years.

“Ignore them,” I grunted.

Her eyes lasered in on me and narrowed. “Easy for you to say. You're not the one who looks like she's trying to sleep her way to the top.”

“Fuck them. They don't know shit about us.” She wasn't wrong though, everyone in the lobby was staring at us. For all they knew we could have had a breakfast meeting. It would take more than seeing us enter the office together one time for the staff to start whispering behind our backs.

Sabrina wheeled around to face me. “This is my reputation, Stryker. I would actually like to be respected in the business world and not have people think I only got where I am because my brother gave me a job, or because I've slept my way to the top.”

I grabbed the back of my neck and squeezed. “Let's go talk in my office.”

She shook her head, her golden hair swished around her shoulders. “If we go to your office they're just going to think I'm blowing you under your desk.”

“We have to be able to meet, sometimes behind closed doors. We can’t be worried about what the staff is going to think every time we need to discuss business. Who said you only got where you are because of your family?”

Sabrina took a step away from me. “Why do you think someone said something?”

I stepped toward her. “Tell me.”

Her head dropped down. “Malcolm,” she whispered.

My hands fisted by my sides. My fucking brother was always screwing up my life. Not this time. “Don’t let him worm his way into your mind. You’re a brilliant woman. You’ve earned everything you’ve got. People like my brother, the ones who have actually been handed everything they have, will never understand what hard work looks like.”

“It doesn’t matter if we know the truth. A rumor like this, for a woman, could end my career. Maybe this was a mistake. I should have known Fitz was up to something when he suggested I take this job.”

I winced and looked away from her.

“This wasn’t his idea, was it?”

“I told him I needed help. I was prepared to ask for you, or list requirements that would match your resume. But—”

“He recommended me before you had to do that, right?” she guessed.

I nodded. There wasn’t much else to say. Here I was trying to tell her that she made it on her own, but I manipulated this particular situation to get close to her.

“That scheming old man,” she hissed.

My brow furrowed. “I’m not following. Look, I know that this doesn’t look good. I meant what I said. You do deserve to be here. I might have been prepared to ask for you, but he suggested it before I did.”

She snorted a short laugh. “Of course he did because he’s got an obsession with matchmaking. I don’t know when he

looked into my background, but I'm sure he was just waiting for the moment he could arrange things to get us together. I swear he's sappier than a Hallmark movie."

"There is one way we can help you save face," I began.

Her eyebrow curved up as she waited for me to explain.

I took a deep breath. "We let them know we're married."

"How does that keep them from thinking I only got where I'm at because of nepotism?"

"I guess it won't, but at least you won't be accused of sleeping with the boss just to get a job." I scrubbed my hand down my face. "I don't want to give up on us because of what a bunch of people I don't even care about are going to say. I only care what you think."

She exhaled. "This is way too much thinking before I've had coffee."

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**W**ork buried both of us for several hours after we arrived. Sabrina had to head down to Human Resources to help vet most of the executives and hopefully uncover any lingering members of Maxwell Easton's inner circle. Judging by the recent bouts of insubordination, there had to be a few remaining.

I managed to corner Sabrina before lunch. I grabbed her elbow and steered her toward the elevators. "Let's go finish our discussion from this morning."

I'd already heard the gossip, and unfortunately, I knew she was dead on about what the talk around the office would be. So far I'd heard she threw herself at me at her interview and she was a sex worker I'd picked up at the hotel bar.

The door slid open and I pulled her inside after me. She tried to resist me, but I didn't let her. "This is only going to make it worse."

“Have they been giving you a hard time?” I asked, knowing by her demeanor they had been.

She nodded, a slight jerk of her head. “Yeah. The entire time I was in HR, I could tell there was something the hiring manager wanted to speak to me about. It wasn’t until I went to the bathroom that I overheard a few of the secretaries gossiping in front of the mirrors.”

There was something off about how fast this rumor had spread. For it to be all over the building before lunch was over meant there had to be someone stoking the flames. The office only saw us together yesterday, and there wasn’t anything remotely familiar or romantic about it. Even us coming into the office together this morning shouldn’t be enough to make the office buzz.

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you this morning. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe you earlier, I just thought we’d have time to talk about how to proceed.”

“What do we do now?” she asked. She gnawed on her lower lip, a tiny crease forming between her eyes.

The elevator opened up to the garage. I took her hand and pulled her out to head to my car. She smiled slightly as I opened the door to my Honda.

I scrubbed my hand through my hair, suddenly feeling inadequate. My brother always drove sleek sports cars. “What?”

Sabrina placed her hand on my chest, right over the uneven beating of my heart. “I like the idea that you aren’t flashy about your success.”

I barked out a dark sounding chuckle. “I did have a sports car for a while. It was a lease and didn’t suit me. This is reliable, and I don’t feel like I’m pretending to be someone I’m not. I’m hardly a success. I bounce from place to place saving other people’s businesses. I’ve built nothing for myself. I’m thirty-six with no family, no kids, and no roots.”

Sabrina slid past me into the car. I forced myself out of my stunned stupor and went around to the driver’s seat. Starting

the car I looked over at her. “But I want roots with you. Does that scare you?”

She shook her head. “No,” her voice came out as more of a squeak, and she cleared her throat. Trying again she said, “No, but I think we should figure out what to do about the office situation and get to know each other before we plan a future.”

I turned the key in the engine and backed out of my space. “Probably a good idea.”

We drove out of the immediate vicinity so we wouldn’t run into anyone from work. This conversation didn’t need an audience. I parked in front of a diner closer to Anderson Global than the newly minted Anderson East.

Sabrina giggled when she saw where we were. I looked over at her and cocked an eyebrow. “What’s so funny?”

It was just a diner. One of those retro ones with black and white checkered tile and vinyl benches. The waitstaff wore fifties-style uniforms, and there were mini jukeboxes on most of the tables. Maybe it was a bit cheesy, but I wasn’t sure what she found funny about it.

She pointed at the building, trying to fight her nervous laughter. “I guess you could say this is where all of this began. This is where my friend Evie was a waitress before Beck met her. I guess, maybe, it helps me believe we were meant to be.”

I parked and turned to her. “Explain.”

Sabrina took a deep breath through her nose. “Beck fixated on Evie. He pursued her and made her a deal. He wanted her to be his assistant and lover. That’s how I met her. Of course, he didn’t plan on falling for her.”

The corners of her mouth curved up. “When Evie found out she was pregnant Beck accused her of having an affair with his best friend, my stepbrother.”

I shook my head. This is why I didn’t have close friends. They could turn on you instead of standing by you.

She held up her hand keeping me from chiming in. “He demanded a paternity test. I don’t think anyone has ever gotten

results like they did. That's how they found out Colter was her father. And how Beck discovered the vasectomy he had years ago had failed."

"I'm enjoying the backstory, but I don't see how this is connected to us," I interjected.

"I'm getting to that," she said. "Like I said, it was a chain reaction. Jana and Colter met through Evie. They fought, and bonded trying to get Beck and Evie back together."

She turned her head to face out the window. "Jana and Malcolm dated in high school. He cheated on her and left her unable to have a real relationship for years. Colt worked hard to win her over, and yeah, he used her family situation to his advantage."

"She forgave him for that?" I asked. Our situations weren't the same. Colt, from what Caroline had already told me, moved heaven and earth to marry Jana. I'd stayed gone for five years trying to get my life together so I could deserve her. As if Sabrina cared about money and status.

I was a fool. Worse, I wouldn't have wanted her if she had. The truth, as it stared me in the face, was that I was scared. After a lifetime of being told I was worthless, I didn't want her to see me that way too.

Her face softened, and she reached over and took my hand. "Love can make you blind, but it can also make you strong. He never lied to her. From the very beginning, he told her he wanted to marry her and stay married."

Looking at her hand holding mine, I swallowed. "Can you forgive me?"

She looked at me with a puzzled expression on her face. "For what?"

"Leaving. For not finding you and telling you about us after I realized you'd forgotten about me."

She licked her lips. "I don't know what we are yet, but whatever it is, I haven't closed the door on figuring us out."

“Is there more to the story?” I asked, more curious about how all the strings of fate linked us together.

“Strings of fate,” she laughed again. “I think that would amuse Fitz.”

I hadn’t realized I spoke out loud, but Sabrina had me off balance. “Anderson? Beckett’s father?” I asked.

“See, this all started when Fitz lied and told Beck he would lose the company if he didn’t settle down and get married. He didn’t foresee his relatives creeping in to take advantage of a perceived weakness. Nor did he see how power-hungry Maxwell Easton was. Of course, now we know he’d really been trying to hide the mismanagement of Easton Corp from the Feds, and how he inflated the value of the company.”

She waved off a deeper explanation. “Chain reaction. Maxwell’s going after Anderson Global put Easton Corp in the spotlight he was trying to avoid. Backed into a corner he took Jana’s assets to try and save himself. I don’t think Fitz saw that outcome as a possibility, but he certainly wanted Jana and Colt together. He said he sees us all as his kids.”

I started to see the cause and effect. “How long do you think he knew about us?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Who knows. I doubt he’ll ever admit to all of it. He’s like a benevolent puppet master. It’s possible he’s known since I started working for Colt three years ago. Maybe it was after Colt and Jana got together. It’s hard to say, but I do think when Jana said she didn’t want to run her family company it gave him an opportunity to play matchmaker one more time.”

“Remind me to add him to my Christmas card list,” I joked.

“*You* have a Christmas card list?”

My mouth started to twitch with amusement. “Better also remind me to start a list.”

“Are we together because of fate or Fitz?” I wondered aloud.

Sabrina squeezed my hand still wrapped around hers.  
“Maybe it’s a little of both.”



# Chapter Eleven

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## Sabrina

“I am actually hungry. How about we continue this discussion inside?” I tipped my head toward the diner.

He took the keys out of the ignition and together we entered the diner. The waitress instructed us to seat ourselves, and he walked toward a corner booth where we could have some privacy. We were silent until we ordered, knowing that we’d have several minutes uninterrupted.

There was something weighing on Stryker, and I wasn’t sure I’d like whatever it was. I couldn’t avoid this talk though, as much as it might further shake up my already off-balance world.

“Just rip the Band-Aid off,” I sighed.

He nodded. “What does Malcolm know about us?”

“He knows we’re working together. He wasn’t pleased about it. But, if you are asking if I told him we’re married, no, I haven’t had the chance.” I looked away, not sure if I should divulge what happened the last time I did see Malcolm.

Stryker leaned back and draped his arms across the back of the booth. His fingers idly played with my hair. The repetitive motion was soothing, but I wasn’t sure if he was trying to comfort me, or himself.

“I think Malcolm might have been the one to start the rumors about us at the office,” he finally said.

My mouth fell open. All the usual excuses I’ve made a thousand times for Mal on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t

give breath to a single one of them.

No, defending Malcolm wasn't my priority, but there was still something keeping me from believing he was behind it, not that I didn't think he was capable. After the other night, I wasn't sure exactly what he was capable of. "There's only one problem with that theory," I said, voicing my concern, "Malcolm doesn't know about us."

"When he found out you were going to be working with me, how did he react?"

"He was pissed. Told me I couldn't work with you and that I only got where I am now because my brother pitied me and handed me a job."

Stryker blew out a breath. "I don't think he knows we're married. You defied him by not doing as he wanted you to do. He's trying to force your hand because he knows how important your career is to you."

"Why would he diminish it like he did?" I asked meekly.

"Because you being successful means you aren't available to him when he wants you to be."

"But we've always been just friends. Even with us trying to start something, it's more than clear we'll only ever be just friends."

"To you," he said. "It's clear to you," he repeated in a softer voice.

Looking down at my hands, I picked at my cuticles. It was a nervous habit I used to do as a kid when I would wait for my mom to take me for visitation. I never knew until the last minute if she was going to remember or not. "I'm not sure it matters now."

"Sunshine, I sense you're not telling me everything."

Taking a deep breath I returned my gaze to his face. "A couple of days ago he was waiting in my apartment for me. He, uh—"

Stryker's hands fisted on top of the table. "What did he do?"

“He was angry that I was still treating him like a friend and thought he could move us to the next step. He tried to kiss me despite my telling him to stop. He pressed me down on the couch, and I had to shove him off. Even after that he still thinks we’re going to go out again.”

“Like fuck you are. I don’t want you meeting with him alone,” Stryker seethed.

I’m not sure why I felt the need to comfort him. I was the one assaulted by someone I considered a friend. Still, I reached out and put my hand over his. Bringing Stryker with me to meet with Malcolm would not make for a productive conversation, but what was I really trying to salvage?

“I can live with that.”

“Do you still need to talk to him before I can take you out?” he asked.

I opened my hands to indicate where we were. “We’re out together right now.”

“I want to take you on a real date, not a kitschy diner where we talk about my asshole brother for most of our lunch hour.”

“You don’t need to go crazy and try to impress me. I don’t need fancy restaurants and over-the-top gestures. I happen to like kitschy diners. You’re right though, next time let’s leave talk of Malcolm out of it.”

“When will this next time happen?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I’ll text Malcolm and tell him we need to talk. I think we’ve put our lives on hold long enough.”

“How do you want to handle the rumors? I know what I want to do, but I’m willing to do whatever feels comfortable for you.” His dark eyes held mine, and I could see the understanding and even hope in their depths.

He was right. My choices were limited. I could either give up this opportunity and hide from the judging glances of others, or we could tell them we were married. Sure, they’d

still look at me and think I got the job because of my connections, but that was better than them thinking I was sleeping my way to the top.

Why was I so hesitant to let people know? Digging deep within myself, I knew the answer. If people knew about us, it made it real. I had to accept we really were married, and I had to make a decision whether or not I wanted to stay married. But, I told him I'd give us a chance. A real chance and that meant I couldn't treat Stryker like my dirty secret.

"We should release a statement and tell the office we're married."

He smiled. It was small, but the relief was clear in the curved tilt of his lips. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "How about we draft an email so the truth has a chance to spread before we get back."

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**I**t was nearly the end of the day when I remembered to text Malcolm. I wasn't surprised when he didn't respond. He'd be at one of his clubs by five getting ready for the night. Each one had a manager, but he liked to rotate between them to keep his staff working hard. At least that's what he claimed, but I think he just liked how they fawned over him.

"Any word from the asshole?" Stryker asked as he entered my office after everyone had left for the day.

Turning over my phone I checked to see if I'd missed any messages. There was one from Jana asking me how my day was going. Colter messaged me to ask me what his email password was. Evie sent a string of emojis I didn't quite understand. Judging by the water droplets and eggplant she'd either had a great night with Beck or Jana let it slip about Stryker and she was asking for details. Not a single one was from Malcolm.

I shook my head. "Everyone else reached out to me, but not him."

Quickly, I responded to each text. I reminded Colter about the sticky note I left under his keyboard. To Jana, I suggested we meet for lunch later in the week. And just to fuck with Evie, because I'm an amazing aunt, I sent her a random string of emojis back. Who knows what combining stars, a black heart, and a genie said to her.

"I want to take you to dinner. Are you still insisting you need to talk to him first? You're giving him an awful lot of consideration in light of the fact that he sexually assaulted you a couple of days ago."

I narrowed my eyes, ready to downplay the gravity of what Malcolm did, but Stryker glared at me keeping the words from spilling out.

"He kissed you without your permission and continued even when you were telling him to stop and trying to push him away. That's sexual assault. I don't give a shit that he wasn't able to take it further. He would have, so don't you dare make excuses for him."

I licked my lips. "You're right. I think I just want to be better than him. He cheats on his girlfriends, and apparently tries to force himself on his best friend."

"He doesn't deserve your friendship, he never did. You don't owe him this courtesy. Not after what he did."

Stryker's gaze softened. "You're loyal, but in this case, you're too loyal."

I looked away from him. He was right. The part of myself I was most proud of, my loyalty, Malcolm had turned into my weakness.

"I'd like to go home and change first, and you are not taking me to some stuffy restaurant. If we're going to do this, we're going to be ourselves. No trying to impress each other with grand gestures. We go forward as we want to continue."

His smile turned wicked, and I was afraid I'd unwittingly set something in motion. His tongue stroked across his full lower lip, drawing my eyes. "Oh, Sunshine. I'm not sure you want to experience who I am completely."

I shivered, but not out of fear. There was a secret, dark part of me that hoped he held my missing piece. The whispered part of my soul that craved a man's dominance. It was at odds with the strong woman I'd always shown the world, but that strength had a price. A heaviness I'd longed to share with someone else.

Back at my apartment, I dug through my purse for my keys. "I'll only be a few minutes."

Why did I insist on carrying my entire life around everywhere I went? Finally, I located my keys beneath my make-up bag, my wallet, and my phone. Stryker took them out of my hands while I tried to shove everything back into my large bag.

Since I didn't currently have a car, there were only a few keys on the ring. As I'd labeled them, it was pretty easy for him to separate my key from Colt and Jana's, Evie and Beck's, and my dad's house keys.

I stepped out of the way to let him unlock the door. He grabbed the knob and frowned. "Sunshine, did you leave the door unlocked?"

"Of course not. It was probably Waverly." I rolled my eyes.

She was the worst roommate, but I had promised Colt I'd help her when he cut off funding her extravagant lifestyle. Soft touch that he was, he still tried to help her. Or rather, he pushed me to help her. Maybe I was the pushover.

"Get behind me," he ordered.

I did as he asked, and moved behind him while he pushed open the door.

The sounds filling the apartment were obscene, but not unexpected. I might have been choosier about my sexual partners, but my sister certainly wasn't. Not that choosing was hard considering I hadn't had any kind of sex for the last five years. Still, my sister had a new man every week, sometimes every few days.

Not that I should slut shame my own sister or anyone. She was single, and as long as she was safe she could have as much fun as she wanted. Men did it, and if it was good enough for them, then women should get to play too. With Waverly, it was harder for me to keep that in mind since she often went out of her way to sleep with any man I was remotely interested in.

There was also the fact that I didn't love coming home to the sounds of skin slapping and heavy breathing broken up by grunts and moans. It was louder than it should have been in her bedroom.

I went to move around Stryker, but he threw his arm out, keeping me behind him.

"I actually need to get to my room if I'm going to change," I said and ducked under his arm.

"Sabrina, no," Stryker blurted out and tried to push me back behind him.

It was too late though. The scene before me hurt, but not in the way I expected it to. If there was even a shred of doubt that I didn't have romantic feelings for Malcolm that was cleared up in the time it took my brain to realize what I was looking at.

Malcolm had Waverly bent over the table and was pounding into her oblivious to the fact they were no longer alone. Or, my inner voice whispered, they wanted to be caught.

All those times I thought Malcolm was waiting for me in my apartment, had I really just interrupted him hooking up with my sister? It didn't make sense. Not him screwing my sister, I understood that. They had a history, and she was beautiful. What confused me was, why had he pursued me at all if he was sleeping with Waverly? Did he have some kink about fucking sisters? Did he think I'd join them someday? That was never going to happen.

Stryker grabbed my arms and pushed me back out the door. There was a needless look of sympathy on his face, but also pain. He was misinterpreting my feelings for what I saw.



In the hallway, he stopped me to rub up and down my arm. “I’m sorry he hurt you.”

“What? No,” I sputtered. I opened my mouth to clear up his misconception, but the door to my apartment flew open, interrupting me.

Malcolm stormed out, his shirt inside out, and his pants still undone. “Sabrina!” he shouted, even though I was only a few feet away from him.

I held up my hand. “Don’t try to justify what I walked into. Answer one question for me.”

Leaning back against Stryker, I selfishly borrowed some of his strength to help me face off against my former best friend. “Why did you pursue me if you’re with Waverly?”

His head shook so vehemently I thought he was going to give himself whiplash. “I’m not with Waverly. We help each other relieve the tension sometimes, but it’s nothing.”

My arms fell to my side. Stryker wrapped an arm around my waist giving me more comfort. Malcolm’s eyes dropped down to where his brother held me and sneered.

“I guess the little message I gave my friend in accounting wasn’t wrong after all.”

“I fucking knew it,” Stryker barked. He took a step forward, but I leaned more of my weight against him to keep him from attacking Malcolm.

I patted Stryker’s hand, letting him know it was fine. Well, it wasn’t fine, but I no longer cared what Malcolm thought. “I have been trying to get a hold of you all afternoon, but I don’t feel like we need to have a talk anymore. Our friendship is over.”

He laughed, and the sound was grating. “I knew you wanted to get ahead, but I thought you relied on nepotism, not your pussy.”

Before I realized what he was doing, Stryker spun me so that he was in front of me again. His fist plowed into Malcolm’s face.

“You ever speak to my wife like that again and I’ll do more than break your fucking nose,” he promised.

Malcolm pinched his nose, trying to stem the rush of blood that quickly coated his face and hand. “I’ll call the cops.” His voice was muffled behind his hand.

This time Stryker replied with a laugh, except his wasn’t cold. It burned with fury, but also a seductive promise. It said that he’d suffer any consequences to keep me safe. They weren’t just night and day in their looks.

“Do it,” Stryker challenged. “I’ve got a fantastic lawyer on speed dial.”

Malcolm rose to his feet and tried to glare at Stryker, but he looked too pathetic for it to work.

“Have you ever wondered why Colter has never really gone after you?”

His eyes widened when I pointed to my chest. “Me, Mal. I’m the reason your feud never became a full-blown war. Consider my protection revoked.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Sabrina. Colter will always bend to Waverly’s will. You might give him the green light, but he won’t come after me as long as she and I are seeing each other.”

“I thought you were just scratching an itch? I bet that will really endear you to Colter. You’re right, he’s totally going to go easy on you,” I taunted.

“Sabrina, no. I’m just upset. I never meant for you to find out about this. Look, the other night I pressured you, and I’ve got needs, okay? That doesn’t mean I don’t have real feelings for you,” Malcolm tried to explain.

I turned my back on him in dismissal. Stryker ran his knuckles down my cheek. “How about we go back to my room, order room service, and sort out your clothes in the morning.”

My mouth fell open, and he realized how that sounded. A dimple winked at me as his mouth curved up. “I meant we’d

call the shopper, Sunshine, but if you've got other suggestions I'm listening."

A shiver ran down my spine because I did have a lot of ideas. Five years worth, and a hazy memory forming which I'd like to investigate.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Stryker

Sabrina was in a daze as I led her down to my car. I'd never been jealous of my brother before. Not when I was a young boy and I watched him receive the recognition from our father I'd never been given. Nor when I worked long hours to help my mom with bills while I was in high school.

Then my mother got sick while I was in college, I had to take a second job to help cover her treatment for ovarian cancer, and Malcolm was given a two hundred thousand dollar car. That money might have meant my mom could have had the best treatment. I still wasn't envious of him, because he had the two most frigid people on the planet caring for him, and I had my mom, even if my time with her was shorter than it should have been.

But, it was this moment, watching Sabrina suffer heartbreak over my asshole brother that I finally felt envious of him. He had her heart, and he threw it away, and yet she still mourned the loss of him. She was my wife, but he had her in a way I feared I never would.

Letting the valet take my car seemed unnecessarily extravagant, but I needed to get Sabrina alone. If everything I'd hoped for the last five years was about to disintegrate, I preferred to get it over fast and in private.

I wrapped my arm around her and tucked her into my side. Her warmth, the softness of her curves, I soaked it in for possibly the last time as I moved her to the elevator. Her continued silence worried me.

Inside my suite I led her to the sitting area and led her to sit down on the sofa. Once she was settled I wrapped a blanket around her. Then I waited for the shock of what she witnessed to wear off.

“Sunshine, talk to me,” I begged after she continued to sit staring blankly ahead.

She blinked several times and sighed. A sign she was coming around. “You said we were going to get room service. I could really use a burger.”

My smile was both grateful and sad. “Anything you need, Sunshine.”

“I know you want to talk, but I need to process a little more.” She looked at her clothes, beautiful but not comfortable. “Do you have anything I could change into?”

I strolled over to her and kissed her on the top of the head. “I’ve got some sweats. They’ll be huge, but they’ve got a drawstring. Why don’t you go take a shower and I’ll get them and order dinner.”

The moment the shower turned on I grabbed my phone. Surely I could provide more comfort for her than a pair of my sweats. She wasn’t short, but at six-foot-four she’d be swimming in my clothes.

I grabbed my phone and called Colter, putting it on speaker so I could order our dinner on the app at the same time. It wasn’t a call I’d ever thought I’d make. He picked up after a couple of rings.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Colter, it’s Stryker. I hope you don’t mind, but I got your number from Caroline.”

“I’m guessing this is an emergency if you’re calling me,” he grunted.

I exhaled. “I need a favor. Actually, Sabrina does.”

“What does she need?” he asked, concern leaking into his voice.

“Can you grab her some clothes? Something to sleep in, and something for work in the morning.”

“Why doesn’t she just go to her apartment? You know, where all her stuff is?” he asked.

From everything I’d ever heard Colter doted on his baby sister, Waverly. Would he excuse her actions and take her side against Sabrina? “There was an incident. She needed somewhere to go, and I offered.”

“Did your brother hurt her?” he snarled.

“Yes, but not in the way you are probably thinking.”

“Stryker quit beating around the bush and tell me what happened.”

If he was going to defend Waverly, I’d rather Sabrina never know about it. Perhaps it was better for him to find out from me, in case he said anything that would hurt her.

“I drove her home from work and walked her up. She was going to change and then we were supposed to get dinner. Instead, we walked in on Waverly and my brother fucking like animals in the living room.”

I heard something crash over the phone. “Damn her!” he shouted in the distance.

There was a thud as if the phone hit the carpet. I waited a few seconds, then Jana’s voice greeted me. “I think Waverly has finally done it. I don’t know if Colter will be able to keep helping her with how cruelly she treats everyone he cares about. I’ll grab some of my clothes for tonight, and tomorrow Colt and I will go grab some of Sabrina’s things.”

“Fuck that,” he shouted. “Put me on speaker.”

I heard her press some buttons and then his voice came through the line more clearly. “Sabrina is not going to be kicked out of her own apartment. I never should have pushed her to let Waverly live with her. I’d hoped if they spent more time together they’d grow closer, but I can see now that Waverly isn’t capable of normal human emotions. Tell Brina I will fix my mistake.”

I exhaled in relief. Colter must have heard me and released a sad-sounding laugh. “You thought I was going to turn my back on Sabrina, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Hearing her voice, I looked up and saw Sabrina standing in the doorway listening to my conversation.

Too late, I realized that putting my phone on speaker was a huge mistake.

“Oh, Brina,” Colt said in a sad voice. “I’ve made too many excuses for her for far too long. First, she came after Jana, and I let it pass. Then she made a scene after baby Grace was born, and now she’s betrayed you in probably the worst way possible. You know you’re welcome to come and stay with us, right?”

“No,” I snapped. “I’m sure we both appreciate it, but Sabrina is my wife, and we need to sort some things out.”

“Stryker—“ Colt began, but he was interrupted by Jana.

“No, Colt, he’s right. I’ll be there shortly with some clothes, like, less than twenty minutes. There’s no traffic right now, and I’d already put some clothes aside because Colter has a shopping addiction, and I refuse to support his illness. Hang in there Sabrina,” she said.

“Thanks, Jana,” Sabrina choked out.

“We’re family. See you soon.” The line went dead.

“You told Colter?” she asked.

I couldn’t tell if she was pissed off at me for overstepping, or if the flat sound of her voice was just a lingering effect of the emotional shock she’d been in for nearly the last hour.

“I’m sorry, but I needed to take care of you. My brother hurt you, and yours has the ability to fix it.”

She shook her head. “Your brother didn’t hurt me.”

My fists clenched. Even now she was defending him. “I saw the look of devastation on your face. You don’t need to stand up for him.”



Her head shook again. “You’ve got it wrong. It wasn’t him that hurt me. I expected him to do something like that. Maybe not at first, but certainly after the last time I saw him. It was Waverly that hurt me.”

She looked away from me, and I could see her struggling to control her emotions. Her voice trembled when she spoke. “My relationship with my sister has always been strained, but I thought deep down she loved me. I was wrong.”

Her pain struck me in the chest. I joined her on the couch and wrapped my arms around her. I didn’t know what to say to her. Words seemed insufficient to heal the hurt Waverly caused.

Sabrina looked up at me, her blue eyes brighter because of her unshed tears. “You really haven’t been with anyone for five years?”

I framed her face with my hands, and my eyes fell to her lips. “Not even a kiss.”

She swallowed, and I watched her eyes dilate. “Why?”

One of my hands fell to her waist, while the other slipped into her hair. “I’m on edge, Sunshine. Don’t play with me.”

She licked her lips and leaned toward me. “I’m very serious.”

Fractions of an inch were all that divided me from experiencing the sweet heaven of her lips on mine. I was about to bridge the gap and end this torment I’d subjected myself to when there was a knock at the door.

I groaned. “That would be Jana.”

Forcing myself away from her was hard. Nearly as hard as my cock, and I hadn’t even touched her yet. Five years of celibacy had me as horny as a teenager.

I grabbed a throw pillow to cover my lap. “Would you mind getting the door?”

Sabrina looked down at herself. “I guess you didn’t realize I’m wearing a towel.”

Her words made my eyes slip down her body. I'd had my hand on her waist and hadn't noticed the knotty material under my hand. "That doesn't make my problem any better."

She shivered but shook her head to clear whatever she was thinking. "It better be Jana."

"Looks like I arrived in time," Jana said from the door.

She breezed into my suite carrying a large overnight bag. Her eyes dropped down to where I held the pillow over my lap and dropped the bag unceremoniously in the middle of the room.

She spun around to face Sabrina, holding her hand up as if I were the one who was naked. "Oh. So, uhm, I haven't even worn all the stuff in my closet, and apparently, Colt's been putting things in the guest bedroom. There are tags on everything in here. I apologize in advance for the lingerie, your brother is delusional."

"Thank you, Jana," Sabrina said. Her lips kept twitching as she tried to fight laughing. "His crazy ends up being pretty beneficial though."

"Well," Jana waved her arm toward me, "I'll let you two get back to whatever."

The door clicked shut behind her, and once again the atmosphere around us hung heavy with desire. Sabrina strolled over to me, not grabbing her bag. Her fingers teased the top of her towel.

"I can't believe you've waited for me for five years."

I reached out and wrapped my hands behind her knees. My hands traveled up the smooth skin of her thighs. Sabrina's body was perfection. She was the perfect blend of long muscles and lush curves. With my hands on her thighs, I pulled her to straddle my legs. "I'd have waited forever if I had to."

I pulled her onto my lap, the heat from her core causing my dick to twitch. She pressed down harder against me, grinding on my erection, pulling a moan from my chest.

My fingers dug into her hips, stilling her from making me come in my jeans. “I didn’t bring you here with any expectations. I can wait longer.”

“We’re married,” she began.

I felt my eyebrow curve up. “I’d like to stay that way.”

“I don’t think the way to building a strong marriage is through celibacy,” she said, pressing down on me again.

Releasing one hand from her hip I gave her ass a light swat. “Sunshine, if you don’t stop grinding on my dick I’m going to come in my pants and I haven’t done that in about twenty years.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about. You say that you want to give us a chance to see if what we have is real—”

I slid one hand up her back and squeezed the back of her neck. “I said I wanted to give *you* a chance to see that what we have is real.”

Sabrina huffed in frustration from my interruption. “Either way, how are we supposed to focus on any emotional connection we might have or build when all we want is to rip each other’s clothes off and end a half decade of frustration and loneliness?”

My mouth gaped open. It had taken an extreme amount of self control not to do everything I could to seduce her. At some low points I’d even entertained kidnapping her. Those thoughts were quickly dismissed because as a lawyer I knew committing a felony was not the way to start our marriage. Not once in every scenario I imagined did I think Sabrina would be the one to bring sex into the discussion.

“I know I’m hearing this wrong, but just to be sure, you aren’t suggesting that we make love in order to remove a distraction from dating each other, right?”

She bit her bottom lip, and I could tell it was taking effort not to laugh. “Of course not.”

I exhaled and flopped my back against the sofa. “I didn’t think so.”

“I’m suggesting we fuck while we date so that we can both think clearly.”

And those were the last words I thought she’d say, the first words to render me simultaneously speechless and light-headed from the rapid southward flow of all the blood in my body.

Sabrina giggled at the look of shock I’m sure was displayed on my face. “You said ‘make love,’ that implies we’re already in love.” Her eyes slowly traveled up and back down my body before meeting my gaze. “I will admit I’m extremely attracted to you. I’m also intrigued by the notion you have been pining for me for years and refused to touch another woman.”

“It’s a fact, not a notion,” I growled.

“For over a year now I’ve watched my two best friends fight falling in love when it was so clearly inevitable to the rest of us. I don’t want to do that. But, I’m also not going to jump blindly into something with you without all the facts.”

My hands tightened reflexively, pulling the fabric of her towel just a little to give me a better view of her cleavage. “Ask me anything. I will never lie to you.”

Sabrina leaned forward, resting her hands on my shoulders, practically shoving my face into her barely covered tits. The twitch of her lips clued me in that every move she made was calculated.

“I’m more of a trial and error kinda girl. My dad always said I was stubborn, but I’d really rather find some things out for myself. I wasn’t saying I thought you lied. There are other facts I need to know before I can decide if we should stay married or not.”

“Such as—“ I trailed off.

“I know why you’ve been celibate, but it doesn’t help me figure out why I have. I didn’t know we were married. I’ve had no reason not to have dated more seriously than I have. I mean, I tried, or I thought I had. But, every man I went out with, the spark was missing. I’ve been told over and over I’m

too picky, but I need that unexplainable, unquantifiable connection. The weird thing is when I'm with you I feel a spark that could power Seattle.”

I frowned. I enjoyed sex. Before meeting Sabrina, I was a bit of a player, or whatever the kids are calling it now. I've lost track of the amount of women I've gone to bed with. It was never about building a number to brag about but trying to satisfy an urge. All of the encounters were forgettable, and the pit of loneliness inside of me grew.

Then Sunshine came into my life, and all of the distractions, the random women didn't make sense anymore. My life changed profoundly with one look at her. Before that moment I thought love at first sight was bullshit, but after meeting Sabrina I was a convert. To reduce that moment to simple sexual attraction bothered me more than I cared to examine.

Sabrina's hands slowly moved from my shoulders, up my neck, until her nails were scraping through my hair. “I just watched about five separate emotions flit across your face. I can see you have some thoughts about what I said, so spill.”

“Is this just sex? Is that all you want?” I could have punched myself in the face. She was going to think I wasn't attracted to her, or that I didn't want her when the truth was I had never been this hard in my life.

She shook her head, her wet blonde hair swished back and forth, leaving tiny droplets of water on her arms and shoulders. “I thought Malcolm and I could have something. Or, I guess I thought if I couldn't feel something for him, then I was incapable of having a relationship. We'd known each other most of our lives. Objectively, I could tell he was attractive, and he could be charming, but I felt nothing. I never wanted to kiss him, let alone go further. How do I know I'll have those feelings with you?”

“Lay it out for me as if I'm five,” I told her.

“Thanks to Malcolm, the entire office thinks I'm screwing you to get a promotion. Now we've got to tell them we're married, and have been for years.”

I started to lift her off of me. I thought I would be fine exploiting the situation to spend time with her, but apparently I'm more in touch with my emotions than I'd have liked. The idea of faking anything with her pissed me the fuck off, and I realized I didn't want her to come to me just to keep a job that was hers either way.

Her eyes widened as I went to move her and she shook her head several times. "You don't understand. People not knowing felt like the last roadblock to keep me from acting like a blushing idiot. If we tell them we're married, it makes me really think about it. I find I am more curious about being married to you than afraid of how fast it all seems. I want to do whatever feels right."

She took a deep breath and looked down. "Do you not want me?"

Grabbing her hips I rocked her back over my painful erection. "I want you so bad it literally hurts."

"Then why can't we just do whatever feels right? It's not like any of this is happening too fast."

I chuckled at that. I can't think of anyone that would consider five years to be the proper time frame to consummate a marriage.

She gave me a very serious look. "Now that I know you've been waiting for me this entire time, I promise I won't think you're easy."

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Sabrina

“**Y**ou think you’re funny, don’t you?” he asked and started to tickle me.

I squealed and tried to move away from his assault. His fingers dug into my sides, and I squirmed to get away from him. I dove sideways to escape his torture, fell off his lap onto the floor, and lost my towel in the process.

His eyes devoured me, causing my laughter to halt as my breath hitched in my chest. I was aware of the rise and fall of my chest as my breathing quickened. He appeared to be one moment away from pouncing on me, but then he scooted quickly away from me. Not the reaction I was expecting.

Stryker grabbed my towel off of the couch and held it out to me. “I didn’t bring you here to take advantage of you when you’re upset.”

I took the towel from him and covered myself up feeling suddenly self conscious. I licked my lips and studied the looping fibers on the white hotel towel. My eyes stung from a sudden need to cry from embarrassment.

“I’m going to go get dressed,” I muttered and turned away from him.

Stryker reached out, grabbed my elbow, and turned me around. “Please don’t cry.” His other hand rose to gently wipe a tear off my cheek.

My cheeks heated with embarrassment. I grabbed the bag Jana left and locked myself in the bathroom. Most of the sleepwear Jana packed was skimpy lingerie. My heart



thundered in my chest while I continued to dig frantically through the bag trying to find something that would show less skin. Aside from some work clothes and jeans, all I found were scraps of lace. I guess I wasn't the only one who thought Stryker and I would be moving in that direction. Finally, I found a simple t-shirt and a soft pair of sleep shorts. They were still on the short side but covered more than the skimpy lingerie.

When I finally braved going back out to the main sitting room, I found Stryker sitting with his chin resting on his palm, deep in thought. His head snapped up, and I thought I saw remorse in his eyes before he schooled his features.

He opened his mouth to speak to me, but before he could say a single word there was a knock on the door. With a huff of irritation, he rose from the sofa and strolled to open the door. He stepped back and let a member of the hotel staff push a cart in loaded with our room service. I watched Stryker slip the man a tip, and we were alone again. At least the food would help alleviate some of the awkward silence. I couldn't be expected to engage in conversation if we were eating.

He set out our plates on the small dining table, burgers and fries as he'd promised, and pulled out my chair.

Instead of digging into his food, he studied me for a minute. "We should talk about earlier."

I groaned. "It was humiliating enough. Let's just forget it."

"I can't," he said, shaking his head. "It was nearly everything I've wanted for the last five years. Believe me, I'll be replaying every second when I close my eyes tonight."

Taking a deep breath, I asked the question I knew would plague me if I stayed silent. "Then why did you back away? What was missing?"

His chocolate brown eyes met mine. "I want more than lust with you."

How many times over the years have I put men off using the same excuse? Except, those men weren't my husband, and

I usually said it to keep them at arm's length because the spark wasn't there.

I needed to know, otherwise, there was really no reason to continue down this path. "Do you feel that way about me though?"

His eyebrow cocked up, and I could see the exasperation on his face. "I know women can fake interest, but men can't. You were on my lap, so you tell me, do you really question if I want you?"

My fair complexion was always prone to blushing, and if the burning I felt under my skin was any indication, I looked more like a tomato now than a person. He definitely had a reaction to me sitting in his lap.

"Now that we've cleared that up, we still need to talk. I want to take you on a date."

I looked pointedly down at the food set in front of us. "We're having dinner. That's a very date-like activity."

"Inside my hotel suite, while you're dressed in pajamas is hardly a date. Especially not after you caught the guy you were dating boning your sister in your apartment. That is not the scenario I imagined after all the years I've waited for you."

He had a point. I had a disturbing realization the more I questioned why I had pushed him so far earlier. I was trying to push him away. It was an odd tactic, I'll admit, but in my experience, most men lost interest after sex. Not that I'd had many partners. I'd had one boyfriend in high school and another one my first year of college. Neither relationship lasted more than a few months and both ended after we'd had sex a few times.

Stryker seemed so adamant about us staying married, I think subconsciously I wanted to test his resolve, thinking he'd back off and we'd have a night of fun before I made the mistake of developing feelings for him. Then there was the possibility that being with him would trigger the memories I lost after sharing my friend's drugged drink. Plus, I was eager to end the world's longest dry spell.

Yes, I'd had many opportunities to have sex over the last several years, but I've never been able to hook up without feelings. Why I thought it would be different with Stryker was another thing I didn't want to examine too closely.

The thing was, I had mommy issues. My father was amazing. I never felt unloved, or unsupported when I was with him, but there was always something missing. Every time I saw the other kids at school with their moms, or when I started my period at thirteen, I was reminded that my mother would rather host charity functions and have brunch with other society wives than do anything as pedestrian as chaperone a school field trip.

The therapist my father forced me to see in high school said I had difficulty forming attachments since I'd been denied one of the most fundamental bonds a person ever develops, that between a mother and a child. I shrugged it off at the time. I was in high school, what did I care about forming attachments? Plus, there were lots of perfectly normal people who had lost their mothers through illness or accident when they were young. And, it wasn't like I never saw mine. I visited regularly enough to keep up appearances for her with the society crowd, but I was nothing more than a prop to her. An accessory to check all the boxes of her charmed life.

A soft brush against my chin pulled me out of my head. Stryker tipped my face back up to look at him. "There you are." His smile was cautious. "I'm not saying I wasn't into it. There was definitely a moment, but not like this."

He took a deep breath and held it in for a moment before releasing. "Not with my brother hanging over our night and not because you're pissed off at your sister."

My eyes looked down at the food in front of us, then back up at him. "We're having dinner. After we will watch a movie and at some point, you will awkwardly try and put your arm around me. Then, you will walk me to the bedroom door, and I expect you to attempt to kiss me goodnight."

Stryker smiled, but he tipped his head down, trying to hide it from me. "It's a deal. Tonight is our first date. It's been

awkward enough. I only hope I can earn a second one.”

Fighting my own smile, I raised one shoulder, as if we both didn't know we'd be doing a redo of tonight soon. “Guess we'll have to see.”

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**T**he smell of coffee pulled me from bed the next morning. One of my two favorite hobbies was sleeping, so for me to be up at the obscene hour of seven in the morning on a Saturday was due to the fact that I also smelled pancakes. Eating was my second favorite hobby, only, because of the way I ate, I also had to exercise.

Grumbling on my way out to the sitting room I wasn't surprised to find Stryker sitting at the table with two covered plates set out, and a carafe of coffee just waiting for me to be lured from the luxurious cloud this hotel called a bed. Somehow he knew not to speak to me, and wordlessly poured me a cup of coffee. Adding cream and sugar to my cup I took a long sip before the ability to speak re-engaged.

“Why do you have a two bedroom suite?” I was surprised last night when he showed me where I was going to sleep, and argued I wouldn't let him sleep on the tiny loveseat in the sitting room. I'd thought the other door in the suite was to an adjoining room.

He showed me the second bedroom, kissed me on the forehead, and shooed me off to bed. I only thought about why he had such a big suite after I stopped fuming about the fact that he kissed me on the head.

Don't get me wrong. I love a sweet forehead kiss. There was something so reassuring and affectionate about it. However, not endearing considering a couple hours earlier I'd thrown myself at him like the twenty-six-year-old born-again virgin I apparently turned into since our elopement years ago. If I'd remembered I was a married woman there might have been some excuse for the cobwebs that had no doubt taken up residence in my vagina. But no, I'd blacked out most of that

day thanks to the drugs my friend and I unknowingly consumed from her spiked drink.

This morning was a different story. I'd shoved that kiss in a box. I wasn't going to allow any more inner debate over whether or not he was actually attracted to me. Today I was thinking more clearly, with my brain and not my ovaries. Stryker rose from the table, and my mouth went dry. Gray sweatpants.

Just like that my brain short-circuited, and my hormones were back in control of my body. His plain white t-shirt hugged what I imagined was a sculpted torso, and even worse for my self control was the fact that his veiny forearms were on display causing my nipples to pebble tight enough to rip through my borrowed shirt.

He grabbed the paper off the coffee table. That was all. He wasn't strutting around the place trying to whip me into a mess of horniness, he just wanted to check the headlines. When he turned back to face me his brow furrowed. No doubt my cheeks were flushed, and I already mentioned the state of my breasts which were announcing themselves proudly in my braless state.

In a couple of steps he was back in front of me, he yanked me out of my chair and slammed his lips to mine. One of his hands fisted in my hair while the other flattened against my back. Food be damned, the only thing I wanted to consume was Stryker Lawson. Sex counted as exercise right? Maybe exercise would become my second favorite hobby. Hell, the way his tongue demanded entry, the feel of his plump lips against mine, if he was as good at working the rest of my body the way he was my mouth, it might even become my first favorite.

He pulled back from my lips and buried his face in my neck. A growl ripped from his throat, and I felt the unsteady rise and fall of his breathing. "What are you doing to me?" he whispered.

My hands threaded through his hair, holding him against me. "The same thing you're doing to me."

I wouldn't push him, but I didn't want to say anything to stop him either. Maybe it was backward, but I was trying to date my husband so perhaps backward suited us.

"I can't stop. God help me. I meant everything I said to you last night, but I can't—"

Tugging on the strands of his hair, I forced him to look at me. "I don't want you to. This isn't about last night. This has nothing to do with your brother or my sister. I want you, and I haven't felt that for years."

"I can't be gentle," he warned.

"Please." I wasn't sure what I was begging for. Please touch me. Please don't stop. Please don't be gentle.

I wanted to feel his passion, to let it consume me. My life had been too cautious, too planned, and it was boring. I wasn't the same wallflower I'd been at twenty-one. Sure, I went out now and then instead of spending all of my time with my nose buried in a book. Even then, I had gotten really good at appearing to be carefree. I never got drunk, and I always went home alone.

I was tired of going home alone.

Something that looked like resolve passed over his dark eyes. "I won't let you go if we do this. Once I take you, you're mine."

I wasn't sure I could agree with his statement, but I didn't want to deny it either. The truth was, I didn't know what would happen. But, I knew I couldn't see beyond the fog of lust that seemed to envelop me every time he was near. He must have taken my silence as acceptance because the next moment he tossed me over his shoulder and strolled toward the bedroom I was in last night.

He set me down on the bed and stared down at me. "Clothes off, now." His jaw clenched as he watched me comply with his demand.

My fingers shook as I pulled the soft cotton over my head. The urge to cover my breasts was strong, but his molten chocolate gaze emboldened me, and I let my hands slip slowly

across my stomach instead. Hooking my fingers under the waistband of my shorts, I worked them down over my hips until I was in nothing more than a pair of lace and satin underwear.

Stryker finally pulled his shirt over his head, and my eyes feasted on him. His body was a solid slab of muscle. While his stomach rippled with defined ridges, I got the sense his physique wasn't carved at the gym. His seemed carved from years of fighting and hard work, something his pampered brother had no concept of.

The bed dipped down as he put one knee on the mattress. He crawled over me and I shivered in anticipation. When his mouth claimed mine again, I moaned.

“You're such a good girl, aren't you my sweet?” he spoke against my lips.

I nodded, having lost the ability to form words.

He pulled away, and I could sense tension in the way his muscles stayed tight above me. “Outside of the bedroom I want you to be sweet, but what I want to do to you will be anything but.”

“Show me,” I rasped, finding my voice.

“You don't know what you're asking. I'm demanding. I want to use you for my pleasure, and make you come so hard you'll beg me to stop. I won't though. I'll make you drop to your knees and suck me off. Use you like my personal whore and make you love it.”

No one had ever talked to me like this. I'd dated a slew of nice guys who treated me like glass. Not one of them saw beneath my sweater sets and pencil skirts to the woman inside who craved a man's dominance. I must have whimpered because the tension left his face.

“You like that, don't you, Sunshine?”

I nodded.

He stood up again and let his sweatpants fall to the floor. “Do it now. Get on your knees and relieve me of five years of

wanting you. I want to take my time with you, but I've been without for too long.”

I rose on shaky legs and dropped to my knees. My hand closed around his shaft, and I wondered how he'd fit. He was thick enough that my fingers couldn't close around his width.

Flicking my tongue out, I teased the tip as I worked my hand up and down. He fisted my hair and pushed my mouth down. His eyes issued a challenge to take all of him, and I felt myself grow wet as he pushed forcefully past my lips.

Stryker set a punishing rhythm as he fucked my mouth. He watched my face to gauge my willingness but otherwise didn't ask for permission.

“Breathe through your nose and open your throat.”

I'd never deep-throated a guy before, but the idea of him taking me this way made my sex clench.

He hit the back of my throat and I fought not to gag. Tears streamed down my face while I struggled to keep up with him.

His head fell back as I was finally able to take him all the way. I started to tense up as I fought the urge to breathe, but before I panicked he pulled out allowing me to gulp down a breath.

He started a predictable pattern of thrusting and retreating. I relaxed and gave myself over to him, trusting him more than I'd ever trusted a man.

“Good girl,” he cooed. He became wild as I felt him grow even more. I bobbed my head to send him over the edge, sensing he was about to come.

“Swallow every drop,” he demanded and watched my face.

I hummed my agreement, and his hand in my hair shoved me down one more time as he came down my throat. That was another thing I'd never done before, but I didn't find it as repulsive as I'd always imagined.

His hand let go of my hair and he slipped from my mouth. Stumbling back, he dropped down on the bed and threw his



arm over his eyes as his body trembled with the aftershocks of his release.

I took the chance to wipe the tears from my face and clean the saliva from my chin the best I could.

He reached his other hand out to me, and I took it. I expected him to pull me up to cuddle, but once he had me near him he rolled over and took my nipple into his mouth.

I squirmed under his attention, the pulsing in my core the only thought in my head. His hand slipped down my stomach and in between my legs.

“So wet,” he said against my skin. “How many times can I make you come before you beg me to stop?”

I remained silent because I had no idea how many times, but I got the sense I was about to find out.

“Let’s see how greedy this pussy is, shall we?”

He plunged one thick finger inside of me, and my back arched off the bed. It had been so long since I’d been touched, and I wasn’t good at getting myself off. Part of my brain never fully let myself go enough on my own. I was always too aware that it was my own fingers touching me to give in to a fantasy.

“So tight. I can’t wait to fuck you and hear you scream. Are you on birth control?”

“Yes,” I gasped as his thumb started working my clit in time with his finger.

“Good, because when I take you there will be nothing between us. Nothing will come between us ever again.”

He pulled out his finger only to shove in two. After a few pumps, he added a third finger and I tossed my head back on a moan. They hooked inside of me stroking my G-spot and my entire body began to shake as an orgasm slammed into me.

He chuckled. “That’s one.”

It took my brain a minute to shove through the haze to realize he really did plan to count my orgasms. Not that I wanted to argue with what seemed like a solid plan, but any

words I might have said disappeared on a moan as his hot breath hit my center and he sucked my clit into his mouth. His hands pushed my legs aside, and he ate me like it was his life's mission.

His tongue speared inside of me only to repeat and flick against my clit. Over and over he repeated the movement until I was about to beg him to come again. His teeth lightly bit my bundle of nerves before he sucked hard and thrust his fingers into me once more. This time when I came, I swear my vision went black for a moment.

My body felt limp and more sated than I had ever been before, at least that I could remember. I could have dozed off right then, but I felt his hard cock pressing against me and realized he was just getting started.

He was right, I just might beg him to stop.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Stryker

**F**ucking finally. Electricity coursed through my body having my wife, my Sunshine, underneath me again. We were only together the one night before, but that was all it took. I never believed in love at first sight, and maybe I still don't. It didn't take long for me to fall for her though. A couple of hours, one dance, and I was hers. I knew she didn't believe I loved her. But, thankfully, I'd have a lifetime to show her.

The morning light poured through the open curtains, bathing Sabrina in a warm glow. Her golden hair fanned out around her head. She looked like an angel I wanted to corrupt. "On your hands and knees," I barked.

Inside I cringed at the demanding tone I was taking with her. I meant to ease her into this slowly, show her my freakier side little by little so she wouldn't run away screaming. As with the night we met, all my caution was thrown to the wind. For a controlled man who was used to self denial, something about her unleashed me. It was like I was pretending all my life, and finally I was able to be completely me.

Sabrina rolled over to her stomach and pushed up. Her arms shook as she propped herself up, but she tried to hide it. I smirked knowing she'd be worn out by the time I was done with her. My fingers dug into her hips, and I held her steady as I began a frantic rhythm.

I felt her everywhere, but it wasn't enough. I needed her to be the breath in my lungs and the blood in my veins. Letting one hand slide up the curve of her spine, I leaned forward until

I was able to wrap my hand around her throat. With gentle pressure I pulled her up against me.

She was caged in my arms with one wedged between her breasts and the other around her hips. My hand on her throat turned her head to face me. Her warm breath teased my lips with every pant I pulled from her as I worked her up and down my cock.

“You’re mine,” I groaned. “Say it. I want to hear you confirm what we both know.”

She tried to shake her head, but I held her still in my grasp. “So stubborn.”

This time I wasn’t upset because she was resisting. The fight was part of our journey. Like magnets we pulled together, but get flipped around and we pushed apart. For too long I stayed on the edge of that zone being shoved aside. It was past time for me to do everything I needed to do to keep us aligned. The words I wanted to say would wait until later. Taking her lips, I poured all of it into her without speaking.

Sabrina started to tremble in my arms, and I let her drop down to the bed. Turning her over I crawled up her body and laced our fingers together. Slowly, I pushed back into her wet heat, and stared deep into her midnight eyes. Our movements became frantic as we exorcized all of the loneliness from the last several years.

Distantly I was aware of the sounds of our choppy breathing, the moans increasing in frequency, and the slapping of skin. It was an erotic symphony celebrating having her in my arms again. While each of those things registered with me, as well as the electricity gathering in my spine, I felt like I was floating and falling at the same time.

Her nails dug into my back, and each slice of my skin was the best pleasure/pain I could have asked for. Maybe the marks would stay with me because having her under my skin made perfect sense to me at that moment. The slight sting sent fire racing down my spine. I clenched my teeth trying to hold on for as long as I could.

After so long, it was hard to stave off my orgasm, but I was determined to make this good for her. To make her crave me. I pounded into her, hard enough she'd feel me for days after, even if I never planned to go days without being inside of her ever again.

My body began to vibrate with the need to come. "Sunshine, I can't hold off much longer. I need you to come. Squeeze my cock with your tight cunt. Let me feel what's mine. What will always be only mine. Give me your pleasure and let me fill you up."

She groaned long and low. As I had demanded, she gripped me tight, clamping my dick in rhythmic waves. I hummed into the space below her ear. "Good girl. Your greedy pussy soaked my cock."

Another moan slipped out of her lips. I smiled against her skin. My girl liked it when I talked dirty to her. "I'm going to fill you full of my cum. And you'll take it all, won't you?"

"Yes," she gasped.

I wanted to look at her, watch the haze of the orgasm overtake her. What a vision she was, with her pupils blown, and her hair a wild tangled mess from my hands. My thrusts grew erratic as my own orgasm began to crest. "My beautiful wife turned into my wanton slut. Let me hear you again. This time I want you to scream."

Sabrina's head thrashed back and forth. "No, no more. I can't come again."

I held her jaw steady so she could look at me. "I told you that you'd beg me to stop. I won't though. Your pleasure is mine. Mine to give and mine to command. I want more of it, so give it to me."

I punctuated each word with a hard thrust. Each time I bottomed out I made sure to grind against her swollen clit. She tensed up, locking me between her thighs, and her beautiful blues clenched shut. Her chest rose, brushing her tight nipples against my chest, and I ground my teeth trying for a few more seconds before I came.

Reaching behind her, I grabbed onto the headboard which only had a small edge not flush against the wall. With what remained of my strength I used it to slam home harder than I had yet. A ragged inhale filled her lungs, and she held her breath.

“Give. It. To. Me,” I insisted again.

One more hard thrust had her hips lifting off the bed. My fingers dug into her fleshy curves, and I held myself buried deep inside of her. I couldn't hold back anymore. “Fuck,” I shouted at the same time she finally screamed.

Hot jets of cum were sucked out of me, and I dropped all of my weight on her, no longer able to move or even think. Sabrina's arms dropped down limply by her sides, and I finally mustered the ability to roll off of her.

There were so many things I wanted to say to her. Pretty words of love and affection, but she'd say it was too soon. And it was, for her. I'd never done anything as impulsive as marrying a near stranger. It was reckless and had the potential for being the biggest mistake of my life.

I wasn't stupid. I was a thirty-six-year-old man who saved other companies for a living. My entire life had been built on my avoidance of commitment. I moved from company to company, leaving each only when I fixed what was broken.

What I felt for her was deeper than lust. It was an awareness that I could love her so easily, and one night had me halfway there. I wasn't sure if what grew over the years I waited for her was love. It was likely a mix of memory and anticipation, but I was committed to this marriage. With that thought settling in, my eyes grew heavy, and I fell asleep for the first time with my bride tucked safely in my arms.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Sabrina

Stryker and I spent the weekend tangled together. We pushed aside any more discussion of our future or feelings. It was uncomplicated, but that bubble burst the moment we strolled into the office Monday morning. We still hadn't addressed the rumors circulating the office. A fact I was reminded of as heads turned our way as we moved out of the elevator.

While Stryker could never be described as easygoing, he was certainly more content than the man beside me now. The more attention we gained, the more he glowered. I'd heard employees talking about how grumpy he was, which I'd not really believed, until this moment. This version of him was more formidable than I'd seen thus far.

I wanted to reassure him, but I was a little taken aback by the change in his demeanor. His dark brow furrowed to a point, and his lush mouth turned down creating a force field around him pushing away anyone who might try to approach him. He watched me, and looked at the audience we were gathering. I didn't know what he was expecting so I remained silent.

Mrs. Bennett, his secretary, realized we weren't going to start the work week off with any speeches or words of encouragement and approached with papers clutched in her hand. "Mr. Lawson, I have the reports you requested."

"Set them on my desk and leave. Make sure no one interrupts," he barked, in response.

Mrs. Bennet dropped the files and hurried out of the room.

His phone rang and I took the opportunity to escape myself. There was a cloud hanging over him, and I feared his gloom would infect the entire office before lunch.

The whispers started almost immediately. I braved going into the staff breakroom to make a cup of coffee before diving into my own reports. Jana certainly hadn't exaggerated the mismanagement of Easton Corporation. Men outnumbered women in nearly all of the top positions. Even worse, their assistants often had more education. I certainly had my work cut out for me restructuring the staff.

Pulling employee records, I began by holding meetings with all of the top staff. Most of the employees worked hard to impress me, but there were a few who were in Maxwell Easton's inner circle and were resistant to the change in leadership.

An older gentleman, Ambrose Jeffries, burst into my office during a meeting with one of the junior executives. "What is the meaning of this?" he shouted and threw down the appointment card in front of me.

"That is the time I requested for you to meet with me, which is not for another hour." I went around my desk and held open my office door. "As you can see, I'm in the middle of a meeting."

He sneered at me, refusing to leave my office. "You think you can come in here and change everything? What gives you the right?"

Taking a deep breath, I rolled my shoulders back and faced him. "I *know* I can come here and make changes. It was what I was hired to do. As far as what gives me the right, you can thank Jana Greyson for that."

His upper lip curled hearing her name. "Another woman trying to take a man's job. Her father ran this company just fine."

A laugh escaped me. "Did he? Is that why the SEC is poking into his finances? I suppose the fact that every

department in this company is operating at a loss is an example of his fine stewardship.”

“He will be back in charge. You and Lawson shouldn’t get too comfortable.”

Forcing a deep breath, I squeezed the knob. Leaning into his space, I put all of my contempt into my glare. “You might have had a lot of power here under Mr. Easton, but those days are over. He is not coming back, and this company will be run according to the policies of Anderson Global and the newly created Anderson East. If you have a problem with any of this, feel free to reach out to Mrs. Greyson.”

“If I want to plan a party I’ll speak to her, otherwise, I’ll speak directly to the boss,” he sneered.

My fingers dug into the wood of the desk. I had to force myself to relax before I dug deep gashes in the wood. “If working for a woman is a problem for you, I’ll be happy to accept your resignation. Please let me know by the end of the day.”

The junior executive sat through the entire meeting without uttering a word but gasped in shock when I issued the ultimatum to Jeffries. More than the name was changing, and there were going to be some bumps along the way. After meeting with Jeffries, I was buried in one employee dispute after another. A few of Maxwell’s cronies decided to take the offer of retirement rather than work for Jana, even if she wasn’t running the company directly. By the time I’d dug out of the pile of employee dossiers I’d missed lunch, and a throbbing had developed behind my right eye.

My stomach grumbled, and I couldn’t deny I needed to stop and find something to eat. I hadn’t seen Stryker since arriving this morning. I thought I’d check in with him and see if he had eaten yet.

I raised my hand to knock on his door, and Mrs. Bennett squealed in alarm. “Oh, no! He isn’t to be interrupted.”

“I think he’ll forgive me,” I replied. We hadn’t had a moment to dispel the rumors, which left everyone in the office

still whispering behind our backs.

Someone snorted. “Of course you would think that. Spreading your legs might get you a job, but not an all-access pass. Best to let the men conduct business. I’m sure he’ll call for you if he needs you to relieve some stress.” Swiveling my head I found Jeffries loitering near the coffee station. If I didn’t have his resignation in the next couple of hours I would be terminating him.

My face turned beet red with embarrassment, and I threw open Stryker’s door without knocking. “I said not to bother me,” he bellowed without looking up from his computer.

My tongue was tied and I couldn’t get out more than a squeak.

“For fuck’s sake, I don’t have time for a bunch of bumbling fools bothering me every few minutes,” he shouted.

A dozen retorts raced through my mind, but none of them came out. Instead, I stood there like an idiot. Fed up with all the bullshit, I spun around and stomped for the door. Before I exited, I tossed out over my shoulder, “Starve then. I’m getting lunch.”

I heard him call after me as I spun around and stormed away from his office, but I was fed up with the patriarchal bullshit Maxwell built his company on. There was only one person who could help me focus past the noise of this place, and it wasn’t Stryker. Jana was the only one who would be able to understand the hill I had to climb in order to help save her company.

Even though I could hear Stryker trying to catch up to me, I jumped into the elevator and ran out of the building. Of course, with the luck I had today I stepped out to find it had started raining since I’d arrived at work. Maybe Colter was right, not that I’d ever admit it to his face, but perhaps I should have spent some of my savings to buy a car. I had plenty of time to think about my stubbornness while I walked the few blocks to Anderson Global’s main office.

Rivers of water cascaded down my skin, and a puddle spread around my feet as I stood in the lobby on the executive floor. Evie and Jana came out of one of the conference rooms together and froze when they saw me.

“Oh my God! Did you walk here? You’re soaking wet,” Evie shrieked. She hurried to my side and grabbed my hand. “Let’s get you into Beck’s bathroom. He’s got towels.”

My clothes hung heavy with all the water they absorbed. I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and pulled it away from my skin. “I’m not sure towels will be enough to fix this.”

Jana shot me a small smile. “Go with her. I’ve got a change of clothes here.”

I rolled my eyes. “All I’ve been wearing for the last few days are your clothes.”

She shrugged. “Eh, Colter’s shopper still uses your measurements and coloring to choose all my clothes. Not to mention your brother is an obsessive shopper. I’ve got too many as it is, and you’re family.”

*Family.* My shoulders relaxed, and my lips tugged up. Until Evie appeared and shook up our world that was a foreign word to me. Colter and I worked together, and we were friendly enough, but I wouldn’t have said he felt like family. My stepbrother and I weren’t close to our parents. He was already a teenager when my mom married his dad, and I was a toddler. On the rare occasion when my mom had me around, he was usually out with Beckett. We never really developed much of a bond until I became friends with Evie and Jana.

He had bonded with Waverly though. One would think sharing a half-sister we might have grown close. We didn’t though. He doted on her, and I was always on the outside of their circle. My mother and his father were selfish. Their charities, business ventures, and vacations often kept them away from spending time with the family. While Colter and I had another parent to give us the attention we needed, Waverly only had her nanny.

Colter tried to compensate for her lack of parental affection. Our parents gave Waverly every material thing she wanted, probably to assuage any guilt they felt about the time they didn't give her. She grew to value relationships based on what they could provide for her and didn't reciprocate the exchange. Since I was only two years older than her I was more competition for our mother's time than someone who provided her with anything she wanted. The older we got, the more she seemed to see me as competition than a sister.

While Colt never treated me as though I didn't belong, he was constantly consoling her when she was upset by my mere presence. Whether he meant to exclude me or not, the two of them started doing more and more without me. By the time I was in high school Colt and I only saw each other during major holidays, and even then sporadically.

A knock on the door of the bathroom jolted me back to the present. Evie slipped in and shut the door behind her. She held up a hairdryer and handed it over to me. "Jana and I were going to grab lunch. Since you're here, do you want to join us?"

"It's pretty late, isn't it?" I didn't want them stepping away from their responsibilities just because they're guessing I'm having a breakdown.

Evie shrugged. "Gracie was fussy last night, so I got a late start today. Jana lost track of time coding for the app she's developing. Lunch wasn't planned, so when we realized we'd both forgotten to eat we thought it seemed like the perfect excuse to cut out together. With you showing up at this exact time I think it was meant to be."

"I think, maybe you're right," I agreed and switched on the dryer. After I was back in dry clothes and my hair and makeup were fixed I followed the girls to Jana's car.

She looked up at the rearview mirror and caught my eyes. She gave a tiny shake of her head letting me know Evie didn't know about my marriage. I sighed. "I think I need a drink with lunch."

Jana nodded. "I know just the place."

We found a pay lot down the block from a bar Jana and Colter liked to go to, *Hot Spot*. It was a tech-themed bar and restaurant. I'd ordered food from here for Colt many times, so I knew they had a decent menu. What mattered most to me was that they served alcohol.

The rain still came down in sheets. I wasn't looking forward to being drenched again, but at least it was only half a block. Evie thrust an umbrella at me. "How you grew up in this city and don't have one of these with you at all times is a mystery to me."

Jana and I both shrugged. "Tourists carry umbrellas," Jana told her for the hundredth time.

"Native Seattleites wear rain jackets," I added.

Evie's eyebrow curved up. "You weren't wearing one."

I shrugged again. "I didn't have my stuff."

"Why?" she asked, and I knew I stepped into something.

"Let's have this discussion over a drink," I put her off and stepped out of the car under my open umbrella.

Inside the bar we moved to the back corner where we could talk away from the few people who were inside the bar at two o'clock on a Monday. We used a small device to put in our order and waited for our drinks to arrive before we started talking.

"I'm married," I blurted out after our waitress dropped off our drinks.

Evie's mouth fell open, but I held up my hand stopping her. "There's so much more I have to tell you." And then I did. I told her about getting married when I was twenty-one, about how I forgot and meeting Stryker again for the second time. I finished by telling her what happened with Waverly and how I ended up spending the weekend with Stryker in his suite.

Evie slumped back against the booth. "Well, shit."

"That brings us to today," I said and looked at Jana. "There's still a bunch of your father's cronies in the company working against you."

She nodded. "I expected as much."

I filled her in on my run in with Jefferies. "I don't think he'll be resigning by the end of the day."

She shook her head. "No, he won't. We need to dig deeper. My father hasn't given up yet, and we need to be ready. You should meet with Stryker and have everyone you suspect to be working with my father frozen out of the network and escorted off the premises."

I groaned. "Is there another suggestion? He was being a royal asshole. It's the other reason I took off in the rain."

Jana winced. "Caroline warned me he is rather grumpy. I only saw him treat a few others that way, but it's no different than how Beck was before Evie."

Evie chuckled. "He was horrible. Remember how his poor secretary used to hide from him?"

I shuddered. "Do I. Every time he ran one off I had to fill in."

Putting her elbows on the table and cradling her head, Evie smiled at me. "So, what did Stryker do?"

Compared to Beck's past mood swings this didn't sound so bad. I was already regretting my reaction. "I went to see if he'd had lunch, since he hadn't reached out to me all morning, and when I went in, he yelled at me for disturbing him."

"Did he know it was you?" Jana asked.

I deflated. My voice came out weak when I finally answered her. "I don't think so. He, uh, didn't look up from his computer." I took a breath and gave voice to what was banging around in my head. "I overreacted, didn't I?"

Neither of them answered at first. "I think so," Evie started, "but it's understandable considering everything you'd already dealt with today. He doesn't need to be shouting at the employees either. When Beck does it, that's a sure sign there's something bothering him."

I thought back over the last couple of days. Every time he tried to reach out to me emotionally, I felt my walls start to



come up. I didn't mean to hurt him, but I had when I shut him out.

Evie and Jana shared a look before Evie turned her attention back to me. She reached across the table and took my hands and giving them a reassuring squeeze. "You look conflicted. This is about more than him being a big grump in the office. I know it is because you're the grump tamer."

I barked out a laugh. "I'm the what?"

Jana and Evie shared a look then busted up too. Jana fought to stop so she could speak. "You had to have heard what they called you around the office."

Shaking my head, I waited for her to explain.

Her lips kept quirking up as she tried to keep control. "You already said that you had to handle Beck when he ran his secretaries off. Colter was usually friendly, but there were times he was a handful as well. The only one who could manage both of them was you."

"This is so not the same thing," I grumbled. "Colter is literally family. We might not have been super close while I was growing up, but when I did see him, Beck was almost always with him. You know he can't stand his dad, so he always brought Beck around as a buffer. I was only able to 'handle' him as you say because he saw me as his friend's little sister."

Jana gave me a slight smile. "And you're Stryker's wife. You can handle him. And moreover, I think he needs you to."

I exhaled a puff of air. "Well, shit. I guess I need to go back to the office, huh?"

A dark shadow fell across the table. I looked up to see Colt looming above us. "I think you can wait a bit longer."

Evie scooted out of the booth and hugged her father. It was still weird seeing them hesitate before gravitating toward each other. She was trying to be strong and independent, when it was clear she loved getting to know her father. Him staring down at her with a mix of awe, love, and sadness for all the years he missed.

Colt ruffled her head, messing up her long brown hair. She rolled her eyes but moved to my side of the booth so he could slide in next to Jana. They looked at each other and you could see that for a moment nothing else existed for them but each other.

An ache speared my chest. I wanted that. I just wasn't sure I was capable of letting myself have it. To do so meant being vulnerable, and I wasn't good with letting down my walls.

Evie cleared her throat. "You know I'm totally okay with you being together, but maybe don't do that gushy love stare thing in front of me."

I raised my hand. "I second that. I might not be your daughter," I pointed to Colt, "but I am your sister. Pretty much."

He turned his attention to me. "What do you mean by 'pretty much'?"

Shrugging my shoulders, studying the tabletop. It became really fascinating. Yep, super interesting.

"Sabrina." I forced my head up and looked at him. "Explain," he demanded.

Licking my lips I thought about what I wanted to say. "Waverly is your sister. I'm just her mother's daughter. At least biologically." I muttered the last part, but he heard me.

"She's our sister, and blood or not, you are also my sister."

An image of Waverly bent over my sofa being railed by my best friend, sort of possible boyfriend, popped into my head and I frowned. Sure, I'd planned to put an end to the potential for us to be together, but he didn't know that. He was the one who pushed for us to date each other. I thought he would have had enough respect for our friendship to at least have a conversation before screwing my sister.

Colt circled his finger in front of my face. "That look right there. What brought it on?"

Jana winced, and Evie scowled down at the table. I ignored them and prepared to give Colt a sanitized version of the truth,

then I remembered he knew. “Stryker already told you.”

Colt nodded. “He did, and now I want you to tell me. I am tired of hearing these things from other people. Why doesn’t anyone talk to me about the way Waverly treats them?”

I filled him in on the events of the night before. Not adding anything of substance other than how I felt when I caught them.

His hazel eyes seemed to darken while his dark brows pulled together in a severe line. “Was this before or after you and Malcolm had that discussion about not seeing each other anymore?”

I snorted. “Still haven’t had that discussion. I think it’s assumed at this point though.”

He inhaled slowly, forcing his anger down. He always did that, took a moment to control his emotions. “When you say hooking up—”

“I know you’re a grandpa now, but you’re not *that* old,” Jana poked fun.

“Brat, don’t make me take you over my knee.”

Evie gagged. “Everything about this is weird. My dad is making weird sexual comments with my best friend while my aunt is trying not to tell him that my other aunt was bent over the couch getting boned by the manwhore who tried to help take Jana’s company away.”

“Say what now?” Colter’s voice had hit that level of calmness that told me he was anything but calm.

“It’s pretty much what she said. I would add that I’d like to torch my couch, and a hazmat team needs to sanitize my apartment, but that’s pretty much it,” I replied.

Jana shook her head. “No, that isn’t it. First, she went after Evie when Gracie was born trying to stir up trouble. She threw a diva fit when she found out we were together. Even still you tried to be there for her. Sabrina has tried to be there for her, and we all know that she treats Brina like dirt.”

“Dad,” Evie interrupted. Everyone held their breath. She was still trying to get used to calling him that, and I know he loved it, but right now she was trying to get his attention. “I didn’t say anything when she came to the hospital and told me about you and Jana. In that moment, nothing could ruin how wonderful it was to meet my little girl. But, this is different. She knew Sabrina and Malcolm were seeing each other. Not only did she decide to sleep with him, but she did it in a way that guaranteed Sabrina would find out in the most hurtful way possible. I know you wanted to help her, but she’s hurting everyone else.”

Colt nodded. Once upon a time, he would have defended her, but it seemed the fight had left him. “I’ll take care of it.”

“She’s my sister too,” I argued.

He held his hand up. “She doesn’t treat you like a sister should. I pushed her on you, and you shouldn’t have to defend yourself in your own home. I will take care of this. Can you find a place to stay for a few days? I’ll get her out, but I need to do something I hate doing first.”

“What?” I asked bewildered.

“Talk to my father. It’s time he stepped up and handled his own daughter. I can’t do it for him anymore.” His jaw was clenched, and I felt for him.

They’d barely spoken a handful of words for years now. But, he was right. He had his own family to deal with, and neither of us could continue to be our sister’s keeper. It was time Waverly learned to stand on her own two feet.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Stryker

All morning it had been one interruption after another. First, it was my secretary, Mrs. Bennett hovering, asking me every few minutes if I needed something until I shouted at her. Then when I actually did need something I found her hiding in the supply closet. I gritted my teeth and apologized.

Not long after, the employees who'd been meeting with Sabrina started filtering in, at least the ones who had been deemed redundant or of being less qualified than their assistants, who all happened to be women. When I tried to instruct, in a nicer tone, Mrs. Bennett to keep them from barging into my office, I found her hiding in the supply closet again. Apparently she was also afraid of most of the junior executives.

I'd turned back to the report I'd been emailed this morning by one of the accountants at Anderson Global. Aaron Roberts and his team had been tasked with reviewing the financial reports from each department of Easton Corporation. I was still pouring through the findings, but it appeared there were a few departments operating at a loss. Given Maxwell's incompetence and poor staffing, that wasn't a surprise.

I was double checking the report to make sure it was accurate before I called a meeting with Jana when my door opened. "I said not to bother me," I shouted.

I didn't care if my outburst sent Mrs. Bennett back into the closet, but I needed to focus. If there was any hope of turning

this company around I had to figure out what drove those departments into the ground in the first place.

I didn't have time to spare a second to look up, but I could still feel a presence lurking in the doorway. If another employee came to justify Maxwell's management of this company I was going to lose my shit. "For fuck's sake, I don't have time for a bunch of bumbling fools bothering me every few minutes!"

"Starve then. I'm getting lunch." My heart lurched into my throat, and I hesitated too long before I chased after her.

By the time I got my ass in gear the elevator was already on the way down. She would come back. She had to. Knowing that didn't temper the surge of rage racing through me. I grabbed one of the decorations Maxwell had left behind, and threw it against the wall. It was a useless glass globe. It shattered on impact, littering the floor with shards of glass.

I pressed the button for the intercom. If Mrs. Bennett was hiding again, so help me I was going to fire her along with Maxwell's boy's club that was getting the boot today.

"M-Mr. Lawson, did you need something?"

"Get someone in here to clean up some broken glass. I'm heading out for a bit. If Ms. Lake returns, I want to be called on my cell immediately." My tone was still hostile, but I was never great at policing my tone. Perhaps I'd have to learn, but not until I apologized to Sabrina.

"Of course, right away, sir."

I stifled a groan, which was progress. Maybe I'd have to find a replacement for her anyway. I certainly couldn't handle her vacillating between cowering and fawning over me. Grabbing my jacket off the hook by the door, I did what I should have done when Sabrina walked in, followed right after her. I just had to find where she was.

I tried her cell, but it went straight to voicemail. Then I tried the hotel, but no one had seen her. I hadn't given her a key, so going to my room would be a waste of time. Inside I was panicking, but I forced myself to calm down. This wasn't

like before. She wasn't going to leave and forget me, not again.

Trusting someone for me was hard. The only person whom I'd ever given my trust to freely was my mother. Caroline worked hard to earn it, and I'd eventually let her in as well. Until now, I hadn't given much thought about the fact I didn't trust Sabrina. Not that she'd purposefully betrayed me, but pain was pain. I was hurt when she forgot about me, and I kept expecting the same thing to happen again. It would take time to move beyond that, but she'd have to stop running from me as well.

It hit me then and literally stopped me in my tracks. She would have to choose to come to me. I couldn't chase her down, if I did, I'd be one step further away from trusting what we were trying to build.

Resolved, I decided to drop in on Jana at Anderson Global. The rain was coming down hard, more than the usual spring drizzle. I pushed the button for the garage rather than the lobby and decided to take my car the few blocks to their office. The traffic was thick and it wasn't even rush hour yet. What should have taken less than five minutes ended up taking nearly twenty by the time I made it to the elevator.

When I made it up to the executive floor Beckett Anderson was waiting for me. "I saw you on the camera," he said and extended his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

I shook his hand. "It's either all true or total bullshit. Depends on whether Jana talked about me or Colter."

Beckett laughed. "It was Jana mostly. When Colter filled me in he sounded like a jealous husband. He did say you and your brother don't get along, which was a solid recommendation if I've ever heard one."

I knew my brother was not popular in many social circles, but I hadn't realized he was hated. "I know why I don't like my brother, but what about you?"

He shrugged. "He's a lot younger than me. It isn't like we went to school together, but I've seen him around enough to



know he's sleazy. Then there was the whole thing with Colter's sister."

My fists clenched. Beck took note of the change in my posture and shook his head. "Not Sabrina. Their half-sister, Waverly."

I relaxed, but I wanted more information. This was a bit more than what Sabrina had told me, and I got the feeling it was because Colter had kept it from her. "What exactly happened that has both you and Colter against him? Don't get me wrong, my brother is a dog, but he and Waverly seemed pretty friendly the other night."

"Spell it out for me," he said in a low tone.

I shuddered as the mental image came back to me. Bad relationship or not, there are some things you should not catch your younger brother doing. "Mal had Waverly bent over the couch drilling her from behind. Sabrina went in ahead of me, but we didn't linger. We spent the rest of the weekend in my suite."

His posture had gone rigid. I narrowed my eyes studying him. I could be wrong, but he didn't seem like the type of man to be this upset over his best friend's sister hooking up with a bad guy.

"I'm missing something here. Why don't you fill me in?"

He raked his hand through his dark blond hair, messing it up. "They dated years ago when Waverly was about eighteen and Malcolm was in his early twenties. Neither of them were faithful."

I nodded. "I heard this part."

His next words confirmed that Sabrina didn't have all the details. "Well, there are things that Sabrina doesn't know. Colter lost his shit when he heard. Waverly is manipulative, and he always believed her. This time though, he had seen for himself that she'd moved on to some other guy. He didn't like her behavior, which meant he was less likely to indulge her the way he always has."

"You mean give her money," I interrupted.

“Yeah. Colt tried to make up for her parents’ shortcomings by giving her things. Unfortunately, she’s too much like her mother. When she could tell Colt was disappointed in her she tried to spin things. I had my reservations about her story, but he believed it wholeheartedly.”

I was getting impatient and wanted him to get to the point. “This story must be really bad if you are so hesitant to tell it.”

He inhaled deeply. “She told Colt that he had blackmailed her into a sexual relationship with him. When Colt asked what he had on her, she told him it didn’t matter because the guy she moved on with had paid him off.”

“My brother doesn’t have the strongest moral compass, but he doesn’t need to blackmail a woman into his bed. He’s too lazy for that anyway,” I commented.

“That was what I thought at the time as well. I wonder what her excuse is going to be this time. It’ll have to be a good one to convince her brother why she went back to someone who supposedly took advantage of her,” Beck replied.

I looked around realizing most of the people were already gone. “This place is dead. Where is everyone?”

“Some are working remotely, others like to come in early. If you’re looking for Jana she’s out to a late lunch.”

“I’m actually looking for my wife, but I needed to go over some stuff with Jana too.”

I coughed and changed the subject. It was one thing to be open with Sabrina, but not with a virtual stranger. “I’d heard you were something of a hard ass. I expected all of your employees to be at least trying to look like they were working hard to kiss your ass.”

He chuckled. “I was, but that was pre-Evie. She convinced me that happy employees work harder. Ever since I eased off and stopped yelling at the staff productivity has gone up.”

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “I might have to try that. I can’t get my secretary to stop hiding in the supply closet.”

This time he laughed hard. “Mine used to hide in the bathroom.”

“That’s probably them now,” he said as the elevator dinged. “I was actually out here waiting for Evie to get back. It’s funny, I used to work late every night, and now I can’t wait to run out of here to hold my little girl.”

Jealousy speared me in the chest. I wasn’t envious of his money, but I did long for the contentment I could see in him. Then Sabrina stepped off the elevator and the envy disappeared. We might not be where they were yet, but I had hope that someday we’d be the ones cutting out of work early to snuggle our kid.

Sabrina was startled when she saw me standing with Beck. Evie took her arm and all but dragged her out of the elevator.

I nodded for Sabrina to step aside and talk to me. Surprisingly, she didn’t fight me. “I’m sorry for earlier. I didn’t see you.” She opened her mouth, but I held up a hand to stop her. “I know, that’s no excuse for how I acted. I can be an asshole. It’s not my best quality. I had found a report I was trying to make sense of.”

Jana had wandered over and didn’t seem at all embarrassed when I caught her listening. “What report?”

“It shows that several of the departments at Easton Corporation were operating at a loss. What I can’t figure out is why. There is money going in, but certain expenditures seem a bit high,” I explained.

Beck and Colter exchanged a look, and I could tell both of them were thinking the same thing I was. When expenditures for services were higher than goods, there was a higher chance those numbers were manipulated for less than honest reasons.

Colter took a step closer. “Let me guess, those are for contractors, outside marketing, and event planning?”

I nodded. “Nothing that can be counted, and I’m sure there are coordinating invoices to provide a paper trail.”

“Being stupid isn’t a crime. At least, that is what the person who orchestrated this was probably banking on. When

did these transactions begin?” Colter pressed.

“I can help with that,” a man’s voice spoke from one of the nearby cubicles. “I’m sorry, I was leaving a note for my intern and couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. I prepared the report, so I can answer what I can now, and I’ll dig deeper into this now that I know it isn’t only suspicious to me.”

Holding out my hand, I greeted him. “You must be Aaron. This was a good find.”

I expected some kind of greeting or platitude, but I’d lost his attention completely. He was staring at Sabrina in a way that reminded me of a golden retriever when it’s owner returned home. Letting my own gaze travel to my wife, I realized she was pointedly trying not to notice him back. To make it worse, Evie and Jana were watching her wide-eyed.

Of course, they knew each other. Up until a few days ago Sabrina worked here. Aaron and I couldn’t be more opposite. He was the poster boy for preppy business chic, wearing a pale pink button down and a powder blue tie. His blond hair was on the darker side and heavily styled in a way that was supposed to look carefree.

I wore a black-on-black business suit. Black shirt paired with black pants under a black jacket. I always skipped wearing a tie. My job was unconventional, I didn’t see any reason why I shouldn’t be the same. My hair was longer on top, and often flopped into my eyes, but the sides were shorn close to my head. I looked more like a biker going to the bank for a loan than a businessman.

Aaron blushed as he looked at Sabrina. “It’s been a while since I’ve run into you,” he stumbled.

She looked at me quickly, before she returned her attention to him. “Yeah, I’ve been busy moving to this new role. And you were working at the office in Portland.”

His head bobbed up and down with every word she spoke. “I know. Our timing was off before. Maybe we can find some time this week to go to dinner and chat.”

If I ground my teeth any harder together I'd risk cracking one of them. I was still standing next to Sabrina, so I dropped my arm around her and tucked her close to my side. She went stiff in my arms, but she didn't squirm away. It could have been the way my arm kept her trapped next to me, but my message was clear, she belonged next to me.

When Sabrina didn't respond right away an awkward tension surrounded us. Subtly, she elbowed me in the ribs, but I didn't let go like she was hinting. Instead, I focused on Aaron. He squirmed the longer I looked at him, but Sabrina hadn't spoken up to turn him down.

The longer she kept her mouth shut, the more irritated I became. All she had to do was tell him she was married. Hell, she could have said she was seeing someone. Anything so long as she let him know they wouldn't be going on some kind of a fucking date.

I grew tired of waiting and cleared my throat. "Sunshine, you were just asked on a date. Aren't you going to answer?"

For his part, Aaron stood there making me question his intelligence. It didn't take a genius to ascertain Sabrina and I were together.

Sabrina shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Aaron, there've been a lot of changes, I don't think we should have dinner."

His head drooped, and I felt bad for the guy. He deserved the truth, but I wasn't going to relish delivering it. "I hope you'll still help dig through the reports. You did an amazing job uncovering these transactions. I hope you'll understand me not wanting my wife to go on a date with another guy."

Sabrina glared at me, and I knew she wasn't planning to tell him. Worse, she seemed pissed at me because I did. "Did you have any questions about the report right now? We need to get back to the office," she said through clenched teeth.

"You're right, Sunshine. There's something we need to address back at the office." I turned toward Aaron. "I don't

have any questions at the moment. I'd like to examine the report again and then touch base with you later."

"Of course," he agreed.

I caught Colter's eyes, and he nodded. I didn't need to explain further. He and Beck would understand I was taking my woman to get a few things straight. Without further delay, I guided her to the elevators.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Sabrina

The entire way back to the office was tense. Neither of us spoke, content to let our anger fester. I'm not sure if he was pissed because I left or if it was because I didn't feel like that was the moment to broadcast our marriage. A marriage I was still coming to terms with and wasn't convinced was going to last. So, yeah, forgive me for wanting to keep that under wraps for a while.

I knew why I was angry. It had been building for days and not all of it was Stryker's fault. But, every hurt inside of me had tangled together to form this swirling mass in my gut. I was twisted up and I didn't know how to get free.

Sure, I was more than a little irritated at him for yelling at me earlier when I went to see if he wanted to grab lunch. If I were honest with myself though, I had to admit that I was angry because he's had five years to come to terms with being married to a stranger, and I was struggling to catch up. Yet he was ready to announce our marriage to the world.

He was right, that was the best way to handle the rumors going around the office. The problem was it was also making a declaration I wasn't sure I was ready to make. I thought I could, we'd discussed it, but when the moment was in front of me I couldn't speak the words. I knew it wasn't his fault, but a part of me blamed him for all of the chaos in my life right now.

Stryker pulled the car into the concrete tunnel and started spiraling up the ramp to the upper floor. I held my breath as we went around several turns. This was another reason I had



avoided getting another car. The way the ramp seemed to get smaller the higher we got made me feel like the ceiling was coming down on us. Not unlike how I felt like everything was closing in on me now.

My mind wandered until Stryker slipped the car into his parking space and turned off the car. I knew he was going to try and talk about what was going on, but I wasn't ready. He turned to me, and I braced myself.

“Sunshine—“

My fight or flight instinct kicked in and I practically leaped out of the car and ran to the elevators. Stryker's large body took a bit longer to unfold from his compact car. I thought I would be able to flee to my office to find a moment to think, but he caught the elevator door right as it was sliding closed.

“Thought you'd get away from me that easily, huh?” he said and added a tscking sound.

“I'd hoped,” I mumbled petulantly.

My foot tapped as I watched the numbers rise for each floor we passed. I wondered how I might slip by him and barricade myself in my office for the rest of the workday. Which a quick glance at my watch told me was only another hour and a half if I wanted to set a bad example and high tail it out of here the moment the clock struck five. After spending my morning lecturing the stodgy executives about the importance of dedication to the company, that would likely undermine any progress I'd made. Assuming, of course, the collection of chauvinists who work here listened to a single word I'd said.

A ding sounded in the car signaling we arrived on our floor. Before I was able to enact my escape plan, which was nothing more than trying to run past him while wearing heels, he grabbed my elbow and dragged me toward his office. I made a mental note to switch my office footwear as he pulled me past a crowd of the employees who had not listened to a word I had said and were loitering in the lobby doing absolutely zero work to benefit the company.

I might have been more irritated by their ineffectualness, except they were already whispering about what they were watching and didn't even give us the courtesy to wait to get behind Stryker's office door.

Yanking on my arm, I whisper-yelled through clenched teeth. "Drop my arm, everyone is watching!"

He dropped my arm, but then he tossed me over his shoulder and continued to march toward his office like he was being chased. Maybe in his Neanderthal sized brain, judging solely on his caveman tactics, he saw all the other men standing around as competition.

"Stryker!" I screeched, no longer caring about keeping my voice down.

"Woman," he grunted and swatted my ass. See? Total caveman. "I am not putting you down until we are in my office."

I swear he paused right in the middle of the gawking crowd just to make sure I felt the total scope of the embarrassment of being carried over the shoulder and spanked like a child for all my subordinates to see.

In a lower voice only I could hear, he whispered, "Unless there's an announcement you're ready to make."

My jaw snapped shut with such force if my tongue had been in the way I risked losing it. I should have known that was what this was about. This morning I hesitated in telling the office about our marriage as we had discussed. In all fairness though, we never decided that I would be the one to bring it up. He was the acting CEO, it seemed more fitting he would be the one to broach the subject.

Not that I wasn't a bit relieved when he kept his mouth shut. A part of me was hoping they'd move past any curiosity about what the status of our relationship was and give us some space to figure it out ourselves. Well, me, give me the space I needed since Stryker seemed to be one hundred percent pro staying married until we died. Or at least, he was before I

pissed him off. Right now he might be more on the side of the death part.

“That’s what I thought,” he scoffed as I continued to remain silent. Finally, he moved us the last few feet into his office and kicked the door closed.

When he set me on my feet I moved around his desk to keep some space and furniture between us.

I don’t know how he managed it, but his eyes seemed to reflect both irritation and desire as they moved slowly up my body. Each step he took toward me was both a threat and a promise. My heart kicked up in a mixture of fear and anticipation.

I wanted him. I wouldn’t lie about that, at least not to myself, but I didn’t want to want him at this moment.

He continued to stalk toward me, and I kept trying to move away keeping the desk between us.

“If you think keeping a piece of furniture between us is going to stop me, then consider that lesson one on getting to know me.”

Stryker lunged across the desk, knocking off everything in his way. Thanks to the stupid heels, I wasn’t able to get away fast enough, and he managed to press me down over the top of the desk. It was possible I wasn’t trying very hard, but at least I gave it some effort.

With his hand on the back of my neck, he kept me bent over the cold surface, my cheek flat against the glossy wood. His free hand slid up my thigh, and my breathing picked up causing the shiny surface to fog up with each exhale.

I was confused and aroused. It was plain to see why I wanted him. He was like every one of my fantasies made flesh. What had me baffled was that I found his dominance hot. The way he towered over me, combined with the heat of his body as he caged me in made my heart race. But, I had a type. Or at least I thought I had. Every man I’d previously dated had always been extremely respectful.

They all made the appropriate romantic gestures. Dinner at a fancy restaurant, flowers when they picked me up, and a kiss on the cheek to end the evening. It was all so predictable, and boring. Until right now I'd thought it was what I wanted. The fact I didn't feel anything on any of those dates, not that there had been a lot of them, was because I hadn't found *the one*. Or so I had thought, at least.

Stryker managed to make me feel like a current pulsed through my entire body, all without treating me like I was delicate. He certainly didn't follow any rules on dating, but I guess we'd skipped the dating phase of a relationship. He was a stranger even if he was my husband. But the reservations holding me back didn't appear to affect him. No, Stryker touched my body like he owned it. And, while I was a feminist to my core, a part of me was getting off on giving in.

I knew without a doubt if I told him to stop, he would. Even though he was exerting control, I realized it was me who really held the power in this exchange. Knowing that didn't erase the feeling of being dominated by him. If anything, the fact that I was choosing to submit, even subconsciously, seemed to help me relax. The war inside my head over wanting to maintain my autonomy and the fact I was enjoying being under Stryker's authority disappeared. There was enormous power in choice. It meant I was actively participating in what occurred between us, rather than seeing this encounter as something happening to me.

Stryker's hand continued to venture up my thigh, and my flesh tingled where his fingers touched. There were calluses on his hands, and the scrape of them against the tender flesh of my thighs made me shiver. When he finally reached my lace-covered pussy, my entire body trembled and I sucked in air.

His warm breath fanned across my face as he whispered in my ear. "You can keep fighting me if you need to, but you can't lie about how you feel. I'm on to you now. You want me, but you don't want to make the decision. I'm not going to make it easy on you. When the office finds out what we are to each other, it'll be from your lips."

“What does it matter if a bunch of people we work with know we’re legally married? You don’t even like them,” I muttered.

A rumbling growl vibrated from his chest. “I won’t be your dirty secret. I’ve lived that way once, and I swore I’d never do it again.”

“Everyone that matters to me knows. I’m not keeping us a secret. I just want a chance to figure out what we are,” I replied. I wanted to demand why we were talking about this instead of packing up to leave. “So, are we going to go back to your hotel room to continue this conversation?”

A dark chuckle rumbled against my back, and a jolt of fear raced through me. If someone had told me that a little fear could heighten arousal, I’d have called them a liar. I was wrong. My pulse relocated between my legs, making my clit pound insistently until the only thought in my head was a screaming need for him to relieve the ache.

His tongue slowly traced the artery in my neck until he reached the sensitive skin under my ear. He sucked hard and I felt the throbbing increase in my core. An embarrassing whimper escaped my throat, drawing another quiet laugh from him.

Slowly his free hand trailed up my chest, brushing between my breasts with a featherlight touch until he reached my neck. His hand wrapped around my throat, but he didn’t squeeze. It felt like a reminder and a warning. He only paused for a moment, then he continued the journey, only now I could feel the scrape of his callused hands moving up until his hand gripped my jaw.

He turned my head to the side to face him. The soft brush of his lips against my cheek elicited another shiver from me. “Do you really think I can walk out of here like this?”

I was going to ask him what he meant, but then he pushed against me. I felt his very obvious erection against my ass. He correctly read my silence as agreement. The hand under my chin moved to cover my mouth. “You’re going to have to be very quiet. Can you do that?”

Without meaning to, a whimper escaped my mouth. Stryker tsked. “Naughty girl. I think you want me to punish you.”

The hand between my legs moved up to my hips to raise my skirt. “I think I might enjoy punishing you. For all of the nights I’ve spent alone, every date you went on while we were apart, and for going out with my brother.”

My breath caught as I waited for his next move. I didn’t anticipate him stepping back from me.

“Stryker?” I asked. He had my head spinning with his advance and retreat moves.

“Frustrating isn’t it?”

This time I was the one that growled. Of course, when I did it sounded more like an angry kitten. I started to stand straight and tug at the hem of my dress. “If you’re just going to play with me, I’m going to go to my office.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and kept me from rising up all the way. With his other hand he grabbed the zipper on the back of my dress and pulled. “I’m going to play with you all right. You never answered my question. Can you be quiet?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but once again he covered it with his hand.

“Never mind. The state you’re in right now, you’d promise me anything. You didn’t want them to know about us this morning, so I’m going to help you keep quiet.” He leaned against me, pushing me down once again. When he leaned forward he whispered in my ear, “Because, you are going to want to scream.”

Stryker’s hand went back over my mouth, and he used his hold to pull me against his chest. With me standing up he tugged at my dress until it slipped down my body to pool at my feet. “That’s more like it.”

“Put your hands on the desk,” he commanded.

I obeyed his instruction immediately, afraid he’d pull away from me again. He slid his hand down my flank and back up,

stopping on the strap of my bra. His finger slipped under the band and moved underneath it to the center of my back. Using that one hand he unclasped it and let it slide down my arms. He reached past me and grabbed a letter opener off the desk. The dull edge pressed into my flesh, slipped under the waistband of my underwear, and shredded it.

“Lean forward onto your elbows.”

Again, I obeyed. “Good girl,” he praised, and I hummed in anticipation. “Did I speak too soon, Sunshine? I’m going to let go for a minute, and you’re going to stay still and quiet. Nod and let me know you’re going to be my good girl.”

I bobbed my head. He stepped back and I fought the urge to turn around. My skin chilled and the seconds he wasn’t touching me felt like an eternity. When one of his hands finally grabbed my waist, I hummed with pleasure.

“I got you worked up to the point you aren’t going to be able to help yourself, didn’t I?” he asked, and lightly bit the sensitive skin under my ear while waiting for me to answer.

Another pathetic whine slipped my mouth. Stryker responded by placing his other hand back over my mouth. “You know I love seeing you become a dirty slut, but I don’t want to share any part of your pleasure with the staff. When you beg me to fuck you harder, that will be for my ears only. I will be the only one who gets to hear the music of your moans and screams as you come around my cock.”

His naughty words unleashed something inside of me, and I moaned into his hand. “Please,” I begged. He was right. I would be begging him to fuck me harder, or at all. If he drew this out much longer I was going to go out of my mind.

“Is this what you want?” he asked while he dragged the head of his cock up and down my slit.

I tried to nod, but it was harder to move my head with his hand acting as a kind of restraint.

“What would you do to get this?” Stryker held still at the entrance to my pussy. As hard as I tried to push back and

impale myself on his shaft, his fingers dug into my waist keeping me from moving.

“Please, please. Stryker, just please,” I chanted.

“Will you admit that you’re mine?” The hand holding my hip slid forward to stroke against my clit.

I choked back a groan and my eyes rolled back into my head. He hadn’t even entered me yet and I was already on the verge of coming. Knowing that everyone in the office would hear me if I screamed seemed to increase how turned on I was.

“Say it,” he demanded, and his cock slid in enough to taunt me. “Say it and I’ll give you what you need. Hold back and I’ll keep you on the edge between arousal and orgasm.”

Another inch and I started clawing at the desk to distract myself. He turned my face his direction and rested his lips against mine. “Admit it. If not to them, at least to me.”

I swallowed, and finally said to him what I had already admitted to myself. “I’m yours.”

His lips devoured mine. When his tongue pressed against the seam of my lips I opened to him. Our tongues danced together, and I moaned into his mouth as his hips thrust forward slamming his cock deep inside of me.

With his mouth covering mine, swallowing every sound I made, his hand grabbed hold of my hips. He used his strength to work me over his rigid cock. He held himself deep inside of me, rubbing quickly over a spot that made me see spots. My body tensed as waves of pleasure coursed through my entire body.

Stryker pulled out, and I collapsed, boneless onto the desk. He lifted me up. “I’m far from done with you.”

Unable to speak, or move, I let him roll me over to my back. He draped my legs over the crook of each elbow and spread my legs open wide.

Ordinarily, I’d be self-conscious to be on display like this, but I didn’t even have the strength to muster up a shred of modesty. Yet, despite my exhausted state, a thrill ran through



me with the knowledge I would get to feel the thick girth of his cock stretching me again.

His dark eyes heated while he watched his cock push back inside of me. I stretched out my arms and grasped the edge of his desk while he drove inside of me over and over again. Gone was the controlled man who worked hard to muffle the sounds I made when I came. Stryker became primal, driven by need and desire.

All his efforts to keep the rest of the office from knowing what we were doing in private were destroyed by each creak of the wooden desk as it moved back and forth over the tile floor. His pupils were blown wide and the tendons in his neck strained as he tipped his head back. He gave one final deep thrust at the same time and held himself as deep as he could go. A long, low moan ripped from his throat just as he shuddered and filled me with hot jets of cum.

Spent, he dropped down into his chair, pulling me off the desk to rest in his lap. His arms came around me and held me tightly to his chest. We were a sweaty, sticky mess. My hair was a wild mess around my head. If by some miracle the entire office didn't hear the roar Stryker released as he came, we both reeked of sex and had the hair to match.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why I was supposed to care about everyone knowing I just had my brains fucked out in the office. In my current state of being high on oxytocin, I couldn't seem to muster any embarrassment. It could also have had something to do with the feel of Stryker's heart pounding under my head where it rested on his chest and the knowledge that its racing beat was because of me.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Stryker

The next few days at the office were interesting. Mrs. Bennett had either found a new hiding place, or she'd quit and failed to turn in her notice. I needed to remember to speak to Sabrina about replacing her. Of course, we'd have to find her first.

The rest of the staff spent their time gawking at us. Some were covert and tried peeking over the top of file folders, or looking when they thought we weren't paying attention. Those were the ones I wouldn't be adding to Sabrina's list of employees to speak to.

I didn't particularly enjoy firing people. My reputation might suggest otherwise, but having grown up with a single mom, I didn't relish the idea I could be the cause of someone else's suffering. However, my sympathy only went so far. All of the old perverts who clung to Maxwell were doing a good job of pushing me past that limit.

Whenever we had to discuss business behind closed doors they made rude comments. "Make sure to earn that office, sweetie," Jeffries yelled as Sabrina closed the door of my office.

All the color leached out of her face, and her eyes cast down to the ground. This wouldn't be happening if we'd told everyone about us like I'd wanted to, but I got the sense now was not the time to bring that up.

I set down the stack of files in my hands and wrapped my arms around her. "Say the word and he's fired," I said with my

face buried in her hair.

Sabrina sniffled, a sure sign this was getting to her more than she let on. “He was supposed to be fired days ago.”

I winced. Right, he threatened to file suit for wrongful termination, so his pink slip was being delayed while I created a bulletproof case for letting him go. I smiled because I realized that was no longer necessary.

Kissing the side of her head, I guided her to sit in my chair so she could use my computer. “Take a look at that report Aaron sent over. I’m going to go handle Jeffries.”

Her tiny hand grasped my wrist and pulled me back. “Stryker, just leave it. I know he threatened to sue.”

My smile stretched across my face. “You see, sexual harassment is grounds for dismissal everywhere.”

A tiny smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. “Look at you solving problems. Keep this up and I’m going to have to buy you a white horse.”

My eyes narrowed, and I leaned forward, resting a hand on each arm rest, caging her in. “If you’re going to be a bad girl, you’re going to get punished.”

Slowly her midnight blue eyes lifted to mine. That smile became a smirk. “How are you going to do that in a hotel suite? Didn’t the neighbors complain last night?”

Last night was fantastic until the front desk manager knocked on the door. Apparently, he’d tried to call multiple times, but the phone had gotten knocked off the nightstand during a very energetic make-out session. We hadn’t even undressed when he started banging on the door.

“Mr. Lawson, I-I’m so sorry to disturb you and your guest, but the rooms around you have started complaining about the noise. This is a five star hotel, not the kind of place where you have guests,” he coughed the last part.

He was red with embarrassment the entire time, but I was turning colors only at the end. Sabrina strolled over, her hair

mussed around her making her look well fucked, and plastered herself to my side.

She looked up at me, fresh-faced since she had showered right after work. I could see a light dusting of freckles on her nose. A nose that turned up slightly at the end and made her look like a pixie. Not able to resist, I tapped the end of her nose with my finger causing her to scrunch it adorably.

Her eyes turned sad when she looked over at the judgmental man at the door. “He thinks I’m a hooker, doesn’t he? Why does everyone think I’m a whore?”

His eyes bugged out of his head, and he went from a deep crimson to more of an eggplant color. “I don’t think, of course not, this just isn’t the place for—” He flopped his hand around like that would explain what he was trying to say.

“So I should put in my review that this isn’t the kind of hotel you should stay in when you’re newlyweds?” I asked.

This time his mouth fell open. “No, I’m not saying that at all. Of course, this is the perfect place.”

Sabrina pouted. That fat bottom lip jutted out, making me groan with the need to pull it between my teeth. She looked up at me, and I swear I saw a flash of mischief before she schooled her features back into the sulking young bride.

“This place isn’t very fun, baby. You promised me a romantic honeymoon. I don’t like it here.”

I shot the manager a look that said, *see what you’ve done?*

I snapped out of the memory. “If I recall, that was how we ended up getting champagne and strawberries sent up to our suite as a gift from the hotel.”

Straightening up, I smoothed down my jacket. “You’re right though. It’s not the right place. I’m in the mood to set things straight, so after we leave here, we’re evicting your sister from your apartment.”

She flopped back and crossed her arms. “Of course. I’m probably cramping your style at the hotel.”

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes at her, I paused at the door. “We will be discussing that comment later. Right now I have a misogynist to fire.”

“Jeffries, a word,” I barked and moved toward his office. I didn’t look back to make sure he was following me. I knew he would.

I stepped into his office and waited. It only took him a few seconds to enter behind me. “I have my lawyer on speed dial,” he warned and waved around his phone.

I shrugged. “Do it. Ask them what the standard penalty is when an employee commits an act of sexual harassment.”

He sputtered. “Please, what I said was hardly that bad. Maxwell would have asked her if she had a gag reflex. Besides, you’d have to prove it.”

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “You mean the office full of employees who have a habit of loitering in the greeting area? Something like that?”

He grinned and I fought a shudder. I hoped in the next thirty years I had someone in my life who would tell me if my spray tan turned me orange and my teeth had been bleached so white they burned the retinas of your eyes. Better yet, I hoped I had someone who wouldn’t let me do either of those things to start with.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but the staff hates you,” he gloated.

Hate seemed like a strong word, but considering it was Tuesday afternoon and no one had seen my secretary yet this week, it might be the correct one.

“They don’t hate me,” Sabrina said from just outside the office, causing me to jump.

Sabrina slipped into the room, and casually leaned against the door jam. She examined her nails as if she didn’t care at all about the results of this conversation. “Now tell me, how many of the women out there will have something to say about you for themselves? One story might be ignored, but add on to

that and you've got a pattern of behavior. Judges have a much harder time overlooking those.”

Jeffries' shoulders slumped. “Is the retirement package still part of the deal?”

I opened my mouth to tell him if he left quietly then jail wouldn't be included, but he was insane if he thought I was going to sign off on him getting his pension after sexually harassing my wife. Sabrina must have sensed I was about to overshare because she put her hand on my arm and stepped in front of me.

“I'd say that depends on you and what you know,” she began.

His chin started to lift, but he must have realized how screwed he was because he lowered it back down. “I'm not saying anything about Maxwell.”

I held my arms out to the sides. “Look around. He isn't here. He isn't coming to save your job. His mismanagement of the company is why I'm here in the first place.”

Jeffries turned his attention to Sabrina. “What would you like to know?”

She tossed a piece of paper on the desk. Then she pulled a framed painting off the wall and revealed a safe. “It's so predictable it's boring. So how about we cut to the chase? I'm willing to bet there's a thumb drive, or maybe a disk in there with a ledger containing figures that will match all the losses the accountant found missing from each of the struggling departments.”

“Open it,” I said in a low threatening voice.

He jumped and hurried to the safe.

“Combination,” I demanded so we could get back in.

“36-18-8,” he mumbled as he spun the tumbler to each of those numbers.

The mechanism clicked when it unlocked and the door creaked as he opened it. I shouldered him out of the way and removed a leather bound accounts ledger.

“I should have bet money it would be a book.” Sabrina flipped through it, stopped on a page, and set it down on the desk.

She stabbed her finger down on one line of the ledger. Then she slapped down the print off next to it. “If you can tell us why the same amounts missing from this report are recorded here in this ledger from your office, deposits to a numbered account from the looks of it, then maybe we can discuss the possibility of you keeping your retirement account.”

“I looked you up,” he said, ignoring her demand. “You have a degree in Marketing. I believe Event Management was your specialty.”

“Your point?” Sabrina asked.

Jeffries’ lip sneered as if we didn’t have him by the short and curlies. “Why don’t you ask whoever fed you this information?”

Her eyes narrowed which were at odds with the smirk spreading across her mouth. “It seems just like your job here at Easton Corp, you did a half assed job on your research. Maybe that’s why you didn’t find out I minored in accounting and actually passed my CPA. Your help would make this easier, but rest assured, I can do it without you. And in that event, what would we be paying you for?”

I grunted and turned my back on her so I could try to slyly adjust my suddenly rock hard dick. Who would have thought I had a math kink? I shook my head at that errant thought. It wasn’t the fact she was good at math, I already knew she was smart, but I definitely had a Sabrina kink.

Jeffries held his hands in front of him defensively. “I just held the books. I may have overheard Maxwell on the phone a few of the times we were out to dinner. I know he had a partner who was helping him clean the money. I only helped to keep the various directors from telling the feds about the skimming. I didn’t see why they needed to keep track of every dollar. This is his company. What business is it of theirs if he wanted to run it into the ground?”



My fists clenched by my sides. “It wasn’t his company. It was Jana’s. I think theft very much interests the government, and defrauding stockholders is a concern of theirs too. While he was helping himself to the company’s coffers, he was inflating the worth of the company so that investors would pay a higher price for the stock. I might not be a criminal prosecutor, but I can promise you there would be jail time attached to that charge.”

He dropped down into his chair. “I don’t know as much as you seem to think I do. I don’t even know who the other partner was. Max liked to keep all the pieces separate from each other. I only provided cover here in the company. What I can tell you is that Max and this other person were running a shadow business of sorts. The other person would shut down in reality, but their books would reflect a regular day of business. It would have to be a service industry, a restaurant, bar, maybe a casino where a lot of cash is going in and it’s easy to lose track of how much was going out.”

I caught Sabrina’s eye. “Do you think it could be a nightclub?”

Jeffries shrugged. “I guess, or a casino.”

“That isn’t proof that it’s him,” she said to me, not bothering to help Jeffries understand who we were discussing.

I nodded. “I know, but we need to check.” Turning to Jeffries I pointed at him. “You will pack up your office and leave quietly. When you are contacted by someone from Anderson Global, probably Aaron Roberts, you will be forthcoming and tell him everything you know. Even if you don’t think it will help.”

I didn’t wait for him to reply. We both knew he would comply. There was no other choice if he wanted even a fraction of the cushy retirement package he had been promised, likely stuffed with cash stolen from Jana.

Sabrina was right behind me and we heard Jeffries grumbling as he placed his personal effects into a box. So much for being quiet. That was fine though. I had no intention of giving him the original amount in his account. Once Aaron

combed through Jeffries finances, I'm sure a fair number could be reached. One that would match the retirement benefits given to women who had the same level of education and years spent at the company.

Grabbing Sabrina's hand, I pulled her faster down the hallway.

She tried to yank her arm back. "What is the rush? The workday isn't even over."

"We've got something of more urgency that needs to be addressed. It looks like we're going to have to deal with my brother soon. I'd hoped we were done with him, but that's not my luck, but before we face him, we need to take care of your sister."

"Do we have to?" she whined.

"We at least need her out of your apartment," I reminded her.

She turned her face away from me and muttered, "Yeah, I guess it's time."

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Stryker

“**W**hy do you have so many boxes?” Sabrina asked me as I carried an armful of flat boxes up the stairs of her apartment.

“What I want to know is why there’s no elevator in this building,” I grunted as I tried to keep a hold of everything. For being lightweight they were awkward to carry.

“Some of us have spent the last several years working as an assistant.” She punctuated her statement by bumping her shoulder into me, causing the boxes to scatter all over the stairs. “Shit! Sorry.”

A few of the boxes slid down the stairs, and she put her hand on my elbow. “This is my fault. Let me grab those, and you go ahead of me. Bonus if you can confront my sister and tell her to get out before I get there.”

She flashed me one of those smiles that was more tension than joy. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pulled her close to my chest and kissed the side of her head. If there was one thing I understood, it was a strained relationship with a sibling.

A metallic clang of one of the stairwell doors closing alerted us to someone heading up the stairs. I wasn’t prepared to see my brother turn the corner.

“Sabrina,” he called out, surprised. A wide smile spread across his face, and I wanted to plant my fist in it, again.

“Can you hang back a second so we can talk? Please?” he begged.

Sabrina looked up at me and raised her brow. “I won’t if it’ll bother you.”

Inhaling deep through my nose I pushed down my over-the-top possessiveness of her. “I’ll be just upstairs if you need me.”

She smiled at me, and I knew I made the right decision. Every step I took away from her was hard, but I had to trust she could handle Malcolm. I didn’t think he’d try anything. He was a callous asshole, but *usually* he understood consent.

I didn’t bother knocking since this was Sabrina’s apartment. Waverly walked out of the bathroom in a short silk robe. The sash was tied loosely around her waist, and it gaped open exposing the swell of her breasts.

The boxes slipped from my hands as I spun around. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—” What? Interrupt her? I certainly did mean to come in and demand she pack.

“I brought boxes,” I gestured behind me. “Please get dressed and we can help you pack.”

“Why would I pack?” she asked behind me.

“You know why. Sabrina hasn’t been here in several days.” I thought I was pointing out the obvious, but the baffled look on her face when I risked looking back showed she didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Because I hooked up with Malcolm? That’s stupid,” she scoffed.

I held my breath and released it slowly through my nose trying to calm down. Her sister and my brother might actually be perfect for each other.

“You knew damn well they were seeing each other.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please, save the act. She should be thanking me. Malcolm is driven by his dick. Where it points, he follows.”

Her lips curved up, and she slowly trailed her fingers along her chest, drawing my eye to the gaping opening. “We don’t have to fight. I’m a lot more fun than my sister. You like fun,

don't you, Stryker?" Somehow she managed to purr my name. Under different circumstances, like amnesia, I might have been drawn to her myself. She was a beautiful woman. Large dark hazel eyes, thick dark hair, and curves for days. I could see why someone as weak as my brother was tempted to stray.

Not me though. I'd seen my fair share of gorgeous women in my thirty-six years, and bedded many of them before that impulsive night in Vegas. For the last five years I'd avoided every temptation. It wasn't just Sabrina's outer beauty that kept me faithful. She had an inner light that captivated me. And even if she didn't, I didn't cheat. I would never be like my sperm donor.

While I was lost in my head, I faintly heard the rustle of silk. I looked toward the sound and found a very naked Waverly standing in front of me with a grin on her face. She thought the sight of her naked body was all it would take to send my resolve crumbling.

Unfortunately, before I could open my mouth to set her straight, the door opened and Sabrina walked in followed by my asshole brother. Her hand shook as she raised it to cover her mouth, and her blue eyes filled with tears. She whirled around and ran out the door.

"Sabrina!" I ran after her, but Malcolm stepped in front of me giving her time to get away before I could explain.

Fists clenched at my side, I let my brother see every ounce of contempt I held for him. "You need to get out of my fucking way this instant. I will end you if you try to get between us."

Malcolm's lips curled in a sneer. "You mean the way you got between us? Do you think I'm stupid?"

I gave him a deadpan look. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

"You must have thought I was dumb if you thought that I wouldn't see through the ruse of hiring her as an executive just to get close to her."

"How were you ever her friend if you fail to see how amazing she is? She's intelligent, beautiful, kind—"

Malcolm laughed, but I missed whatever he found so funny. “Careful brother, you sound like you’re in love with her.”

Of course, falling in love would be a joke to him. He only loved himself. “How could I not? But, my feelings for her have nothing to do with her getting that position. Fitz Anderson chose her himself.”

He shook his head. “I worked really hard for her pussy when all I had to do was give her a job? I’m sure she was banging her step-brother before Jana sunk her claws in. She’s a needy bitch.”

The urge to laugh overwhelmed me and I couldn’t stop one hollow sounding chuckle from escaping. “You’ve sure got a lot of people fooled.”

“Not anymore,” Sabrina said from the doorway.

She looked over at me, and the sadness pooling in her eyes nearly brought me to my knees. The urge to hit my brother was stronger than it had ever been before. “What do you need?” I asked her, ignoring our siblings.

“Take me out of here.” She looked around, and crossed her arms, holding herself. “I’d say take me home, but I don’t think I have one of those anymore.”

“The hell you don’t,” boomed a voice from the hall.

Colter stepped into the doorway. His eyes fell on Waverly, and his jaw clenched. He panned over to me, and I could see the question in his eyes.

I threw my hands up. “Don’t look at me like that. Your sister came on to me.”

“Put some goddamn clothes on Wave. We need to talk,” he ordered.

She ran into her room, leaving her robe on the floor.

“Were you ever my friend, or has it always been fake?” Sabrina asked Malcolm.

I could practically see the wheels turning in his head trying to figure out how to talk his way out of this. He took a step toward her, and I pulled her behind me.

“Not another step. Brother or not, I’ll lay your ass out,” I warned him.

Sabrina moved around me and pushed me back. “Please,” was all she said. I knew she needed answers. As much as I knew it would hurt her, she deserved to know.

“Answer me, Malcolm,” she demanded.

“Of course it was real.” He smiled at her, but it looked smarmy. “I didn’t mean what I said. My brother just sets me off.”

“So you decided to insult me to get to him?” she pushed.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that,” he mumbled.

“Was I also not supposed to hear all the whispers going around the office? That was you, right? You’re the one who told them I slept my way to the top? Because how was that supposed to hurt Stryker?”

Malcolm threw his hands up. “I was pissed, okay? You were my best friend. I thought we were going to be together and you started working with the person I hate most? Why?”

She exhaled forcefully. “Of course, it’s all about you. Right? It doesn’t matter that I’ve worked my ass off. I’m good at my job, but you had to reduce my accomplishments to me sleeping my way to the top. You even implied that I screwed my brother?”

“What? Someone better explain that right now,” Colter demanded. His voice was low and menacing.

“It’s not like you’re actually related,” Malcolm sneered.

“It’s like you want to die,” I mumbled.

Sabrina wasn’t distracted. “Why did you pursue me? If you thought all of this about me, why did you go after me?”

“What difference does it make? Nothing I say is going to make you feel better. Maybe you were just a challenge. It



doesn't matter now."

"Bullshit," I said. "You'd never gone after her before, so why now?"

The mask fell off, and for the first time I was seeing the man he really was under the veneer of charm. "Because you came back! Do you think I haven't kept tabs on you? That I don't know everything there is to know about you?"

Sabrina gasped. "You knew? This whole time? You knew I was married and didn't tell me?"

Malcolm smiled a cruel smile. "Yes, I knew you married my brother. I thought you'd tell me, but you didn't seem to know, and I wasn't going to let him have you."

"So you wanted to date me only to keep me from him?"

He shrugged. "I watched him. It wasn't long before I figured out you were what he wanted most."

"Get out," she said in a flat tone. "I don't ever want to see you again."

He laughed. "Tough shit, *sister*."

"You heard her," Colter interrupted. "Get the fuck out."

Malcolm headed for the door, knocking me into Sabrina on his way. "I'm done here. For now."

He had something up his sleeve. I wasn't sure what, but I knew his words were a threat.

Colter turned on us. "Why didn't you tell me there were rumors being spread around the office?"

Sabrina moved away from me. "Because I can handle myself. I'm not Waverly. You haven't cleaned up my messes before, why start now?"

Colter sucked in a breath, then nodded. "I deserve that. And I've got one more mess to clean up, but this time it's my fault."

"No," Sabrina insisted. "She's my sister too."

"Waverly," Colter shouted. "Get out here!"

She stomped out of her room, carrying an overnight bag. “I’m out, right? I get it. There’s no way that stuck up bitch was ever going to let me stay here unless you were forcing her.”

Sabrina lunged forward, but I managed to grab hold of her before she could hit her sister. Not that I would have blamed her, but she would have regretted it. There was already enough she was going to torture herself over.

“I’ve done everything I could to make up for how cold your parents are. But, I see now that I might have done more harm to you than they have. I don’t like the person you’ve become. Sabrina has never done anything to you, and you treat her like she’s garbage every chance you get. All this time I’ve been worried about you being neglected, and I overlooked the fact that you share the same cold, uninvolved mother. I can’t take care of you anymore,” he said to Waverly.

“I knew they’d take you away from me,” she muttered. “You don’t love me anymore now that you’ve got Evie, Gracie, and Jana. You’re just as bad as our parents.”

He shook his head. “You have it all wrong. Love isn’t finite. The more you give, the more you have. I never would have cut you out. But you’ve hurt everyone I love. My wife, my daughter, my granddaughter, and our sister. How can I tell them I’ll protect them if I keep letting one of the people I love get away with being horrible to them for no reason?”

“Where am I supposed to go?” she asked, sounding like a little girl. I thought Colter would cave to her blatant manipulation, but he didn’t.

He shrugged. “You’ve got a healthy trust fund. I know you haven’t spent all of it, because you don’t have access to all of it yet.”

“I’ve spent all I’m getting this year,” she replied, defiant.

“I’ll get you a small advance until you can get on your feet.”

“And then what?” she asked.

It was evident he was losing his patience. “I don’t know Waverly. You could get a job. It’s what most adults do.”

She gasped. “A job?”

“It’s time to put that fancy education to use.”

“You’re going to regret this,” she warned and stormed out of the apartment.

Colter’s shoulders drooped. “I’m sorry, Brina. I’ll have someone come and clear the rest of her things out. I’ll never put you in a position like this again. I’ll still pay her half of the rent like I promised.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Sabrina is my wife. If she needs help, she’ll get it from me.”

“Ugh,” she grunted. “You’re both idiots. I lived alone for years. I make enough money to support myself, and I don’t need either of you cavemen beating your chests trying to prove who’s more manly than the other.”

I’d learned something about her in the last couple of days. Sabrina could take care of herself, yes, but that didn’t mean she wanted to. At least not completely. I slid my hand around the back of her neck and held her possessively. “You are my wife. I know you can take care of yourself, but you don’t have to. You’ll never have to again.”

She started to melt against me, but Colter gagged and snapped her out of it. “I need to be alone for a while.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “Fine. I can give you some space, but only so I can go to the hotel and check out. I’ll be back later.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t fight me. “You can have the spare room.”

I laughed. “Like hell, Sunshine. I’ll be back in a few hours. Make some room for me in the closet.”

Kissing her on the forehead, I left quickly.

Colter followed after me. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He jerked his thumb toward the door. “Sabrina runs when she gets spooked. Nothing scares her more than attachment.”

“Then you’d better come have a beer with me and help me figure out how to keep her from running.”

He held up his hands and started to back away. “No way. I’m done meddling in her life.”

I smirked. “Seriously? Not meddling? That sounds out of character for you. I heard you stranded your daughter with your best friend to get them back together.”

“That was different, she’s my daughter, and she was pregnant.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Then you pushed Jana to marry you under the guise of keeping her company. I’ve seen the paperwork, there’s no way you didn’t know she could have gotten control of it without a walk down the aisle.”

“That woman is the most stubborn person on the planet. How else was I supposed to keep her?” he argued.

“See, this sounds like exactly the kind of thing you’d do. Helping your sister keep her marriage is right in your wheelhouse.”

He sighed. “I guess one more time couldn’t hurt.” He pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. “I better call Beck. We’re going to need all hands on deck for this one.”

# Chapter Twenty

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## Stryker

Colter dragged me down to an exclusive club he was a member at. It was a swanky place with casual sitting areas, a nautical theme, and completely the opposite of what I envisioned when I pictured a member's only establishment. It fit his laid back demeanor.

He watched me check the place out. "I'm not big on throwing my money around, but it's nice to have a place to relax without people bothering you all the time. Ever since Beck and I landed on those stupid eligible bachelors lists years ago women have become aggressive."

For once I didn't mind being in one of these types of places. There had been occasions where I had to meet clients in private clubs, but this one wasn't purposefully ostentatious. Despite my reticence to appear wealthy, I'd earned a very comfortable living. Maybe it was because I refused to spend lavishly, but either way, I'd amassed a very healthy bank balance.

Colter was the first rich person I'd met who seemed as averse to flashing his wealth as I was. It set me at ease and made asking for his help with Sabrina more palatable.

We'd both just started to look over the drink menus when Beckett Anderson strolled over. Tall and blond, with Hollywood looks, he'd gotten a lot of press over the years as a famous bachelor. With his appearance and money it was no wonder the tabloids were obsessed with following him around.

“There better be a damn good reason I left my sexy wife at home when our baby just laid down for her nap. Evie was giving me *that* look, and I found the leather cuffs laying out,” Beck said as he sat down.

Colter gagged. “In that case I’m glad to drag you out of the house. I’d like to have a second kid before I have a second grandchild. Also, stop telling me about your sex life.”

Beckett leaned back and stretched his arms along the sofa. He smirked, and his eyes practically glowed with mischief. “I was being tame, but I imagine you are well aware of the kinds of stories I could tell since you also have a younger wife.”

I chuckled. It was clear Colter was uncomfortable, but it was too amusing not to join in myself. “There’s something we all have in common.” Images of taking Sabrina on my desk flashed in my mind.

Colter pointed his finger in my face. “Whatever thought you just had, save it. Fuck, I need new friends. Preferably ones who aren’t married to my sister or my daughter,” he grumbled to himself.

Beckett and I started laughing. Then it hit me. Not the part where Colt included me as a friend, which was surprising enough, but these men, virtual strangers, were my family. At least by marriage.

This time it was Colt that laughed. “You just figured out we’re all family, didn’t you?”

I nodded, honestly a bit stunned. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had anything close to family. As you no doubt can understand, Malcolm doesn’t count.”

Beck looked back and forth between us. “I’m guessing I’m here to help you figure out how to stay that way?”

I nodded. “I think I love her.” Actually, I knew I did, but most people scoffed at love at first sight. Maybe I didn’t fall at her feet the first second I laid eyes on her, but by the time I danced with her in that casino bar, I knew she was it for me.

Colt rolled his eyes. “I already know you love her, but if *you* aren’t a hundred percent sure I can’t help you.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m sure. It doesn’t make sense. We haven’t spent a lot of time together, but I’m all in.”

Colter nodded. “That’s good because Sabrina deserves nothing less.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “I’ve been so focused on Waverly and the damage our parents have done to her I never really thought about how Sabrina coped with them.”

“She’s mentioned her dad a few times,” I added. What she hadn’t brought up was any plans for me to meet him. As long as she was keeping me separate from someone she obviously loved and respected, I knew she hadn’t really let me in.

Colt nodded. “He’s a good guy. Very pragmatic, but I’m realizing he’s a workaholic. He loves her, I won’t say he doesn’t, but I’m just now realizing there’s more than one way someone can be neglected.”

The mood was brought down after Colter’s revelation. I needed to make her feel seen, but I didn’t know how. Until I was able to do that, I wasn’t sure we could expand our relationship beyond the physical.

Beck waved down the waiter. “We’re going to need another round.”

More drinks were brought to the table, and the awkward silence stretched longer. I tipped my glass back swallowing two fingers of scotch in one scorching mouthful. “I appreciate you helping me convince Sabrina to give our marriage a chance. I assume you’ll come up with some suggestions on how to do that?”

Colter and Beck shared a look, then turned to face me in unison. Colter cleared his throat. “Surprise vacation.”

“I’m sorry, did you say ‘surprise vacation’?” I clarified. “That sounds a lot like abduction.”

Beck bobbed his head. “It sounds like that because it is.”

I scratched my head. “You guys are insane. I’m not abducting my wife.”



Colt shrugged. “Don’t knock it. How else are you supposed to make them listen?”

God help me, they were starting to make sense. How much had I had to drink?

“You look skeptical, but that’s how I won Evie back,” Beckett said, taking a healthy swig from his glass.

“I haven’t heard this story yet,” I said and waved down the waiter for another round. If I was going to fall down this hole, I was going to do it sloshed.

“Evie and I didn’t have the best start,” Beck started.

Colt laughed. “You can say that again.” He jerked his thumb at Beck. “He hired her to be his assistant and his girlfriend. Then he knocked her up and accused her of cheating with me.”

I choked on an ice cube. “But you’re her father.”

“Yeah, that was an interesting paternity test,” Colt said, draining his glass.

“But you didn’t—”

Colt shook his head vigorously. “Gross. No, from the moment I met her there was this feeling.” He rubbed the center of his chest. “I felt very protective of her. Of course, I classified it as a big brotherly vibe before we took the paternity test.”

“And that’s how we both found out we were fathers on the same day,” Beck finished.

The waiter handed me another glass, and I took another drink. It didn’t burn like the first few did. “How in the hell do you come back from asking the mother of your child if she was having an affair with her father?”

“I tricked her into going to my cabin to get away, and left her there with Beck and no way to leave,” Colt said.

Another drink. Yep, no more burn. “That sounds—really weird actually. Why would you do that?”

“For the same reason I took Jana to a private island when she tried to divorce me,” Colt replied.

Maybe the rest of my Scotch would help me understand this. “That makes absolutely no sense. How did any of that help you keep your wives? Did you not try talking to them?”

They both looked at me like I was stupid. “What happens when you try to talk to Sabrina?” Beck asked.

“She runs, doesn’t she?” Colt chimed in.

When did my glass get empty? “She doesn’t run out of the room or anything, but any time things get emotional she initiates sex.”

Colt stared into his empty glass. “I’m going to need a lot more to drink for this conversation.”

Beck signaled for the waiter again. “I think you should just leave the bottle.”

“Can you feel your lips?” I asked after several more glasses.

Beck leaned forward and sloshed more Scotch in my glass. “That means it’s working.” He pushed my glass toward me. “Drink up, we’ve got an abduction to plan.”

“I really don’t think kidnapping my wife is the way to build trust,” I slurred.

Colt snorted. “Of course, it’s not. That’s just to force her to listen.”

“I think I should just talk to her,” I insisted.

Colt nodded over and over. “The direct approach. I like it.”

“Why are you bothered by all the sex?” Beck asked.

“I’m not, but I want more,” I said.

“I know!” Beck gestured with his drink, spilling half of it all over himself. “You should get her pregnant. Then she’ll need you more and won’t be able to keep you at arm’s length.”

“That sounds like a horrible idea. Worse than kidnapping her. Why did I think you guys could help me?” I rubbed my

finger against my lips. They were so numb.

“You’re just not grasping the genius. These are premium pieces of advice. I really want to go home now.” Beck slipped off the couch and crawled around the table. “I think the baby advice was the best advice I’ve ever given. I’m going to call my wife.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Wife,” he yelled into the phone. Then he put his finger over his other ear. “I can’t hear you.”

“The phone is upside down.” I took his phone and flipped it around. He stared at the phone like he was trying to figure out how it worked.

“Beck, are you there?” Evie’s voice sounded through the phone.

“Evie? Hey, I wanted to talk to you.”

“I assume that’s why you called,” she said.

“You’ve got it on speaker,” Colt yelled.

“How drunk are you guys?” she asked.

“I can’t feel my lips,” I said to her.

“Right. I’m calling Jana to come get you guys. I’d come, but I’ve got the baby.”

“That’s right! That’s why I called. Let’s have a baby,” Beck said.

“We’ve already got a baby.”

“Another one. I want lots of babies,” he pushed.

“I’m hanging up now and getting you guys a ride home,” she said and ended the call.

I smacked my lips together. Still no feeling. “You know. I think I’m starting to like the idea of having Sabrina away from everyone. I’m going to do it.”

Taking out my phone, I called Sabrina. “I’m going to kidnap you.”

“What? Are you drunk?”

“A little. Not as drunk as Beck. But they’ve given me some great advice.”

“Stryker, listen to me. Those two are idiots. Do not listen to anything they say.”

“I don’t know. I think Beck might have something with the baby idea.”

“No. None of this sounds like a good idea,” she argued.

“How else am I supposed to get you to want to be married to me?” I asked.

“I’m already married to you.”

“But you don’t want to be,” I mumbled.

“Move in with me,” she blurted out.

“What?” I think it was possible I was as drunk as Beck. “I’m already moving in with you. We talked about it before I left?” I thought I remembered that.

She sighed into the phone. “You told me you were moving in, but I didn’t agree with you. Now, I’m saying I want you to move in. You’re right, we’re married and I need to give us more of a chance. I know I’ve been distant. If you promise not to listen to my dumbass brother and Beck, I will try harder.”

“I’m really tired,” I admitted.

“Yeah, I bet. Jana is coming to get you guys. I’ll see you soon.”

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Sabrina

“**H**ow drunk are they?” I asked Jana as I slid into her car.

She pulled out into traffic and headed toward the sound. “Pretty smashed. Colt said that Beck is crawling on the floor talking about wanting more kids. Apparently, he’s started to detail exactly how he plans to make them. Colt’s drunk, but Stryker and Beck are flat out sloppy at this point. Beck most of all.”

I shook my head. “You’d think they’d never had a drink before.”

“Beck hasn’t had a drink in almost a year. Not since he got Evie back and his mom pried a bottle of Scotch from his hand. Colt has cut way back, but I guess they felt your marital issues required lots of booze.”

She looked over at me with a sympathetic expression before returning her focus to the road. “They’re probably trying to talk Stryker into kidnapping you.”

I groaned. “I’m really regretting thinking Colt whisking you away to that private island was romantic.”

She shrugged. “No interruptions. A ripped, pierced, tattooed sex god all to myself. Yeah, you don’t hear me complaining about it anymore.”

“Gross.” I gagged. “We might not share blood, but he’s still my brother. I really don’t want to hear about any metal Colt is rocking considering I’ve seen his virgin ear lobes.”

Jana laughed. I'm glad the mental image I'd try and scrub from my brain didn't concern her.

She weaved through traffic as I hung on to the handle by the window. "Be honest with me, what is holding you back from Stryker? You seem to have chemistry together, so I don't think you're uninterested. He's sexy as hell, smart, and totally devoted to you."

She was right. He was all of those things. At least it seemed so right now. "I don't know if I trust it. Doesn't he seem too good to be true? I mean except for his temper. He can be a total asshole."

She shrugged. "Is he an asshole to you? And don't bring up him snapping at you when you barged into his office. He didn't know it was you, and to be honest, the employees at my company are a bag of dicks."

She had a point there. "Yeah, especially that guy Jeffries. He actually helped your father cover up embezzling from the company."

We hadn't had a chance to go over all the fine details with her, because as soon as Stryker fired Jeffries, he decided it was time to get my sister out of my apartment.

Jana's mouth fell open. "I'm actually surprised. I'm not sure why. My father is as shady as they come, but I just hadn't expected he'd steal from the company. I honestly just thought he was a shit businessman. He's always cared more about appearances and status than doing any actual work. I guess I just thought he'd be too lazy to actually steal."

"Well, Jeffries is gone. We need to track down those accounts and we'll have to inform the SEC," I said. It felt lame to talk about the procedures when it was her father who would be on the hook. She might not like him, but it didn't mean part of her didn't still love him. At least that's how I felt about my mom.

Her fingers drummed on the steering wheel. "I'm not going to think about all of that right now. We've got drunk husbands to pick up."

I looked around inside the vehicle. “Is that why we’re in Evie’s car?”

“Can you believe this beast? I’m thinking Beck isn’t joking about having a bunch of kids. This car could haul eight people.”

“What I can’t believe is that Beck expects Evie to drive this big-ass SUV in Seattle traffic.”

I could see her roll her eyes in the reflection of the rearview mirror. “She doesn’t. There hasn’t been a single day they’ve been apart since Gracie was born. He even hired a nanny to meet them at the office when they were working. When Gracie had a cold, Evie told him to go in to work without her. He did, but he was a distracted mess. Colt ended up demanding he go home and work from there.”

Evie was one lucky little girl. Of course, he had the perfect role models growing up. Colt spent most of his free time at the Anderson’s house growing up. I was even included in a few of their larger family gatherings over the years. I realized now it was because they knew my mom wasn’t really a presence in my life, but they gave me hope that someday I could have my own family like theirs.

I gasped. “I’m scared.”

“What was that?” she asked.

I swallowed. Why was this so hard to admit? “I said, I’m scared. If I allow myself to believe Stryker and I can be together, really together, and it doesn’t work out, then I might lose hope that I can ever have more.”

Her head bobbed several times. “I know what you mean. I did it too. It was one thing letting Evie in, but Colt scared the shit out of me.”

“How did you get past it?”

She gave me the side eye. “You don’t want to know.”

“Not if it’s a sex thing,” I grumbled.

She laughed again. I was glad my squeamishness at hearing the details of my stepbrother’s sex life amused her. “It



isn't a sex thing. Well, it kind of is. It was the island. All that time with no one else to talk to forced me to listen to him."

"I told him he could move into my apartment," I admitted.

"That should work, but you have to try and be open to him."

Try was a funny word. I'd told myself I had been trying, but what I should have been was doing. I'd heard what he had to say, but I wasn't making an effort to listen to him. The only person who had the power to change that was me.

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**J**ana knew exactly where to go when we walked into the bar. This place was more casual than I expected for an upscale club. There were collections of sofas set in clusters. People were slowly trickling in from work, ready to unwind with a drink.

Beck hadn't just unwound, he was snoring softly. Stryker or Colt had put a jacket under his head.

"How much did he have?" Jana asked, pointing to Beck.

Colt shrugged. "We lost track. I stopped trying to slow him down as he started describing the different positions he wanted to try to get my daughter pregnant," he grumbled.

"I can't feel my lips," Stryker mumbled and rubbed his index finger across his mouth.

I looked at Jana. "How are we going to get them into the car?"

Her forehead scrunched. "Prayer?"

"Fantastic," I mumbled.

I grabbed Stryker's hands and tugged. "Come on big guy."

It took several pulls to get him on his feet. He wobbled once he was off the couch and leaned most of his weight on me. "You're so pretty," he slurred.

“You’re drunk. It would be great if you’d help me get you out to the car.” Jana ran ahead of us and opened the door. We had to be quick because Jana had illegally parked in front of the bar.

She opened the back door of the SUV and I helped Stryker climb in. As I turned to leave, he grabbed my arm to keep me from going. “Don’t leave me.”

I patted his hand. “I’m just going to help the other two drunken idiots into the car. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” he whispered. The wall around my heart cracked. Only a little, but enough I could envision letting him into my life. Maybe that was the way it was supposed to go. A little at a time.

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**C**olt managed to sober up enough to help Jana and I get Beck home. That was lucky because I had enough on my hands getting Stryker up to our apartment. At least he managed to walk on his own by the time we pulled in front of my building because we didn’t have an elevator. When we got to the third floor we found the door slightly ajar.

“I locked this when I left,” I mumbled and stuck my keys back in my purse.

Stryker straightened up. The dopey stupor disappeared, and he pushed past me. “Stay here,” he commanded and entered the apartment.

I wasn’t stupid. Stryker was at least six foot four and built like a linebacker. If there was someone in there, he was the one out of the two of us who could face them, even inebriated. I heard him curse and a bunch of stuff clamor to the ground. Rushing in after him, I saw him standing in the middle of chaos.

Boxes were left opened and half packed everywhere. “I don’t think Waverly even brought this much stuff.”

Stryker bent down and grabbed something out of the box. “This seems more your style than hers.” He held up a metal peacock statue with blue and green glass embedded in the tail.

“That bitch! Evie got that for me after Gracie was born.” I took the bird from him and clutched it to my chest. As I went to put it back where it belonged, I noticed more and more of my things missing.

I tore through the boxes and noticed a lot of my things mixed with random things of hers. A growl tore from my throat. “I’m going to have to go through all these boxes and see how much of my stuff I can salvage.”

He moved behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. “We,” he said.

“What?” In my head, I was trying to go through what my place looked like before Waverly moved in. I guess if I forgot I had something, then I could live without it, but I shouldn’t have to.

His fingers pressed into my muscles, working out the knots that started forming when I saw what my sister had done. “We, Sabrina. You don’t have to do this alone. You don’t have to do anything alone from now on.”

Usually, I’d have pushed back, but I was suddenly tired. Not having to do everything on my own sounded incredibly appealing. For the first time, I allowed myself to melt into him. Fully clothed at least. Somehow, this made me feel more vulnerable.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## Sabrina

“**M**ake it go away,” Stryker groaned, and covered his face with my pillow.

I sat on the edge of the bed. “I can’t make the sun go away. But I have coffee.” Setting his cup down on the nightstand, I reached over and pulled the pillow off his head.

He sat up, scrunching his face at the offending light spilling through the blinds. I watched his muscles bunch as he reached over for his coffee. His dark eyes found me over the rim of his mug. “I’m not so hungover that I won’t take advantage of the way you’re looking at me right now.”

“Promises, promises. But first you need to shower because I could light the fumes coming off of you on fire. Then I need your help sorting the boxes of crap Waverly left.”

We spent the rest of the day going through the chaos my sister left behind and figuring out what was missing. There were a few things, but thankfully nothing I couldn’t replace. The fact I didn’t live lavishly worked in my favor. Once we were done all of Waverly’s things fit in two boxes.

“That’s the last one,” Stryker said as he set a vase I found at a flea market down where I’d had it.

“How did you know where it went?” I asked.

Slowly, his head came up and I was struck speechless by the intensity he always had when he looked at me. “Haven’t you realized by now? I pay attention to everything about you.”

“You really do. No one else seems to see me.”

If a smile can be sad, his was. “I know, but to be fair, I’m not sure you always want to be seen.”

I dropped down on the couch. “I don’t think that it’s because I don’t want to be seen.”

He joined me, and his body turned toward mine. Every fiber of him was listening to me. It wasn’t just that he paid attention, which I was starting to accept, but he wanted more. “Then tell me. Open up to me.”

I took a deep breath. “I think it’s because my mother made me feel like who I am was never good enough for her. I was just part of a life that she left behind. A reminder that for a while she was a bored housewife and not the glittering socialite she is now. I’m not flashy like Waverly. Bringing me around meant she had to acknowledge her once humble beginnings.”

His hands took mine. The rough calloused palms scratched against my skin in a way that felt comforting. “I’m sorry she treated you that way. I want nothing more than to shout to everyone that you’re my wife.”

I ducked my head. Receiving compliments was hard for me. I didn’t have a self-esteem problem exactly, but I didn’t trust people to be in my life for me. The only people who were in my life were in some way related to me. They might not have started out that way, but it was only stubbornness that brought Evie and Jana as close as they were. Neither of them would accept a surface friendship with me.

With his free hand he tipped my face up so he could look into my eyes again. “You’re thinking too hard again. What is going on?”

Pausing to think, I chewed on my lower lip, until he pulled it free. “Don’t hide from me anymore,” he whispered.

He was right. I hadn’t meant to, but I had subconsciously tossed every roadblock I could his way. “I want to give us a chance. I’m sorry I have been so cold to you.”

Stryker smirked, and goosebumps ran down my skin. I might have tried to deny a lot when it came to him, but there

was no ignoring our chemistry. “I wouldn’t say you were cold in my office the other day.”

I fought the urge to fan myself. That was something I definitely wanted to try again. Maybe just without an audience close by this time. “I want more than sex.”

He gave me a deadpan look. “I’ve been trying to have more than that since the beginning. Fucking you is one of my favorite things to do, but I also love talking to you, holding you, and even unpacking boxes with you.”

Looking around my apartment, or I guess maybe I should try and think of it as our apartment, I was confronted with the fact I’d made no effort to make room in my life for him. “Where are your things?”

He scratched his head, mussing up the longer strands on the top. Somehow it made him sexier which was unfair since I’d look crazy if my hair started going in several directions at once. “You mean my clothes?”

I shook my head. “No your keepsakes and you know, stuff. Everyone has stuff, don’t they?”

“I don’t. I’ve spent the last five years bouncing around from one company to the next trying to build something for us. I didn’t want to start marking my life with mementos because not a moment without you was something I wanted to remember.”

If it were possible for a human being to melt, I’d have become a puddle on my living room floor. “This apartment is really feminine.”

He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “That’s okay. This apartment reflects you, and that is something I enjoy being surrounded by.”

“Nope,” I said, pulling my hand free. I got up off the couch and grabbed my purse. “Grab your keys, we’re going shopping. Then we have to get you checked out of your suite.”

His answering smile was charming and full of happiness. This wasn’t one of his, “I’m thinking dirty thoughts” smiles, but it was certainly giving me some ideas to try later. He didn’t

complain about shopping, something my father always did, but simply grabbed his keys and headed for the door.

I directed him to a year round flea market I loved to go to. I didn't know how much money he had, but I hoped he liked the thrill of hunting for treasures amidst more mundane items. Anyone could go to a department store and choose items from displays to decorate their home. There was nothing wrong with that, but I preferred to give a second life to things that had been discarded. I guess I felt sympathy for those things.

“Why?” he asked.

My forehead scrunched in confusion. Stryker smoothed it out with his fingers. “You mumbled something about feeling sympathetic toward these things.”

I shrugged, that uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability swelling up in me. “I think because I was once the new and shiny thing, and my mom tossed me aside for something newer and prettier.”

He frowned and placed his hands on my shoulders so I couldn't turn away. “First, Waverly is not prettier. I know what you mean, mostly. I was never the son my father wanted. My mother was poor, and recognizing me would have caused too big of a scandal. Even to this day he barely acknowledges I exist.”

“He can go screw himself,” I mumbled. I'd had it with the Grahams.

The corner of Stryker's mouth twitched before he grew serious again. “Children aren't meant to make their parents look good. We don't ask to come into this world, and if parents expect anything other than love and family, they aren't having children for the right reasons.”

There were so many things we really needed to discuss if we were going to give being married a real shot, and I dug deep for the courage to tackle one of them. “Do you want kids?”

His jaw ticked. “I'm afraid to answer you.”



My heart felt like it fell into my stomach. The truth was, I wanted kids, badly. It wasn't like being a mother was my only aspiration in life. I agreed with him that kids were about giving love and getting it back. But, that was what I wanted most. A family not broken by a selfish parent.

“Why?” I croaked.

“Because if I answer wrong, whatever is happening between us today might end,” he said softly.

I nodded. I knew what he meant. Truthfully, if he said he didn't want kids, I would always wonder if being with me was the right thing. Then I pulled up my big girl panties and decided I'd spent enough of my life hiding.

“If we're going to do this,” I began.

His eyebrow cocked up, and he gave me a stern look. “If?”

I continued as if he hadn't interrupted. “If we are going to do this, then we have to be honest. I know you say you're sure about me, but I'm still catching up.”

His hands dropped from my shoulders, and he started to turn away from me. I grabbed his arm and turned him around again. Or, he let me turn him around, because hello, muscles. “I want to give us a chance. In order to do that, we need to get to know each other.”

He nodded, but he was still upset. “See, that's the thing. I know I want to be with you. Whatever life brings our way I want to face it with you. Whether or not we have kids is details to me.”

“That's a pretty big detail to leave up to chance,” I scoffed.

“Let me put it this way. I want everything with you. If you weren't in the picture, no, I wouldn't want kids. With you, I couldn't think of anything more amazing than holding our little girl and spoiling her rotten.”

I groaned. “I don't know if I can figure out what that means. Deciding to have kids can be make or break for couples.”

He tapped the end of my nose. “I want you to be happy. I’m not the one who has to be pregnant. If you don’t want kids, then we don’t have to have them.”

“What if I didn’t? How could you be happy to let me decide something so big on my own?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Easy, because the only thing in this world I’m convinced I would be unhappy without is you. I’ve already endured five years knowing you exist but that I wasn’t even a memory for you. I don’t ever want to do that again.”

“So I could go get my tubes tied and you’d be okay with just me for the rest of our lives?” I pushed.

“I mean, I’d probably want a dog eventually,” Stryker joked.

“I’m not sure how I feel about this. You have to have a preference.”

He took a deep breath. “If you’re asking me if I would love to see you carry my child someday, the answer is hell yes. I’m going to warn you now that if you do, I will annoy the fuck out of you. I’ll probably wrap you in bubble wrap and insist on carrying you everywhere. Would I like to hold a person in my arms that was half you and half me? Absolutely. But, do I want kids so badly that if you don’t I’ll eventually leave? No. The only person I’d want that with is you.”

I think I ovulated right there on the spot. “Are you real?” I asked without thinking.

“How so?” he asked.

“You say all the perfect things. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop and have you reveal something disgusting, something I can’t live with, but then you just get better. You walk into my life looking like my fantasy book boyfriends, fuck like what I imagine a rockstar would, and practically speak in sonnets.”

A woman behind us gasped and put her hands over the ears of a younger girl. My face heated and I winced. Stryker

laughed a deep belly laugh and threw his arm around my shoulders. “Sorry, my wife has no filter.”

Of course, she blushed when his deep growly voice rolled over the word wife. She dropped her hands. “I was a newlywed once myself. It can be hard to adjust sometimes.” Her eyes traveled up and down Stryker before she turned and winked at me. “I say, have lots of kids, sweetie. It’ll sure be fun getting them.”

This time it was the younger girl throwing her own hands over her ears. “Gross grandma!”

The woman laughed. “How do you think your daddy came into this world?”

Stryker laughed again, and I resigned myself to the eternal embarrassment I would always feel. Once the ladies were out of earshot he bent down and whispered in my ear. “So I fuck like a rockstar, huh? Wanna go home and practice?”

Oh boy, did I. “We can shop later.”

“Good girl,” he whispered and nipped at my ear.

This time I didn’t try and hide my reaction. I groaned and hurried us out of the market.

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**W**e barely made it inside the door of the apartment before he lifted me up and pressed me against the wall. I expected his kiss to be desperate and full of longing like the other times. We always crashed together as we fought for dominance. Instead, he held me tight. The same need vibrated through his body into mine, but he didn’t rush to take me.

Gently his lips pressed against mine. Every move of his mouth against mine said that he had all the time in the world and he planned to use it to worship me. My fingers threaded through his hair, and I let myself get lost in him.

Stryker pushed off the wall but didn't set me down. He carried me through the apartment and entered our room. Only once we were inside did he lay me down on the bed. He looked down at me, and without thinking I let my fingers trace the sharp lines of his jaw.

When I got close to his lips he turned his face and nipped at my fingers. "I'm trying to be sweet, but I can't if you touch me. Just let me."

My hand fell to the bed and he resumed kissing me. It was slow, teasing, and full of emotion. I thought the hunger between us was hot, but this set my soul on fire. Emotions I wasn't ready to put a name to percolated inside of me.

Stryker took his time peeling away the layers of my clothes. Every new part of me exposed was treated to his focused attention. The fire inside of me started climbing higher and higher. I was desperate to feel him plunge into me, but he was nowhere near ready to end my torment.

When his eyes found mine I felt my breath catch in my chest. He was close to saying the words I longed for and dreaded simultaneously. Part of me couldn't believe I'd married this man on a whim five years ago. It was reckless and completely out of character. I needed time to know all the variables and convince myself we could beat the odds that so many people couldn't.

Yet, here we were. It didn't matter that my mind and body were still at war. I was married to this man. Now I needed to be brave enough to let him in.

His teasing touches were driving me crazy. I needed him desperately. Wrapping my legs around him I held tight. I expected dirty words, but he caught on to my mood. Our mouths fused back together as he sank inside of me. I pulled back enough to gasp into his mouth.

He swallowed my moans and cries as he took his time driving me over the edge. Somehow he knew exactly what I needed. He always did. He pushed when I needed it, but he also gave me the space to feel. If only I knew what that was. I

did know that he was becoming vital to me. I didn't know how I'd ever managed to forget him.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## Stryker

I held the door to our apartment building for Sabrina to enter, and grabbed the mail on the way through the lobby.

We'd been so busy with different projects at work we hadn't seen each other since the morning. I was surprised how much it bothered me, and I resolved to do something about it. "We should go out for dinner tonight," I suggested.

Sabrina winced. "I need to dig through the documents we found in Jeffries' office. Aaron wants to meet tomorrow for lunch to go over all the data he compiled. I want to be prepared."

She looked over at me and pursed her lips. "No, you're right. Work can wait. I'll clear my morning and do it at the office."

My mood had still soured knowing she was going to meet up with a sort of ex for lunch the next day. "Does it have to be Aaron?"

Laughing, she kissed my cheek. "I know it should bother me that you're jealous, but honestly, I'm flattered. No one has ever cared enough to act territorial."

"I'll pee a circle around you then."

Her hand went up to her head as she pretended to swoon. "You're so romantic."

I flipped through the mail and stopped on a heavy envelope with gold foil edging. "You've got a fancy envelope from Mrs. Annalise Greyson."

“Ugh,” Sabrina grunted. “Let’s see what my mother is up to now. It looks like she’s having another party. Let’s open it so I can send my usual rejection.”

I handed her the letter and she broke the seal. “It’s worse than I thought,” she mumbled to herself.

“Don’t leave me hanging. What is it?”

She handed me the invitation. “See for yourself. Audacity like this needs to be seen to be believed.”

I flipped it open and read it.

*Mr. and Mrs. William Greyson  
request your presence at the celebration  
of our daughter Sabrina’s marriage to  
Stryker Lawson. Join us for an  
intimate affair at Greyson Manor.*

“**L** leave it to my mother to make even an invitation passive-aggressive,” Sabrina grumbled.

This was hard for me to understand. My mom had been my rock. The one person in this world I could count on no matter what. Her life wasn’t easy before she got pregnant with me, but after me, I knew it was a daily struggle. We never had enough money, but I always had what I needed. Now I knew that was because she often went without.

I couldn’t imagine a mother like Sabrina’s. Especially hers because Sabrina was so easy to love. I wished there was something I could do to make things better for her. Maybe there was still a chance for them to reconcile.

“I think we should go,” I said without thinking.

Her eyebrows flew up almost to her hairline. “I don’t think I heard you right. Did you just say we should go to my



mother's party?"

"She is throwing it for us. Won't she be angry if we don't show up?"

Sabrina released a hysterical laugh. "She's not throwing this party for us. She's afraid her circle of hoity-toity friends is going to find out we eloped and think she's too broke to pay for our wedding. Heaven forbid they think she can't afford to throw frivolous parties."

"You don't wish we'd had a wedding?" Not the topic at hand, but I needed to know she didn't regret how we came together.

She exhaled and dropped into a chair. "I wish I remembered the one we did have. Beck and Evie had an impromptu wedding at his parents' Tahoe house. Only family was there. Colter and Jana eloped. A large wedding becomes more about the families and the guests. I think it's more romantic to have a small affair."

"Would you want to do it again so you could remember it this time?" What I was really asking was if she'd decided she wanted to stay married to me.

She smirked at me. "I see what you're doing there. I like where we are right now. I want to see what tomorrow brings. Can't we learn to exist in this moment?"

I took her hand and kissed her knuckles. "I'll try. But, whether we have another wedding or not, you're still my wife in this moment."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, *husband*. I still don't want to go to that party."

"Those rich friends of hers sit on the boards of companies all over this country. People who we will need to deal with if we're going to salvage Jana's company. Also, people who have been doing business with Maxwell Easton for decades. Instead of letting her win, we should use this to our advantage."

She pursed her lips in contemplation. "I hope you know what you're doing. My mother is devious on her best day."

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**W**e ended up getting takeout and watching TV last night instead of going out like I'd suggested. The party looming in a couple of days left Sabrina irritable, and not in the mood to be around other people. She was finally giving our marriage a real chance, but we were more out of sync than ever.

Case in point, I was pacing back and forth in my office while my wife was getting ready to go to lunch with her ex-boyfriend. A man she never should have dated, since we were married. Not that she remembered. The fact she had a history with him was driving me insane.

My maturity had hit rock bottom. I felt closer to her age than my own. I might be ten years older than her, but you certainly couldn't tell by my behavior that I was thirty-six.

She poked her head in the door and knocked loudly on the frame. "I'm heading out. Do you want me to tell Mrs. Beckett to order you something?"

I rolled my eyes. "Is she still here? I never see her."

"With everything else going on, I haven't gotten around to replacing her. I could have a phone put in the supply closet if that helps."

"This is ridiculous. Just go on your date. I can manage to get my own food."

"Come with me then." Her tone let me know I was in trouble. "This is a business lunch. If you need to see it for yourself, to trust me, then come."

"I'm fucking this up. I trust you." She opened her mouth to argue, but I cut her off. "I do trust you, but I'm still trying to believe I'm enough for you."

"Stryker, we need to get past all the insecurities if we're going to have a chance."

My feet were moving before I made the decision to cross the room. I pulled her the rest of the way into the room, closed the door, and backed her against it. “I know I’m all over the place. But you need to understand something. This isn’t me being insecure or not trusting you. You’re mine. I’m trying to curb my more caveman impulses, but I’m afraid I’m always going to be a bit jealous and possessive when it comes to you.”

She fought a smirk. “So that means you’re coming then?”

I swatted her on the ass. “Like I’d let my hot wife go out to lunch with any other man who looks at her the way I do.”

“And how do you look at me?”

“Like you’re the sun. You brighten my world.”

“That’s a good answer,” she replied in a husky whisper.

My fingers slid through the golden strands of her hair, and I tucked a lock behind her ear. I leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I’ve had years to figure out what I’d say to you when I had you back. You’ve been my main focus all that time. I’m sorry in advance if I get intense sometimes.”

The hesitancy in her expression fell away, and her face lit up as her smile spread. “I think I like your intensity.”

“That’s very good because I can’t be anything less with you.” Never again would we be less than everything.

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“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Sabrina said through clenched teeth. Outwardly she wore a smile, but her nails digging into my hand let me know she was far from comfortable walking into the palatial home her mother shared with her stepfather.

She was beautiful in her white cocktail dress. Jana insisted she look the part of a bride even though Sabrina didn’t really want to go to this party. She fidgeted with her jewelry, the hem of her dress, and the clutch purse in her hands. I took her free hand to keep her from ripping her dress.

Jana and Colter followed close behind. He looked equally as unsettled as Sabrina. I turned my head and spoke to Jana over my shoulder. “You’d think we were leading them to their execution.”

“I think I’d be happier if you were,” Colt grumbled.

A deep crevice formed between Sabrina’s eyes. My mom used to call it her *what the fuck* wrinkles. “How’d Evie and Beck get out of coming to this farce of a party?” Sabrina asked Colter.

He exhaled. “Gracie is teething. Lucky bastards.” He muttered the last part under his breath.

I waited for him to say he was joking, but he didn’t flinch. When he didn’t I said, “I’d hardly think staying up all night with a crying baby is being lucky.”

Sabrina’s eyebrows went up, smoothing out the creases. “That’s because we haven’t gone inside yet.”

Voices filtered into the foyer. Sabrina groaned, and we followed the sound. The main section of the house had been cleared out for the party. There were round tables set around an open space for a dance floor. There was even a string quartet playing softly up in the front of the room.

Sabrina looked up at Colter. “Do you know anyone here?”

He snagged a couple flutes of champagne off a tray a waiter was circulating with and handed one to Jana. “Unfortunately. You’ve skipped most of these functions. I was forced to go to them until I left for college. Nothing changes, not even the faces.”

I went to grab a couple for Sabrina and me, but she waved me off. “I need to keep a clear head when dealing with my mother.”

When I didn’t grab one for myself, she said, “I didn’t mean you can’t have one. You might need it to make it through the night.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “If you’re not drinking neither am I.”

“People will think you’re pregnant,” Colt mumbled into his glass.

Sabrina and I exchanged a look. “Good point,” she said and grabbed two glasses. She still didn’t drink it, but at least we looked like a happy non-reproducing couple.

A woman, I assumed to be Annalise, floated over. The cloud of her expensive perfume preceded her, choking out the fresh air with its cloying sweetness.

“Darling,” she said loud enough for nearby guests to overhear her. “There are so many people you simply have to meet!”

She latched onto Sabrina’s arm and pulled her toward a crowd of Annalise twins. At a minimum they went to the same plastic surgeon and hairdresser. Individually they all had a cold, sort of clinical beauty. Each of them had the same shade of golden blonde hair that fell just past their shoulders, twisted into some kind of fancy updo smoothed back without a single hair out of place. The similarities continued to the makeup colors they used to the style of dresses they wore.

Sabrina looked back at me, and mouthed, “Help.”

“I’d better go rescue my wife.” I tried to fight the smirk pulling at the corner of my mouth. This wasn’t the right time to show amusement, but I did love calling her my wife.

I was halfway across the room when a familiar voice hit me. The urge to run from the party was strong. Somehow my feet continued to carry me forward. Before I was ready, I found myself standing next to the woman who altered the course of my life.

Sabrina let out a sigh when I moved next to her, and I forced out bad memories to focus on who was really important. Her arm threaded through mine, and she held on for dear life. I forced myself not to look at the clones and find the icy blue eyes my brother shared.

“Ladies,” Annalise began, “I’d like to introduce you to my son-in-law, Stryker Lawson.”

She looked at me. Her eyes sparkled with a malicious joy. Addressing the woman I was trying hard to ignore, she said, “I believe you know Jacinda Graham. Sabrina has known the Grahams nearly her entire life, but I only just learned you have as well.”

Sabrina had warned me her mother was evil, but I never would have imagined she’d invite my wicked stepmother to a party she threw to celebrate our marriage. Part of me wanted to see how Jacinda would respond to being forced to interact with me. She’d spent thirty-six years doing her best to pretend I didn’t exist.

The sneer on her face was the first indication her words would be dripping with venom. “I’m surprised at you, Sabrina. You were clearly brought up in a fine family. You and my Malcolm were always so close growing up, I’d have thought you would have had higher standards for who you chose to spend your life with.”

Annalise laughed. “I think you’re confusing Sabrina with my youngest, Waverly. Sabrina was raised by her father, and he certainly never cared for proper society. I’ve never quite understood your husband’s friendship with that man. He’s so pedestrian.”

I was near boiling with rage. She warned me not to come here, but I didn’t listen. I’d stupidly thought these people would matter. Maybe because I’d always been kept away from these types of functions. As a temporary CEO I never had to court business, and never ended up networking at these events in that capacity either. Instead, I pushed Sabrina into a situation that was going to do nothing except hurt her.

Turning to Sabrina, I tipped her chin up with my finger so she would look me in the eyes. The glassiness of her blue eyes showed me how hard she was fighting not to cry. “I’m sorry, Sunshine. You were right. We shouldn’t have come.”

Before they could respond I grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the aging mean girls club. “Let’s go grab Jana and Colter and get the fuck out of here.”

She squeezed my hand, and let me lead her back to our friends. Colt went on alert the moment he laid eyes on Sabrina. “What happened?”

She swiped angrily at a tear that managed to escape. “Just the usual. Annalise had to remind me I’m not “Princess Waverly. I don’t know why I’d hoped maybe she really did want to do something nice for me.”

If she’d have shot me it would have hurt less. Either way, I felt like I had a wound oozing from my chest. “This is my fault. I pushed when you didn’t want to come. I should have listened to you.”

Her breath shuddered as she fought the urge to break down. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. For years I tried to become the man who was worthy to hold her when she cried. I didn’t think I’d be the one to cause the tears.

“Speak of the devil,” Colt muttered as a commotion by the front door made us all turn and look.

Waverly stumbled through the front door. She’d clearly been drinking. In keeping with our horrible luck, she had Malcolm right on her heels.

“Hey big brother,” she shouted. “We’re all here celebrating perfect Sabrina, I see.”

“Waverly,” Colt sighed. “Keep your voice down, and go find some coffee in the kitchen. While you’re at it, get that asshole out of here.” He glared at Malcolm as if he wouldn’t know he was the asshole he was referring to.

She hiccuped. “But I want to celebrate as well.”

“I think you’ve already done enough of that tonight,” he grumbled. “Besides, if you were really here to celebrate with Sabrina and Stryker you wouldn’t have brought the one person neither of them wanted to see.”

“Waverly, darling!” Annalise greeted her from across the room. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Of course mother. I’d never miss one of your parties,” she cooed. Waverly looked back at me and cocked an eyebrow. “I

guess I'm wanted here after all," she said quietly.

With that last barb tossed, she spun around in a swirl of taffeta and hair and weaved through the crowd. Annalise lit up when she made it to them. Sabrina squeezed my hand harder as her mother accepted Waverly with love and acceptance. "You don't have to watch this," I told her.

"I do, actually. I need this to be the last time I let myself hope my mother will be anything more than this shallow social climber. More than that, I need to remind myself that my sister is just like her."

"That's a lesson I'm catching up to. I'm sorry for all the time I let her off the hook," Colt apologized.

We watched them mingle without incident. Maybe because most of the people here were in varying stages of intoxication. Waverly did fit into this world, and Sabrina never would. That was a good thing, and if it took forever I'd show her she was so much more than these plastic people ever would be.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

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## Sabrina

**D**espite the size of my mother's house, the walls were entirely too close. I couldn't breathe until Stryker led me out the front doors. I felt a scream bubbling up inside of me, and the moment I stepped outside I let it rip free. Stryker was there with me the entire time, holding me as I let the rage out. He held me as I struggled to breathe through the pain and disappointment I always felt being around my mother.

"I'll go grab the car," Colt said. Jana followed behind him, giving us a minute alone.

Stryker took a step back and cupped my face in his big hands. "You are too good for this place and these people. Don't let them dim your light, Sunshine."

"Yeah, *Sunshine*," Waverly mocked as she crept up on us.

"So you really think this is going to last?" Malcolm asked, and dropped his arm around Waverly's shoulders.

"What do you want, Malcolm?" Stryker asked. His voice was flat, filled with years of being disappointed by someone who was supposed to have your back.

When Stryker and I turned our backs, our siblings shoved a knife in it. That wasn't the way family was supposed to work.

Malcolm smiled, and I could no longer see the boy I grew up with. I only saw the same fake people that were in that room. Funny, I'd always thought the two of us didn't fit in with that crowd. I guess it was only me who didn't fit in.

There was a time when that revelation would have crushed me, but Stryker was right, I was too good for this world.

Mal made a big production out of thinking. He tapped his finger against his lips. “What do I want? Maybe I want my friend back.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes because that didn’t convey the level of anger I felt over the way he treated me. “Bullshit,” I finally bit out.

The smile on his face turned cruel and he stepped into my personal bubble. “I knew you rebelled against this world, but I didn’t think you’d go so far as to marry down. But, I guess you really don’t belong here. The women in this circle can do better than being an assistant for their stepbrother.”

My eyes traveled up and down, really seeing him for the first time. He might wear the right brands, drive the right cars, and have the right address to impress the people inside, but I’d mistakenly thought he was more than appearances. “See, that’s your problem. You care more about how those people in there,” I pointed back at the house, “see you than how the people who care about you do. Because those people only care as long as there is something you can do for them.”

Waverly rolled her eyes. “That’s the way the world works.”

“What would you know about work? Your parents and Colt pay for everything,” I snapped at my sister.

Waverly straightened up, appearing to sober up. “I’m an influencer. You have no idea how hard I work.”

“Getting drunk and screwing guys who don’t give a shit about you isn’t a career. You don’t even have endorsements. You’re a spoiled little princess, and nothing more,” I shot back.

“You’re just jealous because our mother actually likes me. She ran away from your loser father and you as fast as she could, and she’s never looked back. Just like Malcolm here who picked me over you.” She patted the arm he had tossed around her shoulders.

He dropped his arm and stepped back from her holding his hands out in front of himself. “Don’t go reading into this, Waverly. You’re a good time, but that’s all this is.”

“Colter!” Waverly screamed and stomped off to find our brother.

Malcolm shook his head as we watched her try to find Colt by the valet stand. “Brina, I don’t want to fight with you. You’re right, we’ve been friends for too long. This thing with Waverly its just sex. You’re the one I care about. I still think we could have a future together. She’s always going to be a party girl, but you are the one who should stand beside me. You’re the one who has the skills to help me grow my business. I know you care about me.”

I shook my head. “The word you need is *cared*. I didn’t realize how big of a jackass you were before now. I was too blinded by the person I wanted to see, I guess I never saw the real you.”

“I wasn’t. I’ve always seen how big of a jackass you are,” Stryker interjected. His fists were clenched at his sides, and he seemed ready to pounce. The fact that he hadn’t said a lot about the amount of self-control he had.

Malcolm clucked his tongue. “You’ve always thought you were better than me.”

Stryker pulled me behind him and got in his brother’s face. “I am better than you. You’ve had everything handed to you and from what I hear you are barely keeping your businesses afloat. Actually, you and Waverly are perfect for each other.”

Malcolm took another step forward until there was barely an inch between them. “At least I have my own business. I don’t float around living someone else’s life like you do. Someone else’s company,” he turned his head and looked at me, “someone else’s girl.”

“I was never yours,” I cut in.

He sneered at me. “Keep telling yourself that.” A couple weeks ago I would have been surprised how quickly Malcolm

turned on me, but I've finally accepted he wasn't who I thought he was.

The urge to scream bubbled up again, but I shoved it down. When I spoke, I was able to do it calmly. "You never cared about me. Our friendship meant everything to me. Why did you push for more if you didn't even want to be my friend?"

His eyes narrowed, and the smarmy smirk fell off his face. "Mommy ignored you, daddy spent all his time in dusty libraries, so you clung to me. I'm older than you, and for a long time you were this annoying pest I got stuck with when our dads threw us together. Once you got past your awkward dork phase, you were my backup plan."

I sucked in a breath and held it. It was a moment in time, but I knew the moment I exhaled the memories I'd treasured from my childhood would blow away. When I gathered enough strength I spoke in a quiet voice, even though all I wanted was to scream again. "Your backup plan? All I ever wanted was your friendship."

Malcolm scoffed. "Tell me you didn't have feelings for me when you were in high school. And don't lie, because I saw the way you used to follow me around staring at me like I was your whole world."

"I won't lie. I had a crush on you for about five minutes. That was before you turned into a total douche, treating women like they were toys meant to be used and discarded for your amusement. From that moment on I knew we were never going to be anything more than friends. If I wanted to see you in the same way I did when we were kids we could never cross that line. But, you pushed it. I didn't go out with you because I wanted our friendship to change. I agreed to try and date because I didn't want to lose you. Turns out I was right in the first place. Crossing that line did destroy our friendship."

"Give me a break. That wasn't you trying. You seemed open to the idea of there being more between us until he showed up and you cut me off. I know I hooked up with your sister, but getting with my brother is a bit boring for revenge."

“You pretentious jackass. I didn’t even know Stryker was your brother. Hell, I didn’t even know you had a brother. Nothing about my relationship with my husband has anything to do with you or the rest of your family.”

“Keep telling yourself that. You betrayed me by marrying my brother. You were supposed to be there when I was ready. I had to speed up the timeline once I found out—”

“Found out what, Malcolm?” I seethed through clenched teeth.

“I kept tabs on him. He’s been gone for most of the last seventeen years, so when he came back to town I had to find out why.”

“And what did you do about it, little brother? No way did you leave it at checking in on me,” Stryker said, his voice deceptively calm.

The nasty smile pulled once more at the corners of Malcolm’s mouth. “Having problems with Easton Corp?” He rolled his eyes. “Sorry, I mean *Anderson East*.”

Stryker’s patience broke, and he grabbed the lapels of Malcolm’s jacket. “What did you do?”

Malcolm shoved Stryker off of him. “I thought I was just the slacker brother living off of daddy’s money? There’s no way I could be smart enough to pull one over on you, right big brother?”

“What did you do?” Stryker shouted.

Colter ran over with Waverly hot on his heels. He jumped between the brothers, shoving them back from each other. Without looking at her he spoke to Waverly. “Be useful for once and get Malcolm out of here. I don’t give a shit if you go back inside, just get him out of Stryker’s face or I’ll let go of him.”

Waverly gasped. “Colt, why are you being so mean?”

Slowly he turned his head to face her. “Treat people the way you want to be treated. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

This is how you treat everyone else, so it must be what you want for yourself.”

Her eyes welled up with tears, but I’d seen her pull this string before. She should have been an actress with the way she could cry on cue. “Sabrina, this is all your fault! He is my brother, not yours. You don’t belong here.”

She spun around, her hair fanning out behind her. In her effort to make a dramatic exit she forgot the one thing Colt asked her to do, take Malcolm with her.

The full intensity of my brother fell on my former best friend, and for the first time since their rivalry began I didn’t intervene. “As much as I would love to watch Stryker beat the shit out of you, it wouldn’t end well for him.”

Malcolm smirked until Colt laughed. “Oh, he’d kick your ass for sure. You’re tall and muscular, sure, but you’re vain. Stryker is built like a fucking tank. He’s got four inches of height, and probably thirty pounds of muscle on you.”

“Fifty,” Stryker interrupted.

Colt scanned his eyes up Stryker’s body. “We’re totally hitting the gym together. Beck never has time. He’s more over the top now since Gracie has been born.”

I poked Colt in the side. “Focus. You’re trying to keep Stryker from smashing in Malcolm’s face, not convince him it would be easy.”

“Right. I’m just trying to remind myself why that’s a bad thing.”

“Because it’s assault and he’d get arrested,” I pointed out.

Colt nodded. “Right, and Malcolm’s not worth it.”

“I’m right here,” Malcolm stupidly reminded us.

“Maybe you should change that,” Colt snapped.

“I’m going.” He looked straight at Stryker. “You can’t have everything. You can have the girl or the company. Not both. Walk away from Sabrina and I’ll tell you what you need to know to save the company.”

Stryker took my hand and with his free one cupped my face. "I'll always choose you."

"Not the choice I would have made," Malcolm muttered. Stryker slowly turned his head to face his brother. "That just confirms it was the right one."



# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## Stryker

Colt caught my eyes through the rearview mirror as we got on the bridge to head back to Seattle from Mercer Island where his parents had their ridiculously large estate for two people. “How are you doing?”

I sighed. “Nothing Malcolm does surprises me. I used to think he was lucky because our father chose him, loved him, and gave him the life he shut me out of. Now, I think he was ruined by all of those things I envied him for. But, I think I’m the lucky one.” I looked over at Sabrina, and I knew I was better off for not being a Graham. For all of his material possessions he had always been denied the one thing I had in abundance, love.

Jana turned around in the front seat as far as her seatbelt allowed. “As much as I love bashing Malcolm, and I do love it, I think we need to acknowledge that he’s not quite as stupid as we assume. He’s more than the vapid party boy we’ve made him out to be.”

“I never thought he was stupid. Of course, I also thought there were redeemable qualities about him, so clearly my opinion might not be valid,” Sabrina said quietly.

Threading my fingers through hers, I squeezed to get her attention. “Do not beat yourself up for having a big heart. It’s one of the things I love most about you. Malcolm didn’t deserve your loyalty, but you weren’t wrong for offering it to him. He was a stupid asshole for taking a gift like that and throwing it away.”

Jana cleared her throat. “He’s not stupid though. He was bragging tonight. We need to dig into what he’s so smug about.”

Sabrina chewed on the corner of her bottom lip. “I think he’s been laundering money for your dad. I just haven’t figured out how. Aaron has helped me find the accounts that are missing money, and some of it we’ve been able to trace back to deposits in offshore accounts owned by your father. We managed to access his tax returns, don’t ask, and found corresponding amounts reported as revenue. It took some digging, but there aren’t just losses that don’t make sense reported in the company’s financials. There’s a profit on a product that doesn’t seem to sell anywhere else.”

Jana groaned. “Let me guess, Easton Vodka and it only sells in Malcolm’s clubs.”

Sabrina nodded. “I was able to find a contract offering exclusive access to the vodka line. However, I can’t find any records of its continued production.”

Jana shrugged. “That might not mean much. There was a large batch produced in anticipation of it being a hit. From what I was told when I took back control of the company, the board forced it to be discontinued after my cousin Chad blew the launch.”

“That’s where it gets interesting. More product has been sold, according to the records, than was apparently produced,” Sabrina added.

“Well, fuck me,” Colt blurted out. “If I were going to launder money, I can’t think of much better than a business where quantity is easily manipulated and most of the transactions are cash.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Even credit card transactions are easy to alter. The employees ring up whatever they are told. Labels can be changed. A cheaper vodka can be substituted and called anything as long as it comes from the right bottle. Since they aren’t opening the bottles every night  
—“

“They can be refilled, and the staff is none the wiser,” Colt finished.

“So Malcolm gets an infusion of cash, and washes money for my father,” Jana thought aloud.

“I guess you’re right. My brother is not as stupid as I thought he was. We still have to prove it though. I think we need to go to the distillery and see if we can pin down exactly how much was produced. Then we need to find out exactly what was told to the board that allowed Maxwell to claim the revenue for himself,” I added.

“That part is easy. When my father seized my property, he used some of my inheritance to purchase the line back from the company. The meeting minutes say that he argued since the company was to be mine eventually, and I was blamed for the abysmal performance of the brand, it was only proper that I compensate the investors for their losses. They were happy to be off the hook for the failed product, so he was sold the remaining stock and all rights to dispose of it as he saw fit,” Jana explained.

I nodded several times, coming up with a plan. “Then I need to make a trip to the distillery and see if I can uncover any records, or verify that production has really been shuttered.”

“I’ll make the arrangements for us to travel to Colorado in the morning. Easton doesn’t have its own plane, but there is a charter service contracted, that might be better than flying commercial so we don’t tip off Maxwell,” Sabrina said.

“Why would that tip him off?” I asked.

“You haven’t noticed your relationship has become gossip column fodder?” Colter asked.

“What? That can’t be true. I’m the bastard son of a mediocre executive. That’s hardly gossip column worthy,” I scoffed.

“You secretly married the stepsister of one of Seattle’s formerly most eligible bachelors. Sabrina is beautiful, and occasionally the subject of speculation. Beckett and Colter are

still favorites of these websites. Now they're more interested in bump watch for Evie and I, but they can't quit obsessing over them. And you're kind of hot, so of course, they are paying attention to you," Jana said.

"I'm going to spank your ass for that comment, brat. Then I'm going to make sure those blood-sucking gossip hounds get a bump to watch. You've triggered my inner caveman, and I'm going to make sure the world knows you're mine," Colt growled.

Sabrina's nose crinkled. "Ew, please drop us off before you procreate. I've had enough trauma for one evening."

For the first time during this disastrous evening, I laughed. "It's not a horrible idea. If the gossip rags are watching, then might as well give them something to pay attention to."

Sabrina pointed her finger in my face. "Do not get any ideas from my block-headed brother. We are not going to have a child just so you can work through some idiotic need to prove your manhood."

I bit the tip of her finger and she squealed. "How about because I love you and would love nothing more than to watch your belly swell with our child."

Jana sighed. "Sorry, Brina. I think I'm going to let Colt try and talk me into it. I'm not going to be much help in getting out of this one of their plans."

I could see Colt's smile in the mirror. "Oh, there won't be much talking happening. I've got a better way to convince you."

Jana's face heated a rosy pink. "Is there jewelry involved?"

Colt turned and winked at her. "Most definitely."

Sabrina mock gagged. "I'm going to vomit. Do not talk about your hardware. I only survived the first time I heard about it thanks to lots of alcohol."

All this time I'd assumed Colter Greyson was a typical executive. Sure, he was handsome and had a previous reputation as a bit of a playboy, but he was a numbers guy. I'd

always thought he was pretty predictable. This was the second time tonight my preconceived notions failed me. It seemed I wasn't as good at reading people as I'd thought.

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**T**he climb up the three flights of stairs should have left us exhausted after the roller coaster of emotions we experienced at the party. Instead, the only thing I kept thinking about was the moment Sabrina called me her husband. Rather than tame my inner beast, hearing her accept our marriage lit a fire inside of me.

I scooped her up once we unlocked our door, and carried her over the threshold. "What are you doing?" she asked me.

"You called me your husband earlier," I said as if that would explain my thoughts to her the way they were banging around inside my head.

"Because you are. Me not having any memories of it aside, we are married."

I set her on her feet beside our bed. "Tonight was the first time you said it like we were a couple and not a mistake to be corrected."

Her hands rubbed up my chest and hooked around my neck. "I'm so sorry I made you feel like that, and that I forgot about you."

With the small room I had between our bodies I managed to undo my tie. I pulled it through my hands, imagining the black silk wrapped around her porcelain skin. "I know how you can make it up to me."

Her pupils dilated, and she bit her bottom lip. Her skin flushed with a rosy glow. Reaching behind her I slowly lowered the zipper of her dress. The white material pooled around her feet, and she stood in front of me in her pale pink lacy lingerie. With my hand on the center of her chest, I applied pressure until she laid back on the bed.

Stretching the tie between my hands, I stood over her with my legs on either side of hers. “Have you ever heard the term, *tying the knot*?”

She nodded, her eyes glued to the fabric I pulled over and over through my hand. “Stretch out on the bed, arms over your head,” I instructed.

My Sunshine, always eager to play. She did as I said, arching her back as she reached toward the headboard. With my tie I wound the fabric around one hand then around the other back and forth until I’d made the traditional wedding knot. It wasn’t the strongest binding, but it was the symbol I was after.

“Usually when this ceremony is performed a bride’s hand would be tied to her groom’s as a symbol that the two are bound together in life. I’ve been tied to you since the moment we said I do, it’s you that has slipped through, so I’m modifying it a bit.”

I trailed my fingers across the swells of her breasts, down the center of her stomach to her navel, then flirted with the edge of her panties before pulling my hand away.

“Are you trying to torture me?” she asked in a voice rough with desire.

A dark sounding chuckle ripped free from my throat. “It would be fitting after suffering for the last several years, but no.” This time I started at her ankle, stroking the skin of her calf, the inside of her thigh, lightly over her fabric cover mound. Up and up my hand went until I made it to the base of her throat.

I wrapped my fingers around her delicate neck but didn’t squeeze. I didn’t want to take away her air, or her illusion of control. She’d gone on too long trying to manage everything on her own. Unable to resist, I leaned forward and pressed my mouth against hers. For a moment I lost myself in her.

When she started to squirm I pulled back. “You asked if I plan to torture you. That’s not my intention, but you might feel

like it before I let you come. I have very particular needs, but so do you. I don't think you're aware of it though."

"I need you to fuck me. I'm very aware of that," she stated boldly.

Again I chuckled. A few months ago she wouldn't have dared say anything like that to me. I flicked my tongue against the shell of her ear, and ground my engorged dick against her mound. I kept my pants on so I could maintain control long enough to drive her as high as I could before I let her come.

She shivered as my hot breath fanned out across her neck. I gently bit the spot below her ear. "You'll get fucked when you're a good girl. You've got to earn it."

"How?" she panted.

"By being honest with yourself. What do you desire most?"

Her tongue flicked across her lower lip. "I thought I made that clear. I want your cock."

"I'm not into punishment, but if I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to get spanked. Now, be honest with me. What do you want? What is the desire you have never told anyone?" I already knew the answer, but I didn't think she'd been brave enough to admit it to herself.

I watched her eyes go back and forth as she searched her own mind. Her body went lax underneath mine, and she lowered her eyes. "I want you to take control and use me however you like. I want to know what it's like to be yours completely."



# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## Sabrina

“Then I’ll show you what it means to be mine,” he vowed.

He opened a drawer in the nightstand and pulled out a pair of leather cuffs. Dangling them from one finger he held them above me. “Are you sure?”

My mouth went dry and my heart thundered in my chest. I opened my mouth to beg, but I genuinely wanted him to take control. I’d never considered myself submissive before, but I’d never been as turned on as I was when Stryker touched me. Every nerve in my body was alive as I waited for what he was going to do next. I decided to follow his lead, and give myself over to his plans.

He watched my face as I battled what remained of my inhibitions. His sinfully full lips curved up as I decided to give myself to him completely. “Good girl,” he purred.

“Let’s switch out that binding, and then we can really play.” Slowly he unwound the tie from around my hands. I was a little sad to see it leave my skin, but that disappeared once he buckled the cuffs around my wrists.

His hands slid down my arms, the roughness of his calluses felt divine against my flesh. I shivered as he once again placed one of his large hands around my throat. He never squeezed but held me in a way that felt like it branded my soul. After a moment, he kept moving down. Lightly he brushed over the swells of my breasts before reaching behind my back and unhooking my strapless bra.

The air was chilly enough to cause my nipples to pebble once exposed. His dark eyes seemed to go molten as he watched them tighten into hard points. He sucked one into his mouth and bit down just enough to make my breath catch and make my core throb. He pulled back a little, stretching my nipple and forcing a gasp from me.

I pressed my lips together, trying not to make another sound. He chuckled, and I realized I'd just issued some kind of challenge. He hadn't given me permission to make noise, and I didn't know what the rules were. According to the books I read, we were supposed to go over those, right?

"Do I need a safe word?" I blurted out.

He laughed loud and hard. "All you have to do is tell me to stop. I'll be honest, I get off on tying you up. There are things I want to do to you that will make you come so hard you might pass out. I'm going to take you hard, but I don't want to hurt you. If you're *ever* uncomfortable with anything, all you have to do is tell me. As I already told you, I don't like punishing women."

I couldn't help the surge in jealousy that came over me. My eyebrow cocked up before I could school my features. "Women?"

He smiled, and if I weren't suddenly irritated with him I'd have stretched up to kiss him. "Poor choice of words. You are the only one for me. You've been the only one for me. By now you have to believe I'm going to be faithful. If I didn't stray during the years you'd forgotten me, I sure as hell am not going anywhere now that I've got you where I want you." With his index finger, he tapped the end of my nose. "You're adorable when you're jealous."

His eyes traveled back down to my breasts. "Now, let's see how long you can hold out before you scream."

I was determined to be good, but I had to bite my lip when he sucked my other nipple into his mouth. Instead of biting this time he sucked hard. I felt the pull all the way down to my clit which throbbed in tandem with every pull of his mouth. My back arched, and I trembled with the need to moan.

Somehow I managed to swallow the sound, but the effort caused spots to appear in my vision.

He hummed against my flesh, and his mouth worked down my stomach. He alternated nibbling and sucking, but still I remained silent.

“You’re doing so well, Sunshine. But I *am* going to make you cry out. I guess my baby just needs more, huh?”

Choppy breaths came into my lungs, and I held it. I knew I was going to lose, but in losing I was going to win the best orgasm of my life.

Stryker’s fingers slipped under the waistband of my underwear, and slowly drew them down my legs. His hands landed on my knees, and he pushed them open wide. A rumbling hum came from his throat. “So hot and tight. I can’t wait to feel you squeezing my cock. Are you ready to scream?”

He settled between my spread thighs. When his hot breath hit my shaved mound I shivered. His fingers spread the lips of my pussy, exposing my clit. I expected the teasing touches he’d given me before. I was not expecting him to suck the bundle of nerves as hard as he had my breast.

My breathing got louder, but still I managed not to make a sound. I was so wet I could feel the slickness leaking from my core, but I was too far gone to be embarrassed. Then I was just grateful when he shoved two thick fingers deep inside of me, pumping furiously.

I shook my head back and forth. The remains of my control starting to slip.

“Give in,” he growled. “Stop fighting me and I’ll fuck you as hard as you begged me earlier.”

I wanted to do as he asked, but I wanted to push him a little farther. Something told me the more I resisted, the harder he’d take me.

Stryker curled his fingers and hit a spot deep inside that made those spots in my vision become stars. His tongue swirled and flicked hard against my clit causing a vibrating

sensation. His fingers plunged deep and hard, and I lost it. I groaned long and loud, my body shook with the force of my orgasm.

He pulled his fingers out of me and sucked them into his mouth. It was the filthiest and hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

“Good girls get rewarded,” he said as he pulled his fingers out of his mouth.

With my legs propped over his arms he bent me in half, and I knew as powerful as my last orgasm was, I hadn't seen anything yet.

The head of his cock pressed against my opening, and he thrust deep inside of me. The veins in his neck stood out and perspiration beaded on his brow. “Fucking perfect,” he mumbled.

This time I didn't try to stay silent. I moaned each time he slammed into me. He'd looped the middle of the cuffs through one of the slats in the headboard, and I finally experienced the extent of being bound. I struggled against the bindings, wanting nothing more than to touch him.

He slipped his arms out from under my legs and wrapped them around his waist. Then he grabbed the headboard and used it to help him drive deeper and harder. The sounds of banging wood, skin slapping, and our collective grunts filled the room. It was an erotic soundtrack I knew would play on repeat in my memories for a long time. His hips rolled, grinding his pelvis against my clit.

Just as I was starting to climb the peak again he pulled out. “I want more,” he growled.

He unbuckled the hook connecting the cuffs and flipped me over to my stomach. Grabbing my hips he pulled me back onto my knees. Before I could take a breath he pushed back inside of me. His fingers dug into my skin, and he used the strength of his arms to slam me against him every time he thrust forward.

Stryker's large palm struck the cheek of my ass. The slight sting quickly morphed into incredible pleasure. "You are mine. I'll never let you go again. Tell me who you belong to," he demanded.

"You," I panted. "I belong to you."

He fucked me harder and deeper than ever before. I realized he'd held back up until now. This was what it meant to belong to him. For the first time, I felt what I'd always been missing, a connection. I gave myself over to the sensation. My head became fuzzy and there was no more thought. I was flying, rising higher than I ever had.

I felt the moment he lost control. His movements became jerky, and he growled as hot jets of cum filled me. The sensation was so primal I screamed as my entire body clenched along with the inner muscles of my pussy. My vision went black, and I let myself drift off to an exhausted slumber.

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I woke up slowly the next morning. My muscles were deliciously sore, but I felt more rested than I ever remembered being. Sunlight streamed into our room, and I realized it was later in the day than I normally awoke.

Rolling to my side, I found the other side of the bed empty. There was a moment of panic. Last night Stryker and I connected body and soul, but I still woke up alone. Panic seized my chest, and another revelation hit me. This was the reason I held back before. He had power over me, even without his hand on my throat and that terrified me. Needing someone who could leave me went against all of my self-protective instincts. Part of me wanted to turn back the clock and push him away harder, but he'd worked his way too far past my walls. Scary or not, he was vital to me now, and I could either continue to live in fear or finally be brave.

Before I could fall too far into the pit of my personal hell, the smell of coffee filtered into the room. I made my way into the other room and found Stryker sitting at the table with the

reports I'd been going over with Aaron the last couple of weeks spread out on the table. When he saw me enter the room he got up and got me a cup of coffee without a word. I sat down at the table and he set a mug down in front of me.

He dropped a kiss on my forehead before joining me at the table. Lifting the cup to my lips I took a sip and found it perfectly doctored to my tastes. Half filled with sweet cream, it was equal parts coffee and creamer, just the way I liked it.

Stryker smirked at me. "That isn't real coffee."

I shrugged. "It's enough caffeine to wake me up, but hides the bitter, nasty coffee taste."

He shook his head. "You've lived in Seattle your entire life and don't like coffee. How is that possible?"

"I don't hate coffee. I just prefer it to taste like a candy bar. Thankfully lattes exist." I reached for one of the files he had on the table. "What are you doing looking through the inventory reports for Easton Vodka again?"

"I was thinking of how smug my brother was last night. He seemed to think he had pulled one over on us. I remembered the discrepancies you mentioned in the sales reports. Jana said the vodka launch was a bust, but here a few months later it was breaking even."

"We need to get our hands on Malcolm's accounting records."

"First we'd have to know where he keeps them. I'm not close enough to him to ask. I'd think he'd have them stored in the office at his Seattle club, but he doesn't spend that much time there, and it wasn't opened until a year ago," he said.

"His first club was in Denver. After college, he went to find himself, or so he said at least. What he found was a group of people who partied all the time. He started organizing bigger and bigger events for them, and fell upon a warehouse he was able to convert. Since he'd been on the verge of being cut off from his dad—sorry, I mean your dad—"

He held up his hand. "You were right the first time. That man has never been my dad. When we first met he pulled me

into the company, and God help me, I tried to impress him, but he's only ever seen me as a mistake. I walked away from him and his bullshit job shortly after we got married."

I set my cup down on the table. "There's still so much we don't know about each other."

Stryker reached out and took my hands. "We've got a lifetime to learn the little things. What's important is that I love you. The rest is just details."

I smiled what I imagined was a dopey looking grin. "That's the second time you've said that to me. I don't think it hit me when you said it before, but you really do, don't you?"

A crease formed between his eyes. "What, that I love you? Do you still doubt it?"

I shook my head and laughed softly. "No, I think I believe you."

One of his eyebrows cocked up. "You think? If you don't know then I'm not doing a good enough job showing you."

"I don't know how you could do any more. I'm the one who's bad at showing it, but I need you to know that I love you too," I said.

His chair creaked as he pushed back from the table. Patting his knee he said, "Come here, Sunshine."

I stood without arguing this time and sat on his lap. His hand settled on my thigh and began a distracting motion up and down. I was so focused on the direction of his hand that I nearly missed what he was saying.

He squeezed my thigh and regained my attention. "A couple of years ago I took an assignment in Denver overhauling a corporate law firm. The CEO who took over once the restructuring was finished is a genius at accessing things he shouldn't be able to get his hands on. Let me give him a call and point him in the right direction. He owes me a favor."



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## Stryker

**I**t took some time to get ahold of my friend Thomas. I finally managed to catch him between rounds of golf.

Then I had to wait a few more hours for him to get a plan together to get a hold of Malcolm's records. In the meantime, Sabrina and I spent the first lazy Saturday we'd ever had together.

We dressed in sweats, cuddled on the couch, and watched movies. It was everything I'd fantasized about for the last few years. Well, perhaps not everything. Last night checked more of those boxes than anything else, but this was a close second. Having her with me, doing something so normal, and feeling the heat of her body pressed into mine filled my heart with peace. Occasionally I'd drop a kiss to the top of her head for no other reason other than I could. Showing her affection, especially after she admitted she was having a hard time accepting the depth of my feelings for her, was my new goal.

My phone rang in the middle of our second movie of the day. She paused the tv, as eager as I was to see what he learned. I answered the phone and put it on speaker.

"Hey Tommy," I greeted him. "What did you find out?"

"I haven't gotten my hands on anything yet, but I learned that the venture capital firm that gave him the loan wrote in a provision to have oversight of the company to ensure their funds weren't misused and that they were getting their share of the profits. It appears they haven't actually followed through with examining his records though. This pertains to all of the locations, not just the original club. And, would you guess

which firm they contracted to conduct the audits?” There was a note of victory in his voice.

“If you say McNeal, Cline, and Tanner I could kiss you,” I replied. That was the name of his law firm and would cut through a lot of bullshit in getting those records.

“As temptingly pouty as that mouth of yours is, I’ve heard I’m late in giving you congratulations on your marriage. Maybe I’ll let your wife kiss you and you can just buy me a beer when you get here,” he replied.

“Get there?” I asked confused.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re looking for, but rather than spending man hours digging through receipts that are likely mostly bullshit, how about you come down here and we search together?” he asked.

“I guess I’m going to be buying you that beer then. I can leave tomorrow as long as I can get a flight out.”

Sabrina took out her phone and her fingers flew over the screen. After a minute her phone chimed with an incoming text. She looked up after she read it. “Jana said that the company has access to a plane they share with another company. The contract has a few more months on it, but after that she plans to let it lapse and utilize the Anderson Global jet when necessary since by then the merger should be complete.”

“Did you hear that?” I asked Thomas.

“Make the arrangements and let me know. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. We exchanged a few more pleasantries and got off the phone.

“I’ll call and see if the plane is available and if there’s enough time for us to file flight plans to Denver,” Sabrina said.

I put my hand over hers with the phone. “I think you should stay here and keep things running at the office. Now isn’t the best time for the both of us to be away.”

Her lips pursed and her brow furrowed, a sure sign she wanted to argue with me, but I shook my head to stop her. “I

don't want to be away from you either, but this will be a quick trip. Hopefully I can turn around and leave the same night."

She narrowed her eyes. "There is going to be way too much to go through for that. Don't take this the wrong way, but as brilliant as you are I'm the one with the head for numbers."

"I promise to scan and send you any files I need your help with. I have a feeling my brother is going to try something, and I don't think we should both be away from the office right now." What I didn't want to mention was that my intuition was screaming at me that she shouldn't come with me. If I told her that though, she'd insist neither of us go.

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**T**he arrangements to take the plane to Denver took the rest of the day on Saturday. I knew arranging private travel would be different than purchasing a ticket on a commercial flight, but I didn't realize how much red tape would be involved. After several calls, the pilot called and told me to be at the airstrip at seven in the morning.

Sabrina wasn't the only one dreading being apart. The last time she was out of my sight for an evening she forgot all about me. I didn't think she would be dosed with roofies again, but I spent extra effort to make sure she remembered me in the morning. I reached for her over and over during the night.

Every touch showed my desperation to be near her. This time wasn't a game of domination and submission. As much as I normally craved control, that was how much I wanted her wild. She was set free to roam my body with her touch, and she took full advantage of it. Her hands caressed slowly at first, but as our passion increased so too did the pressure she used. Her nails raked over my skin, biting into the flesh. Maybe I was cracked, but the sting sent waves of euphoria through my body.

Each stroke of her nails against my back drove me faster and deeper into her wet heat. Her breath became mine and our hearts beat in tandem. Whether it was fate or dumb luck that brought us together, our souls were forever linked. Soon after, worn out by multiple orgasms, we gave in to exhaustion and fell asleep.

My dreams were vivid. My cock was sucked deep into the tight heat of Sabrina's throat while her nails scored down my inner thighs. The urge to thrust deep drove me over and over. Since this was only a dream I gave in to my body's demand. My fingers threaded through silken strands of hair. I used my hold to force my cock faster and deeper into her throat.

Electricity traveled up my cock, and my balls pulled tight to my body. The sound of gagging drove me on. I buried myself deep with one more rough thrust and came with a shout, spilling hot jets of cum down her throat.

Slowly my eyes blinked open and caught glistening blue ones looking up at me. For a moment I was horrified to find I wasn't dreaming. Forcing my hand open, I let her hair slip through my fingers, and my softening dick pulled free from her mouth.

She wiped her mouth off with the back of her hand and winked at me. "Better than an alarm?"

"Fuck woman. That was amazing, but I was too rough. I thought I was dreaming, I could have hurt you. Shit, did I hurt you?"

Sabrina smiled at me. "I liked it. I like being used for your pleasure."

A growl rumbled in my chest, and I slammed my mouth against hers. My tongue took hers as roughly as my cock had before. Her body melted for me, but after the way she sucked me dry, I didn't have a hope of getting hard again before I had to leave for my flight.

Still, I couldn't leave my Sunshine unsatisfied. I worked my way down her body. Taking time to worship her perky tits, I pulled one tight bud into my mouth and sucked hard. Her

back arched, and I switched my attention to the other one. I worked my way down her body, nipping at her stomach before burying my face between her thighs.

Time wasn't on our side, but I was determined to leave her as satisfied as she'd left me. I circled her clit with my tongue, alternating sucking with a slight scrape of my teeth. Wetness leaked from her and I fucked her hard and fast with two fingers. I added a third and curled them, hitting the spot that made mindless sounds fall from her swollen lips. Her legs clenched around my head and I replaced my fingers with my tongue. I ate her like a man starved.

Once more I plunged my fingers inside of her, finding her g-spot, applying pressure and friction until her entire body went taut and her breath held. After a moment it released with a low moan. She went boneless in my arms, and I allowed myself a moment to hold her tight.

Somewhere deep inside doubt wormed its way in. I knew she wouldn't forget me, but I couldn't help the fear that there were forces working to separate us. Even so, I needed to see this through. My brother was planning something and if we didn't check him, the merger could be brought down. I promised Jana to protect her company, and I'd never let down a client yet.

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“We should say goodbye here at the apartment,” I insisted. Parting from her was hard, even for only a few days.

Sabrina put her hand on her hip and gave me a look that told me I'd said something stupid. “So, are you going to take an Uber all the way to the airport, or do you plan to leave your car there?”

The plane that Maxwell Easton had contracted with flew out of a private hangar south of Tacoma. I didn't know what the parking situation was like there and had assumed I'd leave my car like she suspected.

A satisfied smirk pulled at the corners of her mouth. “We’ll say goodbye at the airport then.” She grabbed the keys from my hand and moved to the door.

“I still need my bag,” I told her before she walked out.

She held up a bag by the door. “One step ahead of you. I packed a change of clothes just in case you can’t leave tonight like you thought. A couple actually. No telling what you’ll find and if you’ll have to stay longer.”

“Seems you’re prepared for everything. When did you find the time to do all of this?”

She winked at me. “You were sleeping really soundly this morning.”

Flashbacks from this morning flooded my mind. Knowing how much she could take gave me ideas for the future. One thing was clear, she was a lot tougher than I’d given her credit for.

Despite the early hour, there was still enough traffic on the interstate that the trip took over forty minutes. We had plenty of time to talk, but neither of us said much. The airstrip was outside of town headed toward Olympia and mostly catered to politicians needing to travel around the state. I pulled up to the small office building and handed the keys to Sabrina.

She stepped out of the car with me and followed me to the trunk where I grabbed my bag. I pulled her to me and kissed her deep and hard. I had to force myself to step back from her or I was going to be taking this flight with a hard on. I already hated flying, I didn’t want to do it sexually frustrated too.

“I’m going to miss you,” I said, and pressed a final kiss to her forehead.

Sabrina winced and stepped back from me. “About that.” She reached for my bag and unzipped it.

Inside were a few changes of clothes—for both of us. “I’m coming with you.”

I sighed. “We talked about this. You need to be at the office.”

Her head was shaking before I'd even finished talking. "Except, I don't. I talked to Colt. He agreed that our number one priority is finding out what might be in Malcolm's records. You need my help."

I opened my mouth to protest, but she held up her hand stopping me. "I know you're capable, but we don't know how much he has there and the two of us can get through it faster. Not to mention Aaron and I have spent the last few weeks going through all the records for Easton Corp. I might be able to recognize a transaction I didn't think was important before. Colt's going to go into the office with Jana in our place and finish meeting with the employees. They are onboarding them to Anderson East, so it only makes sense that one of the heads of corporate finalizes that step."

Everything she said made sense, but there was an alarm going off in my head telling me not to let her get on this flight with me. Only, I couldn't argue with her logic. There was also the fact I didn't want to be away from her.

I shoved the apprehension deep down. "I'm just not a great flyer, but you're right, it would be better if you were there with me. Except, what are we doing with the car?"

A security agent came out to meet us, stopping Sabrina from answering my question.

"I need to see your identifications to verify against the manifest. Then the crew will be out to collect your luggage and the pilot will be ready to head out."

We both handed over our IDs, and I realized Sabrina had set this up before coming here when I saw her name already listed on the manifest. Once she was done with her verification, Sabrina handed her the keys. Then she looked at me and raised her eyebrow. "Colt and Jana are going to be by later to get the car."

I grabbed our bag with one hand, and her hand with the other. "Let's get this over with then."

"You really hate flying," she said. Her eyes were wide as if that was just sinking in.



“Loathe it,” I admitted. “I’ve flown before because it’s a necessary evil if you work all over the country, but I only do it when necessary.”

On the tarmac sat a tiny twin engine plane. I’d only ever flown commercial, and only ever on large jets. They seemed so solid. I didn’t think about the fact they were going up in the air. I pretended it was the same as taking a bus, or a train. It would be hard to pretend when I could see out of all the windows and if I stretched out my arms I could touch both sides of the plane.

Sabrina tugged at my hand. “C’mon, let’s get on with it.”

The ground crew went over the plane, which made me feel a little better about climbing inside of a tin box with wings. A man exited the building and headed our way. One of the ground crew joined him and reached for my bag. I passed it off and shook the captain’s hand when he extended it. “I’m Captain McHenry. I’ll be your pilot to Denver. We will be stopping for fuel in Hailey, Idaho on our way to Denver. I filed the flight plan yesterday, and we’ve gotten clearance to land at the private airstrip at Denver International Airport.”

The crewman put our bag in the back of the plane and removed the blocks from the wheels. The captain directed us to the door. “Our total flight time will be a little under four hours. Let’s get settled inside and we’ll be on our way.”

Sabrina and I took two seats in the middle of the plane. I insisted we sit over the wing because I’d heard once that was the safest place to sit. As if that would be enough to save us if the plane went down.

She put her hands on my face and forced me to look at her. “You need to breathe. Try closing your eyes for a while. It’s really early, and I know you’re tired. Just, sleep for a while, and before you know it we’ll be landing.”

I took a slow deep breath in through my nose. My hands gripped the armrests while we taxied down the runway. I clenched my eyes closed tight as the plane took off. Once it leveled out I was able to drift off.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## Sabrina

Stryker fell asleep a lot faster than I expected. Of course, he expended a lot of energy last night, or he would never have been able to relax. Once we hit cruising altitude I found myself getting drowsy, and let myself doze off as well.

About an hour into the flight the air got choppy, and I startled awake. Stryker jolted next to me. “What’s going on?”

I tried to force more calm into my voice than I felt. “I think it’s just some turbulence.”

The plane dropped and felt like it bounced in the air. This time Stryker wasn’t the only one squeezing the armrests. He leaned over and peered out the window. “Are the trees supposed to be this close?”

The plane started to rattle and shake harder the more altitude we lost. “What’s happening?” I shouted up to the pilot.

He ignored me as he fought with the controls. From my view of the front of the plane I could see the mountain getting closer. Captain McHenry grappled with his seat belt and picked up a pack next to his seat.

“What is that?” I asked Stryker. Almost as soon as the words were out of my mouth I realized what he was holding. “Shit! Oh, shit,” I muttered over and over. “Why does he have a parachute?”

Of course, Stryker didn’t have the answer to that question. The pilot turned around and gave us one last look before he put his arms inside the parachute and fastened it. Without so

much as an apology, he pushed open the cockpit door and jumped out of the plane.

I expected Stryker to panic, but instead, his emotions seemed to shut down. He was calm and methodical as he stepped into the cockpit and took over the controls. He put on the headset and started to issue an alert that we were going down and tried to give the location to whoever was on the other end of the radio.

“How are you doing this?” I shouted.

His muscles strained in his long sleeve shirt as he fought the controls. “I’ll explain everything when we land. For now, I need you to brace yourself.”

“Land?” My head swiveled, seeing nothing except trees getting larger and larger.

Through clenched teeth, he replied, “More like controlled crashing.”

“Get ready,” he shouted.

I leaned forward and held on to the seat in front of me. If I’d thought the flight was choppy before, that was nothing compared to now as the plane descended into the trees. Branches scratched against the sides of the plane as a myriad of alarms screeched from the front of the plane.

Stryker cursed a blue streak as he fought to control the plane. I thought my life would flash before me, but all I saw was emptiness. All the years I’d moved through the world not knowing he was out there waiting for me to remember him. The last few years I’d taken for granted and all the ways we’d make up for that lost time. Now I knew, there was no way to replace those missing years.

The noise was deafening as we got closer and closer to the ground. From the left side of the plane I could see flames shooting from the engine.

“Here we go,” I heard Stryker yell above the sound of metal groaning and buckling.

The impact knocked the air from my lungs, and my head slammed against the tray table hooked on the back of the seat. Blood trickled down my forehead, and got into my eye. My head swam, and my stomach churned. I groaned, feeling on the verge of passing out, or puking, perhaps both.

The way down seemed to take ages, but it had probably only been minutes since the pilot had jumped from the plane and left us to die. How Stryker was able to take control was a mystery since he was terrified of flying.

Trees whipped past the plane, banging into it as we muscled our way through the trunks. Pieces of metal whizzed by as they hit. The nose tipped down, but he was able to pull it back up. Then the plane hit the ground, bounced, and skidded sideways before finally resting on its side.

I exhaled, and with a shaky hand wiped the blood from my brow. “Stryker?” My voice shook, but I needed reassurance that he was okay. That we were okay.

“I fucking hate flying,” he said.

A surprised chuckle escaped me. I tried to hold it back, but that chuckle turned into hysterical laughter.

I heard the click of his seat belt, and the groaning of the plane as he moved toward me. His hands lightly brushed my arms, then gently raised my face. He sucked in a breath, and I lifted my fingers to hover near the cut on my forehead. He stopped my hand before I could touch it.

“Let me get a look at you,” he demanded.

A loud pop sounded outside of the plane as the fire in the left engine grew. “Shit,” he said, looking out the window. “We need to get out of here.”

His hands fumbled with my buckle and he lifted me from the plane. “Our bag,” I said pointing toward the rear of the plane.

Stryker shook his head. “That fire is spreading, we don’t have time to dig through the back for it.”

He was right. A change of clothes wouldn't do us any good if we never made it off the plane.

"I can walk," I told him as he carried me toward the cockpit where the door was still open. The side door was dented and would take time and effort to force open.

"If you haven't noticed, I'm a little bit of a control freak," he tried to tease.

"Stryker," I pushed back.

He sighed. "I know you can walk, but I need you close. Just, let me."

I nodded my head and groaned with the movement.

The plane shuddered under each step he took. When we got to the door he helped me down before jumping down himself. He took my hand, and we climbed over downed limbs and loose rocks. I looked back and saw a scar torn through the vegetation.

We didn't speak as we moved away from the trees. After being up most of the night, and coming down from the adrenaline rush of the crash, it took all of our energy to focus on getting far enough from the smoldering wreckage. There was risk of fire spreading from the burning engine. The forest floor was littered with fallen pine needles and dried vegetation this late into the fall, prime kindling for a fire.

For hours we moved down the mountain until we got to a stream. It hadn't snowed yet, but there was still a lot of runoff feeding the stream. "We need to follow it down and find a place to cross. If the fire does spread, hopefully, it will give us some protection."

The air grew cold as the sun began to sink behind the peak of the mountain. "Stryker, we need to find shelter."

Shock, exhaustion, and cold caused my body to shiver. I didn't have any way to gauge the temperature but based on the fact my breath was fogging, it had to be well below fifty degrees. Cold enough to cause hypothermia.

“You’re right. We can’t risk getting wet this close to dark. Let’s look for a spot where the trees block some of the wind.”

Together we moved deeper into the trees. The branches hung low providing a natural roof.

“Look around for any kindling or logs we can use to build a fire. I’m going to see what I can add to this so we can stay as warm as possible.”

I did as he asked and started filling my arms with the driest branches and logs I could find. He bent and twisted the branches to make a sort of lean-to out of the limbs. He wove an opening in the middle of the roof. I paused in my collection and raised a questioning brow.

“We survived a plane crash. We’re going to need a fire to keep from freezing to death, and I’ll be damned if we end up dying of smoke inhalation,” he explained.

“Were you a boy scout or something?” I doubted Malcolm knew a thing about survival in the outdoors.

Stryker continued to fill in the holes of the natural canopy with fallen branches and any he could break off. “No. It was too expensive for my mom, and it required a lot of volunteering by the parents. My mom needed to work, so I never pushed it.”

I dropped the wood near the entrance to our shelter. The cold made my hands shake and my cheeks burn. Stryker was the perfect distraction. There was still so much to learn about him, and I was like a sponge trying to absorb every drop of information.

“Then how did you learn how to do all of this?”

He fixed one last branch in place and started arranging the firewood before stopping to answer my question. “My uncle taught me. My mom’s younger brother, Matthew, loved the outdoors. Hunting, fishing, camping, all of it.”

“You said, loved. Past tense,” I said.

He bobbed his head. “He passed away when I was a freshman in high school.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“He’d taken a job as a hunting guide up in Alaska. To get to one of the remote camps they had to take a bush plane. A freak storm blew in, and they crashed out in the middle of nowhere. It was a week before a rescue crew could make it out to them. Not that it would have done any good if they’d made it there immediately. The autopsies showed they all died on impact.”

“That’s why you’re scared to fly.” I could have kicked myself for not listening to him and booking a commercial flight. “I don’t understand how you were able to land the plane.”

“I hardly landed it. I just made the crash survivable,” he corrected.

Stryker started moving some stones to form a fire circle. “Try and find something to pad the floor so we don’t have to try and sleep directly on the rocks. Once the fire is going I’ll answer all those questions I can see swirling around in your head.”

Unlike my husband, I was not particularly outdoorsy. Under normal circumstances this wouldn’t be a problem, but we weren’t on a fun vacation. This was a survival situation, and I didn’t have the skills. If Stryker weren’t here I’d freeze to death. Hell, I’d have died in a fiery crash before I’d had a chance to experience hypothermia. Which of course had me even more curious about how a man who’d built a reputation as a corporate savior knew how to emergency land a small plane, construct a shelter and hopefully build a fire out of sticks.

Not knowing what I was searching for, I grabbed anything that looked like it could be soft to lay on. Maybe soft was a stretch, but it would be better than sleeping directly on top of a slab of rock. I was rapidly losing the light, so I grabbed whatever I could find and returned to the shelter.

It appeared that Stryker was spinning one stick into a divot of another stick. “Does that really work?”



He lightly blew where they met, and a tiny trickle of smoke rose from it. “If you’re patient enough it does. I’d rather have matches or a lighter, but neither of us smokes, so we have to make due.”

Considering we had nothing but time on our hands for me to ask endless questions, I sat back and watched Stryker do the most primal thing mankind has ever done—make fire. The wind started to pick up, but the structure he built blocked most of it out. Still, I started shivering hard enough to rattle my teeth.

He looked up from his task and saw me fighting a bone-rattling tremble. Setting down the sticks, he opened his arms wide. “Come here, Sunshine. My arms are big enough to hold you and start a fire.”

I wasn’t going to argue with him and try and tough it out, and also after the crash I longed to be close to him. He rubbed his hands up and down my arms. “You are not allowed to get hypothermia.”

“Then you better get that fire going,” I chattered.

He picked up his sticks and started working on creating a spark again. “You probably want to know how I knew how to land the plane.”

I nodded, and he continued to speak. “You know I’m scared of flying because of my uncle. I don’t like to let my fear rule me. When I first started my career, I tried to drive to all of my assignments. As you can imagine, that made it difficult when I was working all over the country. Then I met this amazing woman one night in Vegas, but she ran off the next morning before I got a chance to speak to her. The thing about anxiety is that an attack will tell you all of the things lacking about you. After I convinced myself the huge jet I sat on wasn’t going to crash, I was able to focus on how I didn’t deserve her. But, I had a moment of clarity, and instead of going straight to her, I knew I needed to become the man she deserved. One who didn’t melt down the moment he was on a plane.”

I turned in his arms and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “You were never not good enough for me. If anything, I was the one

who needed to grow up.”

“Either way, I decided to conquer my fear of flying.”

I blinked several times. “That was your fear conquered?”

“You should have seen me before. It was getting to the point where I wasn’t sure I’d be able to fly at all. I decided if I at least knew how to handle an emergency, I’d be able to fly without panicking. I signed up for flight lessons, but I couldn’t manage to get up in the air. I did, however, spend hours and hours in a flight simulator practicing emergency landings.”

“Well, that explains how you managed to save us. I don’t think this experience will do much for your fear of flying.”

“Oh, I’m never flying again. You either. My fear of flying now extends to you.”

I looked at his face and could see he was one hundred percent serious. Not that I was chomping at the bit to get on another plane any time soon, but I still wanted to travel the world, and traveling by ocean liner wasn’t really done anymore.

More smoke swirled out from where he was rubbing the sticks together. A small ember formed and he gently placed it on the pile of kindling he built up next to the sticks he was rubbing together. He coaxed it into smoking and a small flame appeared. I wanted to shout in glee, but I was afraid of jinxing his progress.

When the bundle of kindling had more flames coming from it, he transferred it to the stack of logs he’d piled while I was gathering material for our bedding. He was relentless, and eventually, all of his efforts paid off with a small fire. My collection of pine boughs and moss was laid out nearby.

We laid the pine boughs out on the ground and covered them with the moss. With the fire roaring, Stryker laid down on the pallet and patted the spot next to him. I snuggled up to him and tried to relax. The aches and pains from the crash were starting to present themselves. My head throbbed, and my stomach rumbled. We might have managed to solve one problem, but several more were waiting to challenge us.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

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## Stryker

I stroked Sabrina's hair as she trembled in my arms. "How does your head feel?"

"It hurts," she croaked.

"Any dizziness or nausea?" The skin was split next to her hairline and bruised.

She shrugged, which wasn't a comforting answer. "Sunshine, answer the question," I pressed.

"A little, but I'm not sure if it's from the bump on my head, or because I missed breakfast."

"Shit, you've not eaten all day?" Neither had I, but growing up with a single mom struggling to make ends meet, there was more than one time I lied and told my mother I'd eaten at a friend's so she wouldn't skip dinner. Sabrina might have grown up with a single parent as well, but while I got all of the emotional support I needed, she had all of the physical care. I wanted to make sure after we made it off the mountain she never lacked either ever again.

"Let's not focus on that now. We can't look for anything until the morning, so let's just survive the night." She took a deep breath, and when she spoke her voice sounded tiny and scared. "Why did he do it?"

"The pilot?"

She nodded her head, then winced.

"You need to rest. Without any painkillers you need to try and sleep for a while. But only for a little while. I'm going to

have to wake you up periodically in case you have a concussion,” I diverted her.

She yawned. “That’s old advice. Doctors say it’s safe to sleep with a concussion now, but if I have one it’s mild. You can’t wake me up several times tonight, because we don’t have a way to set an alarm. You’d have to stay awake all night long.”

“You need me.”

“I do, and that means I need you to sleep too. I don’t know how to survive out here on my own,” she argued.

“We need to keep the fire from going out.”

Sabrina turned in my arms so we were face to face. “Okay then, we’ll sleep in shifts. Now, quit trying to distract me from what I want to know. Why do you think he crashed the plane?”

I rolled over onto my back, pulling her half on top of me. “Without proof we can only follow the breadcrumbs. Malcolm was bragging about getting away with something. He had to have known you’d figure out where he kept his records. He might have problems with impulse control, but he’s not stupid.”

I combed my fingers through her hair, idly twisting a strand around my fingers. “He was Maxwell Easton’s proxy when Maxwell tried to buy shares of Easton Corporation when the board pushed him out. Malcolm hosted the launch party for the vodka. The same vodka that was listed as a loss to the board, but also seems to have miraculously started selling.”

She took a deep breath, pressing her luscious breasts against my chest, momentarily distracting me. “But only at Malcolm’s clubs. It was right in front of my face the entire time, and I overlooked it.”

I tipped her chin up with my fingers. “It’s not a personal failing that you saw the best in him. You gave him love when he didn’t deserve it.”

Her head shook emphatically. “I was never in love with him.”

Only she could make me smile while laying on a bed of pine needles and moss. “Sunshine, I know you weren’t *in* love with him, but there’s more than one kind of love. He was a part of your life since you were a child. He was family to you, and he took advantage of your loyalty.”

She let her head drop to rest in the crook of my neck. “I was a fool. He took advantage of my friendship to pump me for information to use against Jana.”

My hand slid up and down her back in what I hoped was a soothing pattern. “We’re alive. He won’t win.”

“He tried to have us killed, and he’s probably having all of his records shredded as we speak.”

“You weren’t supposed to be on this trip, remember? I’m the one who told my secretary I was flying to Denver alone. Not that I think Mrs. Bennet is a mole for Maxwell, but she wouldn’t think twice about telling any of the other executives the reason for my absence.”

“That leaves too much to chance. Who would be calling her on the weekend to ask where you are? The plane share was set up by Maxwell Easton. How much do you want to bet it isn’t only at the office that he’s got people committed to feeding him information?” she asked.

“Right at this moment, it doesn’t matter if it was Malcolm or Maxwell that tried to kill us. We’ll get to the bottom of it when we get home, and we *will* make it home,” I promised her.

She yawned again.

I put my hand on the back of her head and cradled her against my chest. “Sleep now. I’ll watch the fire.”

Her body went slack as she started to let go of her tension, but fought sleep to argue with me. “I will, but only if you wake me in a couple of hours so you can get some sleep too?”

“Shh,” I coaxed her to relax again. “Just rest now. I’ll wake you in a few hours.”

She gave in to sleep, and I had the time to relish the feel of her soft curves molding to my body. The puffs of her breath against my neck soothed the lingering edge of panic remaining from the crash. I was envious of her ability to fall asleep so soundly. Part of me worried it was because of her bump on the head, but as long as her chest rose and fell I forced myself to calm down.

When I told her I'd wake her in a few hours, I lied. I had no intention of waking her before morning. We were fighting for our lives and I needed her to heal as much as possible. We might have survived the pilot jumping out of the plane, leaving me to try to remember how to emergency land a plane. That was just the first hurdle. Now we had to make it off this mountain with no food, clothes, or shelter.

There was enough life left in my watch battery to set an alarm. I could keep the fire going until morning, and still get some rest. My wife wouldn't die in these woods, not as long as there was enough life left in me either.

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**T**he surrounding woods came alive with the first light of the sun. The fire had burned down to coals, but they still kept us warm until we woke. I waited for a while after I woke to let Sabrina sleep a bit longer. The birds chirping and landing on the branches of our shelter, finally caused her to stir awake.

She stretched and groaned on top of me. "You never woke me up."

I kissed her forehead. "Don't worry, I slept. I needed you as rested as possible. Today is going to be a hard day."

She rolled over, and I stood up. Every joint in my body protested after a night of trying to sleep on the ground. I reached out a hand and helped her up.

The long lines of her body were put on display as she stretched and worked out the kinks caused by sleeping half on top of me.

“Me using you as a human body pillow couldn’t have helped.” Her pouting lips called to me, so I pressed another kiss to her mouth before I told her what we needed to do next.

She dropped back down to her feet and saw my serious expression. “What’s the plan?”

Wasn’t that the question of the day? I didn’t think it would help to tell her I was making it up as I went along.

After we smothered the fire and set out of our shelter, I looked back up the mountain toward the plane. I contemplated going back to the plane to gather supplies, but we were out of food and the risk of losing a day going in the wrong direction was too great.

Sabrina looked in the same direction. “Are you thinking of going back to the plane? Don’t planes have a beacon or some kind of signal to let someone find us? You sent out a distress call, so they’re looking, right?”

I took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. I didn’t want to destroy any hope she had that help was on its way. At least until I could figure out a way to make sure it actually was. But, I also didn’t want to lie to her.

“I tried. I never got a response. We need to come to terms with the possibility no one is looking for us.”

“But the beacon—“

“Sunshine, Captain McHenry planned this down to having a parachute ready. Don’t you think he probably disabled the black box?”

“I thought they were tamper proof,” she said.

I nodded. “They are, but they can’t work if they aren’t installed. Think about it. He planned for us to crash in the mountains. When someone inevitably came across the wreckage, they’d assume the box was lost in the crash.”

“Wow.” Her eyes blinked several times. “I think it just really sunk in that someone was trying to kill us.”

“I would have thought the pilot jumping from the plane as it raced toward the mountain would have covered that.”



She punched me, somewhat playfully, on the arm. “That’s called shock, you ass. Then you jumped up and handled things so confidently that I didn’t think about the details. Not that it matters at this moment. When we don’t check in from Denver, Colt and Jana will realize we’re missing and start looking for us.”

I grimaced. “Not in Idaho they won’t. I’m assuming that’s where we are at least. The entire flight plan he showed us could have been bullshit. If that’s the case we could be in the Rockies or the Cascades. But, if he at least showed us a legitimate flight plan, then I think we’re somewhere near Hailey, Idaho. Did we ever stop for fuel?”

She shook her head. “I dozed off a little bit too, but I woke when we first started to descend. I thought we were headed to refuel, but all I could see out of the windows were trees.”

“Let’s assume we really were headed toward Denver, then we should be in the northern Rocky Mountains. If we can make it into Hailey or Sun Valley we can rent a car and get home.”

Her eyebrow cocked up. “Rent a car? You’re serious about not flying again, aren’t you?”

I squeezed her hand. “That’s something for us to argue about later. First, we’ve got to get off the mountain.”

The terrain was uneven and filled with underbrush that managed to hide loose rocks. We were far from areas frequented by hikers, which meant there were no trails to help guide our way back to civilization. Our situation took a turn for the worse as we struggled our way down the mountain. Clouds gathered, cutting off most of the sunlight and making the air colder than it was when we first emerged from our shelter this morning.

Neither of us had coats, or anything warmer than sweatshirts. So, despite the fact we were tired and hungry, we kept moving. I could only hope we would feel warmer if we didn’t stop. If we were really lucky we’d find shelter and food before the sunset. Hopefully we’d have both before we worked up a sweat because if we did, staying active wouldn’t offer us

any relief. It would be worse actually because it could cause us to get hypothermia.

After a few more hours trudging through the brush, we made it down to a thicker part of the forest. While it made the sunlight more anemic, we'd reached the part of the woods where we were more likely to find a hunting cabin, or maybe a hiker. Sabrina slowed down and tripped over some exposed roots.

I wrapped my arms around her, keeping her from falling. She was trembling, either from the chill in the air, or from hunger, but I knew we needed to find some way to get warm fast.

Bending down, I hoisted her onto my back. She struggled to get down, but I reached back and swatted her on the ass. "You're out of steam, Sunshine. It's okay to let me help you sometimes."

She stopped trying to get down. "Okay, but only for a little while. Otherwise, we'll both be too worn out to set up shelter, not to mention you're the only one that knows how to set up a proper shelter."

I hated to admit she was right. My stubborn streak matched hers though and thankfully paid off. A little farther down the hill we came across a cabin practically hidden in the trees.

Crouching down, I tapped her thigh. "Let's see if anyone is home."

The signs weren't hopeful. No vehicle sat in the rocky driveway, and all the lights were off. It was clear no one was home, but if we were lucky there'd be some non-perishable food and a way to keep warm. Finding a way to call Colter might be too much to hope for, but we needed to check. To do that, we needed inside.

The cabin was a small A-frame structure made of rough-cut logs with dovetail joints. There was a chimney pipe on the left side of the roof, giving me hope there'd be a way to heat the home if the power was out.

While I was scoping out the structure, Sabrina went to try the door. Of course, with our luck, it was locked. I sighed. "I'll go check the back. Maybe there's a window we can climb through."

I started off the front stoop, but she grabbed my arm. "There's no landscaping or decorations, except for one potted plant," she said pointing at a fake ficus.

She lifted the plastic pot and found a key nestled underneath. "See, just like I thought."

I took it from her and left her by the front door so I could check it out. None of the switches worked, but there was a large fireplace. The cabin had an open concept design with a loft for a bedroom. Aside from some dust, there was nothing concerning inside.

I should have known she wouldn't wait for me to give her the all clear, and she followed me inside almost immediately. She went to reach for the light switch.

"There's no power," I said stopping her.

Her hand stopped in mid-air and moved to the side table. She dragged her fingers across it, then rubbed dust off her fingers. "Not surprising. It doesn't look like anyone's been here for a few months."

"We'll make due. We don't need power as long as we have heat. I'll get a fire going. Why don't you go check the kitchen and see if there's any canned food?"

Stepping outside to grab some wood from the stack by the door, I came in to get a fire going. The small size of the building worked in our favor, and the room quickly began to heat up. Just as I was about to find her to see how she'd made out, she let out an excited whoop.

I moved into the tiny kitchen to find her doing a victory dance. She swayed her hips from side to side, wiggling her ass. I gave myself a moment to enjoy the show. When she turned around she caught me watching her and she squeaked.

She rubbed the center of her chest. "You scared me."

The corner of my mouth curved up. I reached for her, putting my hands on her hips, and pulled her to me. “You’re so adorable.”

She laughed. Not the reaction I expected, but hearing her laugh did things to me. “How is it everyone else thinks you’re some kind of grouchy asshole when you’re—”

The hint of a smile fell off my lips. I loved this woman, but I still wanted to dominate her. I rose to my full height and loomed over her. “When I’m what?”

I gave her a pointed look, but she didn’t squirm. I had more work to do to get her on her knees where we both wanted her to be. “I am an asshole, Sunshine, the only person in the world who sees this side of me is you. But sometimes you see me as a better man than I am.”

She shrugged. “Okay, you’re still a hard ass.”

Patronizing me was going to get her in trouble. But I was starting to understand why Colter loved it when Jana acted like a brat. The power play had my body humming. I was mentally going over every way I could get her underneath me when I realized she was still talking.

“Mrs. Bennett does still hide from you, and the other day you did make one of the interns cry.” None of my behavior phased her. I didn’t want her to fear me, but I did want her to submit to me. No, I needed her to submit to me.

I slid my hands down her shoulders until I was able to hook around her thighs and lift her up. Instinctively she wrapped her legs around me. I pushed her down against my stiffening cock to punctuate my point. “You’ve got the hard part right.”

My fingers fisted in her hair, and I claimed her mouth. “How about you show me those moves again in front of the fireplace?”

“Don’t you want to know what I was dancing about in the first place?” She was stalling, but I did want to know if she was able to find anything we could use. I released her and let her slide down my body until she was standing.

She didn't seem to be aware of the fact she was dancing again. "The pantry is fully stocked. I don't know why no one has been here for a while, but it looks like up until recently this place was used a lot."

"What did you find?" I asked.

She opened the cabinet by the sink and stepped back. What was inside was enough to make me almost start dancing myself. Dry pasta, oatmeal, honey, canned meat and fish, peanut butter, and crackers, and that was just what was lined up in front. I reached out and grabbed a couple of cans of beef ravioli from the shelf. "I used to love these when I was a kid."

She moved to take them, but I grabbed her wrist to stop her. I tossed her over my shoulder and moved toward the fireplace. "Later, I've got a different appetite to satisfy first."

Her fists pounded against my back. "Stryker, no. I'm gross. We've hiked two days through the woods, and slept on the forest floor."

"Have it your way," I told her. I changed path to the bathroom. "Good thing the water heater runs off gas."

Now I only prayed the propane tank I spotted from the kitchen window wasn't empty. There were a few candles sitting around the cabin. I lit a couple and set them on the vanity in the bathroom. The pipes groaned when I turned on the water, but it ran clear and started to heat up after a couple minutes.

"Get out of those clothes," I ordered. Not knowing how long the hot water would last, I helped her. Once she was gloriously naked I stripped out of my own.

She climbed into the stall and stood under the spray, letting the water sluice over her body. Grabbing the bar of soap the owner had conveniently left behind, I lathered up my hands and started washing her body. I started with her breasts and watched as her nipples contracted into stiff points.

She squirmed under my attention, and I wanted more. I slid my hand down her stomach and focused on her pussy. Her hands landed on my shoulders and her nails pierced into my

skin. I didn't let up, but instead I thrust two fingers inside of her ruthlessly.

"Stryker," she panted.

I rubbed the palm of my hand against her clit and curled my fingers inside of her. I rubbed my cheek against hers, aware my stubble scratched her skin. I whispered in her ear. "You implied I'd gone soft earlier, that I'm a nice guy. Does this feel like the actions of a nice guy?"

"Mmm," she hummed. "It feels awfully nice to me," she purred.

I growled. Of course I didn't want her to see me as an asshole, but I wasn't nice either. None of what I wanted to do to her fit in that category.

I pulled my fingers out of her and lifted her by her thighs. I pressed her against the tiles. I kept one hand under her thigh to keep her lifted. The other went around her throat. Once she was pinned against the wall I had a free hand to guide my cock through her folds and tap it against her clit.

She tried to move herself down over my cock, and I applied pressure to her throat. "You're not in charge here."

She stopped trying to top from the bottom and submitted to me. "Good girl," I praised her and thrust hard into her hot cunt.

Images from the crash flitted through my mind. I drove into her with abandon trying to chase the images away. The tingling in my balls, electricity coursing down my spine, and racing of my heart were all reminders I was still alive.

With the little brain power I had left I panted in her ear, "I love you." She needed to hear it before I completely transformed into an animal with the single-minded drive to fuck her unconscious.

"I love you too," she replied without hesitation.

"But right now, I need to use you. I want to fuck you with no thought other than how good your pussy feels squeezing my cock. I want to remind us both that we're still alive."

Her inner walls fluttered in response to my words. “How is this supposed to do that?”

“Because nothing feels more like living than coming inside of you.” Her pulse hammered under my fingers where my hand was around her throat.

“Please,” she begged.

If she demanded I stop, I would. I’d have to switch the water to glacial, but I’d do what she asked. “What do you want me to do, Sunshine?”

“Fuck me,” she panted. “Use me. The only thing I want you to think about is how good I feel to you.”

My control was fraying. “Do you know what you’re asking me? I love you, you’re my wife, but right now I want you to be my slut. I’ve tried to fight this, and treat you like you deserve, but I want you available for my pleasure any time I want, in any way I want. Are you ready to give me that kind of power?”

She trembled in my arms. “Yes, whatever you want, just fuck me.”

I needed to make sure. “You want me to order you on your knees? To demand you swallow my cock whenever the mood strikes me? You want me to lock the door to my office, bend you over my desk, rip off your panties, and pound my cock into your cunt because seeing you makes me hard?”

“Yes,” she panted. “I want to be your everything. Your business partner, best friend, wife, and even your slut. Every desire, every fantasy, all of it. Whatever you want, come to me.”

“You asked for it,” I growled.

That was all it took for my control to snap. I thrust up into her while simultaneously pulling her down on my dick. She felt like velvet sliding over me. I bottomed out inside of her and moved my hips until I found her g-spot and rubbed against it until she started to shake.

Through the fog clouding my brain I recognized the cries and moans slipping past her plump lips. Inside my head was a constant demand to take her harder. Bending my knees I used the extra leverage to drive my cock harder into her than I'd ever taken a woman.

The walls of her pussy clamped down on my dick hard enough to hold me deep inside of her. The pressure was too much and I shouted as I came. I held myself buried deep, letting her tight cunt drain every last drop of my release.

The water ran cool against my heated flesh. I reached behind me and shut off the water. I grabbed a couple of towels from the shelf and shook them out before wrapping one around her.

“You are amazing,” I said, then kissed her.

“Say it,” she demanded, reconnecting with her inner brat.

“I love you,” I replied automatically.

She shook her head. “Not that.”

I smiled, figuring out what she wanted to hear. “You are my good girl.” I kissed her. “My amazing wife.” Another kiss. “My perfect slut.”

She tucked her head down. “Thank you,” she whispered, meek once again.

“For what?” I asked, confused. I should be thanking her for giving me every fantasy I've ever had.

Slowly, she dragged her baby blues up to meet mine. “For opening my eyes to all the things I never knew I wanted.”

One last kiss. “That makes two of us.”



# Chapter Thirty

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## Sabrina

**D**ressed in togas made from flannel sheets we sat in front of the fireplace and had a picnic of canned ravioli and peanut butter on crackers. The battery on Stryker's watch died hours before and time became irrelevant. Tomorrow we'd have to find a way off the mountain, but if I'd learned nothing from the plane crash it was that time was both short and meaningless.

I leaned against Stryker, soaking up his warmth and affection. Everything was up in the air-how we'd make it home, how we'd save Anderson East, and what the new dynamic of our relationship would look like. All the tension started to drain from my body. Habit had me reaching for my purse before I remembered it was somewhere in the wreckage.

"Shit," I muttered, and I froze.

Stryker said he wanted a family, but was that something he said in the heat of the moment? And what did I want?

Stryker moved my hair over to my other shoulder and trailed his lips up my neck. My instincts were at war inside of me. Part of me wanted to hand myself over to him and enjoy the freedom that came with submitting my will to him. The other part of me demanded I protect myself in case he was angry that I'd lost my birth control pills on the plane.

"You were starting to relax and then you went stiff as a board. What's wrong?" he asked.

My mouth went dry and my heart felt lodged in my throat. As much as I wanted to hide from his reaction, I turned to face

him.

“Sunshine? You’re worrying me. Do you feel okay? Is it your head?”

I shook my head. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Clearing my throat, I tried again. “My head is fine. I’m just freaking out a little.”

“That’s only natural. We’ve been through a lot the last couple of days.”

I shrugged. “That’s not it. At least not all of it.” I took a deep breath. “Our bag, including my purse, is on the plane.”

He took my hands. “It’s only things. We can replace it.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy to fix this by buying some stuff.”

He studied my face. “Whatever it is, just talk to me. We’ll handle it together.”

“My birth control pills were in my bag,” I said in a rush.

Stryker went still and I held my breath waiting for him to say something.

“How do you feel about that?” he asked cautiously.

“I’m not sure. Right now I’m more worried about how you’re going to react,” I admitted.

“I’m thirty-five and married to the only woman I’ve ever loved. I want a life with you, and that includes children. But, I realize I’m ten years older than you, and we might not be in the same place. I don’t want to pressure you.”

I exhaled. “So you wouldn’t freak out if I told you the kind of birth control I take has to be taken every day, at the same time, to be effective? Because I’m kinda freaking out right now.”

Stryker crawled forward causing me to lean back. Once he had me on my back he held himself over me.

He stared down at me with such intensity I felt my skin flush. His fingers pulled at my sheet, unraveling where I

tucked it into the top.

“Are you telling me-” he kissed his way down my throat- “that-” he flicked my nipple with his tongue- “if I fuck you-” he sucked my nipple into his mouth and let it pop free.

I threaded my fingers in his hair and pulled his head up. “What? Tell me, if you fuck me, what will happen?”

A wicked grin pulled at his sinful mouth. “If I bury my cock inside of you, and fuck you until neither of us can move, then there’s a good chance my baby will start growing right-” he nipped at the skin of my stomach- “here.”

“I think it would be our baby,” I gasped.

He shoved my knees apart and buried his face in my pussy. He devoured me with the same focus he had in the shower earlier.

He had me tangled in his web. I was ready to beg for the release he masterfully kept just out of my reach.

My body started to tremble, but once again he pulled back, denying me the release I so badly craved. He leaned back and tauntingly wiped his chin.

Slowly, he rose from the floor. His erection jutted forward accusingly as if I were the one punishing us both.

He grabbed a sheet we’d cast aside because it was old and threadbare in places. Holding it between both of his hands he pulled. The material barely protested as it shredded under his efforts, leaving him with strips of fabric.

“Arms above your head,” he commanded.

Desperate for release, I obeyed without arguing. He got to work tying my hands above my head and connected the end to a piece of furniture.

Taking his time, he moved around to my feet. Grabbing both my ankles and pulling me down making me unable to move my arms at all. His hands slid up to my knees and guided them open. Settling between my thighs he held himself back.

“You’re right. This will be our baby. I love how strong you are, and it’s what makes your submission to me such a gift. So understand this, I try to be evolved, but there’s a primal side of me that only sees you as mine. Mine to protect, to care for, and mine to fuck.”

I should have balked at his speech. He’d never treat me as a possession, but there was a big part of him that wanted to own me. It was a hard truth to admit, but I wanted him to own me, at least when we were alone.

He laid on top of me, and the weight of his hard body felt like security and home. He guided my legs up next to his sides and pinned them under his arms, and he paused. “This is the moment where you have to decide if you’re all in. I might look good in a suit, but that white collar still chafes sometimes. So decide now, because the primal side of my brain is trying to take over, and it’s demanding I fuck you until I’m certain you’re pregnant.”

My fingers twitched with the need to hold him. He knew at some point I’d feel that way, but binding them was his way to hold on to me. I wasn’t naive, I knew he was subconsciously trying to scare me away as a test to see if I would stay.

I sucked in a gasp as a realization hit me. Stryker wanted me to admit he owned me because I owned him. He handed himself over to me the night we met, and he’s been mine even when I forgot.

For five years he waited and built a life for us to share. Now he needed me to prove to him I was as tied to him as he always had been to me. My husband seemed to prefer his metaphors to be literal.

“I’m all in,” I whispered.

Those were apparently the words he needed to hear. This time he pushed into me slowly. I gave in to letting him lead.

He used me in the best way. My only choice was to take what he was giving me, and that was everything. A stream of consciousness fell from his mouth. “You’re mine, and I’ll

never let you go again. I'll keep you tied up forever if I have to."

Those words made me fight. I bucked against him, which elicited a growl from him, and he drove into me harder. My body was on board even though my mind was not. "Stryker," I snapped, and his eyes locked on mine. His pupils were blown, and I was looking at a man being run by his instincts.

"Tell me that's not why you want a baby," I snapped. "Please, tell me the reason you want to get me pregnant isn't because you're afraid to lose me."

He rocked against me slower, but he didn't stop. "There's not one single reason I want to see your body swell with my child. If you're asking me if it'll turn me on to know our family is growing inside of you, then the answer is yes. Knowing that every man who sees you will know you're taken."

He leaned forward and sucked on my neck hard enough to leave a mark. My eyes rolled back into my head, almost making me forget he hadn't answered my question.

"My desire to have a family is something I didn't think I'd need to explain to you."

The stark honesty in his expression ended my argument. It told me everything I'd ignored while I was trying to make my decision. Stryker was lonely, he'd only had his mother, and for a brief moment me, in all of his thirty-five years. When I forgot him five years ago, I left him completely alone.

"Sunshine, I'm barely hanging on," he whispered with his head buried in my neck.

"Then let go," I told him.

He reached for the bindings on my wrists and untied them. "Not like this, at least not this time."

Once my hands were free I threaded them into his hair and breathed into his mouth as we kissed like we'd never touch again.

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**T**he fire burned down to coals while we were consumed with each other, but once our energy was spent, the chill in the air was hard to ignore.

Stryker sat up and started shoving his feet inside his boots. “I’ll go grab more firewood.”

Air wooshed in as soon as he opened the door letting in the cold and a swirling cloud of flurries.

“Fuck,” he shouted from the stoop.

I grabbed a blanket off the couch and wrapped it around me before going to see what was wrong. The wood floor was icy under my feet, but I pressed forward to look out the door. At least a foot of snow had drifted in front of the door, and covered every available surface. More was coming down in fluffy white clumps.

Stryker was working hard to secure the tarp over the firewood by the door. “There’s only enough wood here to last a few days, a week tops. If it gets wetter than this we’re going to freeze.”

The lines of tension in his face scared me more than the snow. This was a man who stood up to danger and managed to land a plane after the pilot jumped out. A man who built us a shelter out of branches so we’d survive the first night.

“We’re not going to be able to walk out of here. Once it snows this high in the mountains it sticks,” he said.

If anyone was looking for us, they had no idea where to start searching. To make it worse, we couldn’t let anyone know where to look either.

“We need to ration the food,” I thought aloud.

“Tomorrow we need to see if we can find anything to let us know exactly where we are. A map would be good too because knowing where we’re at doesn’t help if we can’t find our way out. But, the one thing I know for sure is that we can’t

wait for someone to find us, because if we do, we could be here until the spring thaw,” he said.

All the air whooshed from my lungs. “It’s only October. That could be six months from now.”

His eyes flicked down to my stomach, and I put my hand over it protectively. “We might not have that kind of time,” he murmured.



# Chapter Thirty-One

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## Stryker

**W**e spent a few days wrapped up in each other. We were acting out of denial, but it gave us a break from thinking about the sword that had been hanging over our heads since the moment we stepped foot on the plane. It was all just too much, so for a few days, we both pretended that we were on a romantic retreat, rather than fighting for our lives. We were still careful about rationing the food stores we had, and I kept a close eye on the firewood. It wasn't like there was anything we could have done otherwise, except maybe drive each other crazy worrying about what was going to happen next.

When I woke up in the loft several days later it was both literally and figuratively. After my mental vacation, it was time for me to figure out what our next step was. The heat from the fireplace rose up to the loft making it warmer than on the main level. Sabrina was sleeping next to me. Laying on her side, she had the blanket draped only over her hips, her arms were tucked under her chin, and covered all but the sides of her breasts from my perusal.

I would have loved to roll her onto her back and feast on her rosy nipples before sliding down her body and burying my face in her perfect pussy. I wanted to feast on her until she woke up the way I did the morning of the crash, but she was exhausted from the number of times I'd reached for her over the night. There were bruise-colored shadows under her eyes, and after our activity over the last few days, I was pretty sure she was already pregnant. Not that we would be able to tell

this soon, but if she was, our circumstances were more dire than before. I needed to let her rest now more than ever.

As it was, there were plenty of things that needed to be handled. I needed to chop some wood and get it dry enough to burn before we ran out of what was there when we found the cabin. Thankfully, Sabrina thought to wash our clothes in the sink and hang them up near the fire. My clothes weren't warm enough for the weather when we crashed, but it was better than chopping wood while wearing a blanket. But, now that we were stranded on what looked like the set of a Hallmark Christmas movie, my clothes weren't much better. Instead of a parka, all I had was a thermal shirt, a lined flannel, and jeans. Which meant I looked like the hero from one of those movies as well. Too bad our only dilemma wasn't to save the hometown maple sugar factory from the evils of corporate greed.

To complete the winter wonderland aesthetic the snow had continued to fall steadily the last few days. This was the first morning the sky wasn't obscured by a curtain of falling snow. I hadn't paid enough attention to the weather reports in the days before we left, at least not what the weather in Idaho would be, because we were supposed to be in Denver. Of course, there were warmer clothes in our bag, but that was still in the storage container of the plane.

Without access to the news, my best guess was a rogue storm had traveled south from Canada. There were snow drifts in places up to my knees, and over a foot everywhere else. It wasn't a blizzard, but it certainly complicated our situation. We needed a plan, but to do that I needed to know where we were. I was only guessing that we were in Idaho. Without knowing where we were I couldn't justify leading Sabrina into the wilderness in search of a town.

There were too many variables to deal with. The weather was proving to be a formidable adversary. Not knowing where we were, I wasn't sure what kind of wildlife we might face, if we'd be able to forage for any food at all, or how remote this cabin was. Those unknowns could prove fatal if we decided to set out for help when staying put at least guaranteed us warmth

and safety. We could search the area for food, set traps, and do other things to gather food if we ran out of supplies. In fact, I'd probably start seeing what I could find and store now before that happened. I wanted to wait until Sabrina was awake before I tackled the tasks outdoors, but there was still the matter of seeing if there was any indication inside about where we were.

The cabin was filled with years of memories for the owners. In the days we'd been here, Sabrina and I had been through all of the cabinets and drawers, but there'd been no need to dig through the desk or junk drawers. But then, all we had needed before was the basic necessities. Finding something with the address written on it was a tall order considering there was no mail service out here. But, I couldn't give up hope that I'd find a map or something I could use as a frame of reference.

There were lots of keepsakes scattered throughout the cabin. I really didn't keep up on decorating trends, unless it was about hotel suites. The first real home I'd had since my mom died was Sabrina's apartment. The first thing I was going to do if we managed to get back to Seattle was to start looking for a new place for us. One that had an elevator, because if Sabrina was actually pregnant we'd need way too much stuff to be carrying up and down the stairs.

In the kitchen area of the cabin there was a spot that served as a work/storage space. There was a small linen closet, drawers, and a built-in desk. We'd already gone through the linen closet where we'd found the blankets. The drawers were too small to hold anything we'd have needed up until now. I still wasn't sure what I could possibly find discarded in one of these drawers. This entire cabin was like a large time capsule.

One drawer was filled with keys of all sizes, shapes, and purposes. Some looked like the tiny keys that came with a teenage girl's journal. There were skeleton keys, door keys, hell, there were even a few hex keys loose in the drawer. What there was not was any indication of what all those keys went to. Even if I did know what they went to, keys weren't going to get us back to Seattle.

The next one gave me hope when I pulled out a collection of maps. Until I realized they were from cities all over the world and none of them where we would find a remote cabin somewhere between Seattle and Denver. Like the keys, this seemed to be a collection that only meant something to the people who gathered it. There were some rural maps, but I didn't think we were in the Pyrenees Mountains, the Swiss Alps, or the Appalachians. There were some maps with routes planned, but there were others that were pristine and untouched. None of them were any help to our situation, so I placed them back with care.

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**A**fter Sabrina woke up I set out to gather more firewood. We had a few more days of wood left, and it would take that long for any wood I split to dry. That was if I could find some already downed trees. There was an axe stuck in a large block of wood used to split logs. I trudged through the snow, filling my boots with sludge, to drag every downed log and branch I could find. There was enough to keep us going for a while, but if I had to take down a living tree, there wasn't enough time to season it for it to be usable.

After I stacked the wood up by the front of the cabin, I wandered over to the other side of the property I hadn't had a chance to explore yet. There was a slope that curved down to a road. There were no tracks cutting through the snow, no berms on the side of the route from a plow coming through. If anything, the presence of the road drove home how isolated we were. No one was coming up here, and we were so far off the beaten path they didn't even bother to clear the roads from snow. Which meant we weren't near a ski resort, nor were we located in between towns.

A rumbling sound bounced off the rocky slopes surrounding us. I looked everywhere to see if I could locate the source, but nothing was around except snow, rocks, and trees. I didn't even see the signs of any animals. I waited a few

more minutes, then turned around and made the trip back to the cabin.

“What’s wrong?” Sabrina asked when I walked in.

I stopped in the middle of peeling off my soaked clothes. “Nothing, and that’s what’s wrong. I thought I heard something, but I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. There’s a road down the hill, but there’s no sign anyone has been on it since it started snowing, which means-”

“That no one comes out here in the winter,” she said and dropped into a chair next to me.

I nodded. “Not only that but also, we’re too far away to walk out of here.”

We sat in silence for a bit trying to come to terms with the fact we were going to be here until the spring. The rumbling sound echoed again, this time Sabrina heard it too.

I pulled my wet pants back on and went to the door. A flicker of light caught my attention, and instead of disappearing this time, the sound kept getting louder, and if I wasn’t mistaken, closer.

“Is that a truck?” Sabrina asked, and clutched at my arm.

My mouth went dry. It sounded like some kind of vehicle, but I was afraid to even entertain the idea that someone might find us.

The sound got louder and louder then came to a stop in front of the house. Neither of us moved. I’m not sure we even breathed. A door opened and closed, and the sound of footsteps crunching through the snow approached the door.

The front door opened slowly, and an older woman stood in the threshold. I expected a look of shock or fear, after all, we were trespassing, but she wasn’t surprised to see us standing near her table.

She came in. Shrugged out of her coat and hung it on the hook by the door. Next, she took off her snow encrusted boots. Calmly, she set her keys down on the side table before she finally turned our direction.

There was something about her that was captivating. She had to be somewhere in her early seventies, but she was far from the image of a frail old woman. Her silver hair was cut to her shoulders and framed a regal face that wore lines proudly.

Her pale blue eyes assessed us the same way we were sizing her up. “There’s no vehicle outside except for mine and nothing around here for miles. Which means I’m guessing the two of you have a hell of a story.”

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**T**ogether Sabrina and I told her about the pilot ditching the plane, how I controlled the crash, and how we ended up at her cabin.

“Of course, we’ll pay you for all of the food and firewood and for the use of your cabin,” I told her as we finished our story.

She waved her hand dismissively. “You don’t charge friends.”

“But we’re just two strangers who happened upon your cabin. It was a lifesaver for us, but you shouldn’t have to be put out for that,” Sabrina argued.

“I’m Claire, and we’ve got a bit of a ride down into town, so I promise you by the time we get there we’ll feel like old friends. Besides, I was only coming up here to check on the place. My husband is older, and can’t get around like he used to. We haven’t been able to come up here for months.”

Sabrina looked at me, and for the first time I saw the future and everything I was asking her to accept. Right now everything was good, but someday she’d be sitting where Claire is, basically alone because I’d be too old to participate in our life together.

“How much older is your husband?” I asked her without thinking.

She grabbed her keys and nodded to the door. “Let’s chat on the way.”

We didn't have stuff, so we were out in the car in a matter of minutes after she made sure the house was shut down properly. Once she was behind the wheel, she finally answered me. "My husband is fifteen years older than me. We met when I was in my twenties, but we didn't get together until I was thirty, and we married within months."

She looked sideways at me. "You're older than Sabrina, aren't you?"

I nodded. It was pretty clear that there was a gap in our ages. I knew I still looked good for my age, but that didn't mean there weren't some strands of silver emerging in my dark hair, or that there weren't some fine lines around my eyes. Sabrina didn't have either of those things yet.

"And you're afraid that you're going to be a burden to her?"

I shrugged. She was very astute. Almost scarily so.

"Styker, you can't think like that," Sabrina interjected.

"How can I not?" I looked over at Claire and hoped she saw I was sincere. "I'm sorry, I don't want to assume, but I don't like the idea that one day Sabrina will be handling everything on her own because I'm too old to help her."

"That's just life. Sickness and health aren't just something to say. My husband has been an amazing partner and still is. He's eighty-five now, and even though mentally he's still sharp as a tack, he can't get around like he used to. He's also a stubborn old goat and didn't believe anyone when we told him he needed to cut back. So God went and drove the point home. He'll be fine, this time. He's just having to use a cane for a bit since he fell trying to clean the gutters. Thankfully he hadn't gone too far up the ladder or the story would have had a different ending. But that's the thing. Life has an expiration, and if you are constantly worried about what will happen way down the road, you're going to miss the scenery right here and now."

She left me with a lot to think about on our path down the mountain. The slick roads and hairpin turns took her focus, so



we didn't have a lot of time to keep talking. She was right about feeling like we were friends though. Something about her left us feeling like we'd known her for years.

The further down the mountain we went, the less snow was on the ground. By the time we were out of the mountain, all signs of winter were gone and fall was back. The trees were gone, and the landscape was in monochromatic shades of brown, with the occasional tumble of sagebrush blowing across the road.

“So, we were south of Ketchum in a remote section of the Rocky Mountains. I live almost two hours south in Twin Falls. I could have dropped you off in Ketchum, but there's nowhere to wait there without spending a lot of money. Pretty much everything in the Sun Valley area costs an arm and a leg. I hope the two of you don't mind, but I'm taking you to my house so you can get cleaned up and we can get you some different clothes while you call your people.”

I turned my head to look out the window. “Works for me. As you can tell, we don't have our cards or any cash.”

The town was bigger than I'd have thought for a town in Idaho. Not that I'd given much thought to Idaho, ever. It was one of the few places I'd never taken a job as an interim CEO. She laughed as she noticed me taking it in. “First time in Idaho, I see.”

“This place is actually pretty amazing. I'm a little shocked I've never heard of it,” Sabrina said.

Claire laughed. “Well, we try to keep it to ourselves. Keeps the Californians away. Or at least it did. I'm just glad my Steve and I bought our place years ago. Costs have skyrocketed the last several years. There's no way we'd be able to move here now. Just like that cabin. Steve's had that since the late sixties. Now anything near Sun Valley is obscenely expensive.”

While Sabrina helped Claire make dinner, I stepped out onto the front porch and tried to get myself together. The weather had a bit of a bite to it as the sun started to set over the Snake River Canyon, but the colors spreading across the sky

gave me something to focus on long enough for the pressure in my chest to ease up.

The loud thud of Steve's cane on the porch let me know I wasn't alone anymore. He hobbled over. The thump of his boot mixed with the thud of his cane until he joined me where I leaned against his porch rail.

"This is God's country, here. Been all over the world, and never found another place like it." He sighed as he took in the expanse of the canyon lit in reds and oranges.

"The maps in the cabin, were those from your travels?" Making small talk seemed like the thing to do under the circumstances.

A fond smile lit up his face. "Some of them were from when I was young. After high school I bummed around the country. I fancied myself a bit of a beatnik in those days. I didn't want to be another office drone, and setting out on the road was my way of bucking the system."

"Is that how you met Claire?"

"In a way. I met her here actually. She grew up here. I was making my way around the country, by this point I was in my mid-thirties. My family had all but given up on me since I was determined to waste my life doing odd jobs and refusing to set down roots. I went to a greasy spoon on the edge of town, and Claire was my waitress. From that point on I made a point of rolling through town at the same time every year. She should have given up on me."

"What changed? She said it was ten years from the time you met until you married, is that right?" I couldn't help but see parallels between our stories. Not strong ones, but we'd both found the woman we knew we were meant to be with and spent years without her.

"I was a fool for ten years, yes," he replied. "It didn't take me long before I knew I wanted her to be in my life, but every time I came back to town I expected to find her married. She met me at the diner even when she didn't work there anymore."

For a couple of weeks every year we spent all our time together. Those two weeks carried me the rest of the year.”

I waited for him to collect his thoughts. Even nearly fifty years later their time apart weighed on him. That was a feeling I knew well. When he didn’t speak, I felt a need to fill the silence. One of my truths for the one he shared.

“Sabrina and I got married on a whim a little over five years ago. We met at a bar in Las Vegas. It was nearly empty, and we were both hiding from obligations. I was trying to reconcile working for my father. A man who, to this day, refuses to acknowledge me, but still insisted I take a job with his company. I hated it almost as much as I hated him.”

“She was there for her twenty-first birthday celebration with some friends from college. They wanted to go clubbing, but she didn’t, so they left her in the casino to fend for herself.”

“Those don’t sound like very good friends,” he said.

“She hasn’t seen or spoken to them that I know of since she graduated.”

He grunted. “Good riddance.”

“We hit it off instantly, and I knew she was the one. We got married, but she didn’t meet me in the morning like we’d planned. I found out later that one of her friends was walking around without covering her drink.”

He listened as I told him how she forgot about me, and the years I worked to get her back.

“You asked what changed. I guess the answer is me. I knew it was time for me to finally settle down. Grow some roots. I moved to town, started a construction company. It took a few more years to break even, and a couple more before I started making a steady profit. Even then I believed I was too old for her, but the stubborn woman was still single. One day she met me right here on the canyon and said-”

“Are you done yet?” Claire chimed in from the doorway. “Stubborn old fool that he was-well still is-I had to spell it out for him.”

Steve shrugged, not disputing what she said. “We married a couple months later. The company I started was doing well enough that we were able to travel from time to time. She collected the rest of the maps with me.”

“What about the keys?” Sabrina asked, joining Claire by the door.

The old couple smiled. “Those are as much our story as the maps. The diary keys were for the journal I started keeping the night I met Steve,” Claire began.

“The hex keys were from the furniture I put together for our first place. There are keys to homes, cars, basically every stop along this road we’ve traveled together,” Steve finished.

He looked over at us. “Now, don’t go thinking it’s been all rainbows. We’ve had struggles along the way. We’d have liked to have a family, but that wasn’t in the cards for us.”

Claire made a sound. “That was hard. It took some work to accept it would only ever be the two of us, but our life was as it was supposed to be.”

All the time I’d regretted the years Sabrina and I spent apart, but maybe this was how we were supposed to be too.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

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## Sabrina

Stryker tried to convince Colt to rent a car and drive to Denver, but as bad as the storm was in Idaho, it was worse in Wyoming, making it impossible at least until the highways were reopened. I think he'd have changed his mind and driven back to Seattle if we didn't need to review the documents seized from Malcolm's office there.

Thankfully, the flight to Denver was uneventful and short. Colt and Jana both took turns hugging me when they arrived, but we all fell into a lingering silence until the wheels touched down on the tarmac. I'd never been afraid to fly before, but all of us were feeling a little superstitious this time. Talking about what happened while in the air felt like tempting fate. Exhaustion crashed over me after the last week, and I fell asleep as soon as we were in the car.

When I woke the next morning I found Colter, Stryker, and another man going over documents in the main sitting room. Jana paced in front of the window arguing on the phone with someone.

The tension in the room made me forget all about the fact I was drowning in clothes I borrowed from Jana, my hair was a tangled mess, and there was a crease from the pillow on my cheek. "What have I missed?" I asked anyone listening.

Stryker's head snapped up. "Did you sleep well?"

I inhaled slowly through my nose. I'd guessed he'd start treating me like I was made of glass as soon as it was possible

I could be pregnant, and I was also right that it would drive me insane. “Don’t try to distract me. What is going on?”

Colter opened his mouth to answer me, but Stryker talked over him. “Maybe you should sit down and have some breakfast first.”

Jana stopped in her tracks. Her arm dropped, and I could hear someone yelling for her attention on the other end. She ignored it though and stared at me with her mouth gaping open. “Brina, I need to see you in the bathroom, now.”

My stomach sank. I wasn’t ready to talk about this yet, because the possibility I could be pregnant didn’t seem real yet. The version of me who threw caution to the wind and allowed the possibility of starting a family with Stryker wasn’t sure she was ever getting off the mountain. Hell, I even entertained the idea we hadn’t actually survived the crash, and my brain was trying to come to terms with our impending demise. I blamed my dad’s TV habits when I was a kid for giving me that idea.

Frozen in place, my brain and my feet were at war. I knew Jana wasn’t going to drop the issue, but I couldn’t force myself to move toward the bathroom. The decision was made for me when Jana strode across the room, grabbed my arm and dragged me into the bathroom.

She shut the door and focused all of her attention on me. “You’re pregnant.”

“You can’t know that. I don’t know that,” I protested.

“So you two didn’t-” She made an obscene gesture with her hands.

“Have you seen Stryker?” I blurted out without thinking.

Jana burst out laughing, and I joined her until we were both crying from laughing so hard. It took a minute for both of us to calm down before she started peppering me with questions again. “You’re on the pill, right? Did you have it with you?”

I shook my head.

“And, how do you feel about this?”

That was the million dollar question. “I’m scared, but also excited. I’m not sure which I’m more of, to be honest.”

“I told Colter I wanted us to have time. A year with just the two of us, and then I want to try.”

“You didn’t tell me that. When was this?”

She bit her bottom lip. “About eleven months ago, but I actually stopped taking my pills a couple of weeks ago.”

“Are you-” I trailed off.

She shrugged. “I think you and I need to see a doctor when we get home.”

I looked at the door. “Maybe don’t tell Colt until you know, or they’re both going to be acting like chest-thumping cavemen.”

“Stryker is being pretty ridiculous.”

I smiled. “He’s going to be a nightmare.”

Jana made a circle around my face with her finger. “You love it.”

“I do, but it is going to be irritating if he tries to keep me from working.”

“Speaking of that, we need to get back out there. Colt is a whiz with numbers, but some of the stuff Stryker’s friend brought over has even him puzzled. Since you know Malcolm best, maybe you can figure out what he was doing,” she said while tugging me back out of the room.

Since Stryker was aiming to be a helicopter husband, there was a plate waiting for me at the table. He’d piled on enough food to feed me for the entire day and all of it was ridiculously healthy. Without commenting, I grabbed a new plate, chose a smaller portion from what he’d given me, and added a chocolate croissant because there was no way I was giving up carbs.

I took a huge bite of the flaky pastry and covered my mouth with my hand so I didn’t completely gross out Colter



and Jana. “Okay, show me what has you so stumped,” I said to Colt.

He passed over a few file folders. At first glance, it looked like liquor orders. I’d suspected Maxwell and Mal were washing the money that Maxwell was embezzling from Jana by making it look like a loss on Easton Global’s side, and fake liquor sales covering the money Mal got from the deal. The problem with that was in order for it to be money laundering, the money had to cycle through and come back to Maxwell, or he was just paying him off for reasons we hadn’t thought of yet.

My brow furrowed as I dug through the other folders he gave me trying to find the deposits, or credits to another part of any business Maxwell had any hand in. Not even the foreign accounts in his name matched. Of course, I was looking for a repeatable pattern of the money coming back to Jana’s father minus a percentage paid to Malcolm.

I pointed to some deposits on the page. “These make sense to me. This is roughly the same amount Malcolm has been showing for sales for this brand of liquor, and over here,” I pointed to a copy of the spreadsheet Aaron and I put together that Colter must have thought ahead to bring, “there’s a deposit of that amount minus ten percent.”

Looking over other accounts from Malcolm’s file I found the same deposit made monthly for about the last year. There are a few other large deposits, including one made about two weeks ago. “Malcolm continued to make the deposits, but if they were coming from Maxwell it’s hard to say because he stopped showing anything other than the revenue loss for the vodka.”

Colt jumped up and started frantically shuffling through files. He mumbled something to himself until he came across one that made him shout, “Gotcha, fucker!”

Jana crowded close to him so she could see what he was holding. “That’s weird. We’ve never had an account with that bank. It doesn’t even make sense. It’s only in New York. I

know he does have business there occasionally, but not enough to have a bank solely in New York.”

Stryker held out his hand. “Let me see that.”

Colter handed it over. Stryker took a few seconds to look at it and started shaking his head. “I had a long term placement in New York when I first started saving companies. The company I was with was a construction firm.” He paused looking at us to catch on.

I could tell by Colter’s face he figured out what Stryker was suggesting, but Jana looked as confused as I was. Stryker continued, “The company had problems extending its line of credit. They miraculously solved their money issues, but after a few months started having problems with their labor unions. Turned out the money came from a shady mob connected investor. When they didn’t repay with the jacked up interest their workers started having grievances and refusing to work. The board figured it out and forced the company to restructure. Most of that isn’t important, except that the bank the lender used was that one.” He stabbed his finger on the paper over the name of the bank.

“It’s known for allowing black and gray monetary transactions. They also have safe deposit boxes that they keep ultra private and don’t regulate what gets stored in them like other banks.”

“When was that account opened,” Jana asked.

Colter looked at her with sympathy. “The same week as the launch party your idiot cousin messed up.”

She inhaled slowly through her nose. “I need to make a phone call.”

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**J**ana grabbed her phone and stepped out onto the balcony despite the chilly Denver weather. It made me wonder who she was arguing with earlier. “Who was that on the phone with her earlier?”

“Her mom,” Colt said with a sneer. “She’s angry because Maxwell got cut off from Jana’s estate. Apparently they’ve already blown through most of their cash on hand. Now that she’s faced with selling property and downsizing she is trying to bully Jana into funding their lifestyle.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s the least they deserve after locking her out of her apartment in the rain.”

Stryker pushed my mostly untouched plate of food in front of me and handed me a fork. I resisted another eye roll, and since I was actually hungry I decided throwing a tantrum wasn’t really in my best interest.

Jana came back shivering. “Ugh, why did you let me go out there without a coat?”

Colter wrapped his arms around her and tried to rub some warmth back into her. “Since when do you allow anyone to tell you what to do?”

She swatted playfully at his arm. “You could have tried at least.”

“Who did you need to speak to that was worth freezing over?” I asked her before they started bickering anymore. Usually, when they did it led to moaning.

A Cheshire grin spread across her face. “Evie.”

She laughed at the look of confusion on my face. “I was thinking about the timing of the account my father opened in New York, and that miserable launch. I’d call my idiot cousin Chad, but that fucker hates me.”

“You did make your first order of business when you took over the company to fire him through a singing messenger,” Stryker said.

“Dressed as a gorilla,” Colt added.

I gasped. “How did I not know any of this?”

Jana shrugged. “You’re the nicest person I know. I didn’t want you to see the petty side of me.”

“Maybe I could use the example. Not only has Malcolm been looking down on me for years, making fun of me behind my back, but he tried to sexually assault me, and-”

A chair clattered to the ground and Colt was leaning over the table with his nostrils flaring. “Repeat that,” he said in a deathly calm voice.

“I’m pretty sure he also tried to have us killed, so let’s keep things in perspective,” I said dismissively.

“Do not make light of this,” Colter seethed. He turned on Stryker. “You’re supposed to protect my sister, not let that sleazy asshole try and put his hands on her. She’s your wife, keep an eye on her.”

“I’m not a possession,” I muttered. Not that it did any good. Both men ignored me and continued their staring contest.

“I hit him. I wanted to do more, but I needed to get Sabrina out of there,” Stryker said to my brother.

“If he’s still breathing it’s not enough,” Colter grumbled.

Jana caught my eye and shook her head.

“If she’s right, and he set up the plane crash, then he won’t be breathing for much longer. I don’t care if he is my brother,” Stryker swore.

“Don’t say that,” I chided.

A dark look crossed over Stryker’s face. “Do not defend him again. Not after everything he’s done. This world would be a better place without him, and we all know it.”

“But I won’t be better without you. If you do that, stoop to his level, I could lose you. I just got you back.” My eyes stung with the sudden, shocking urge to cry. I turned away, not used to being emotionally vulnerable around anyone.

Stryker didn’t miss anything though. He rounded the table, pulled me to my feet, and wrapped his arms around me. I tucked my head under his chin and breathed in the warm smell of him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I grabbed onto his shirt. Squeezing it in my fists, making sure he couldn't pull away from me. One of his hands cradled the back of my head, and I felt his lips brush my hair. He whispered, "I promise, Sunshine. I'll never leave you."

Jana cleared her throat. "No one asked why I called Evie. Don't you want to know?"

"Sorry, brat, we got distracted," Colt said.

"Like I was saying, Chad hates me, but he is obsessed with Evie," she finished.

Colt took a step back from her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Moving out of the danger zone. When Beck finds out you asked his wife to call that worm, because I'm assuming that's what you're up to, he's going to explode."

"Is she going to do it?" I asked, pulling my face away from Stryker's chest.

"Oh, I owe her big, but she's also feeling a bit left out since we're here and she isn't."

"So what do we do in the meantime?" I asked.

"We go back to Seattle and see who freaks out when you two show up alive," Colt replied.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

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## Stryker

**S**neaking back into town and waiting until my brother heard about our safe return wasn't dramatic enough for me. I wanted to look into his face and see if he was surprised to see us. And if I caught even a flicker of shock on his face I'd kill him right there. I'd feel bad about doing the one thing I promised Sabrina I wouldn't do, but the satisfaction of wrapping my fingers around his neck and squeezing until he went purple and the blood vessels burst in his eyes appealed to me on a primal level.

Sabrina and I hadn't spent much time out in public as a couple. Guilt weighed on me when I thought about it. She was light itself, and she deserved to be out where she could shine. There was also the matter of letting my brother know once and for all there was no hope for him to win her over. In his delusional mind, he probably thought he could convince her to forgive him for trying to force himself on her and for fucking her sister in her apartment because she'd always overlooked his whorish ways before.

He'd had years with her, a lifetime, but he failed to see her. If he had been paying attention he'd know that her lack of caring that he slept around and often slipped off when they were out together meant that she wasn't invested in the two of them being anything more than friends. Malcolm assumed all women wanted him and thought Sabrina was just biding her time until he was ready to show her attention. Worse, his narcissism was so extreme, he thought she'd settle for whatever scraps of him he was willing to share. He would

never find out how passionate she was because I would never let her go.

We laid low at home for a couple of days. Sabrina slept most of the time. She kept telling me she was just exhausted from stress. I couldn't help but hope it was something else, but every time I pushed her on it she told me it was too soon.

On the third day home I called the contact Colt had given me and had some dresses sent over. Very short, very sexy dresses. I hung them up on the back of the door for her to see them the moment she stepped out of the shower.

She gasped just as I imagined she would, and clutched her towel tight to her chest. "Stryker, what is all this?"

"We're going out tonight. It's time to be seen out and about and push whoever tried to kill us out of the shadows. I had Colt's shopper grab you some dresses. He said she knew your sizes."

Her hand dropped to her belly. She might have been telling me it was too soon to know, but I think both of us knew that something happened on the mountain. A bit of good to go along with the bad.

I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips. "Exactly. You might not fit in these dresses for much longer. As excited as I am to see your belly grow round with our child, let's focus on the here and now. It's just the two of us, for a little while longer."

She grabbed a red dress that was backless, and very short. Holding it against her chest, she gave me a scathing look. "Stryker, my towel is longer than this dress."

"And you won't be anywhere tonight without me, and I'll love seeing you in it." There was an edge to my voice that she picked up on instantly.

"You mean you want your brother to see me with you in this dress? The red one was front and center, telling me that is your first choice. You want to wave a red flag in front of the proverbial bull, don't you?" she said.



My fists clenched as I thought about wringing his neck again. It took effort, but I forced them to release. “He was pretty determined to convince you to leave me at your mom’s party. He’d probably overheard that I was leaving the next day, and put the plan to kill me in motion. Me, not you. I didn’t even know you planned to come with me. I’m not even sure if it had anything to do with the embezzlement and money laundering. I think it’s possible he just wanted you away from me.”

“You really want to put ourselves back in the center of the bullseye?” she asked.

I tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’d love to keep you as far away from all this shit as I can, but if I’m right, seeing me alone won’t be enough to trigger him.”

She raised her eyebrows and watched me. “And you’re sure it’s him. Not anyone else?”

Pain lanced my chest. The idea that there was an unknown person out there who maybe did want both of us dead terrified me. My brother’s jealousy I could understand. Losing Sabrina nearly killed me. He’s had her his entire life, and took it for granted she’d always be there when he was ready for her. He just didn’t know he’d lost long before he ever took his shot.

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“I know tonight is about being seen, but that doesn’t mean we can’t also enjoy ourselves. I haven’t taken you on enough dates and that is going to end. I’m sorry tonight isn’t only about us, but at least we’ll have some company.” I opened the door to the limo I’d hired and helped her in.

Sabrina clutched at the hem of her dress to try and prevent the very short skirt from showing off the sheer lacy panties I laid out for her to wear tonight.

“Hot dress,” Evie said and went to pass Sabrina a flute of champagne.

Jana grabbed it and passed it to Colter. She caught my eye and winked. I'd thought she figured out what had sent me into overbearing mode, but she hadn't let on too much.

"We haven't all been out like this, since-" she looked over at me, "this is the first time actually."

"Gracie is with grandma and grandpa, and I plan to dance all night," Evie said, doing a wiggle in her seat.

A smile cracked the stone-like façade of Beckett Anderson. He gave a sharp tug on his sleeves and straightened his cufflinks. "I'm going to be carrying you out of the club before eleven."

"Wanna bet?" she asked and defiantly tipped up her chin.

Colter fidgeted uncomfortably as the foreplay between Evie and Beck grew.

Beck leaned over Evie, caging her in with his arms on either side of her. "When I win, I get a weekend of you being back at my beck and call."

He leaned closer and whispered, but we could all still hear him. "I plan to work you very hard, for long hours, filling many roles."

She shivered, and I had serious doubts she even wanted to win the bet at this point.

Jana chuckled at how uncomfortable Colt appeared while trying to act like he was engrossed in looking at the scenery flying by the car.

"Aww, is daddy getting uncomfortable?" Jana asked in a childlike voice.

He slowly turned his head to glare at his wife. "Don't start with me, brat. You know I'd enjoy taking you over my knee."

Sabrina leaned into me. I was distracted by the feel of her plush tits pressing into my arm and the warmth of her breath as she whispered in my ear. "Repeat that please," I rasped. I was getting ahead of myself with the things I'd planned to do to her once we got into the club.

“My friends are crazy,” she repeated.

I nuzzled into her neck and ran my nose up the shell of her ear. “Sunshine, you don’t have friends. Haven’t you noticed that everyone in this car is related through blood or marriage? This is your family.”

She sat back and looked at everyone in the car. “Well, I’ve got Aar-”

I put my hand over her mouth. “Sunshine, are you trying to rile me up? No, the accountant is not your friend. He seems like a nice enough guy, but no man who ever thought they had a chance to fuck you is going to be your friend while you’re married to me.”

“A-fucking-men,” Beck grumbled.

The car pulled in front of a club. Malcolm had a reopening of one of his charter clubs in Seattle. It was his way of making something old, new and flashy again. I hated the fact what we were doing was going to bring him more publicity. But, if we were right, the attention would go to his head. When Malcolm was on an ego high, he felt invincible, and that often led to him bragging. He almost spilled everything the other night, but that was only after being fluffed by Sabrina’s mother.

The thing about people who thought they were smarter and better than everyone else was they often didn’t see when they were led into a trap. Malcolm was already practically bursting with the desire to gloat. My plan wasn’t elaborate. All we needed to do was push all of his buttons at the same time to tip him over the edge.

The car was swarmed with a bunch of photographers the moment it pulled up in front of the entrance. “Thank you for doing this. I know how much both of you hate the press,” I said to Beck and Colter.

I had to admit, after spending my entire adult life actively pushing everyone away except for Caroline, it wasn’t so bad to let a couple of people in.

Sabrina narrowed her eyes at me. “Why is there a bunch of press here?”

Colter dropped his arm around my shoulders. “Because we’re making sure to give Malcolm what he wants most in the world. Attention.”

“And you know what doesn’t stay under all this attention?” Beck asked, smirking.

“Secrets,” I finished.

Sabrina’s eyes narrowed as she looked at each of us. “Since when did you three become Musketeers?”

Colt dropped his arm from my shoulders and shrugged. “We’re family. It’s only natural we bond over shared interests.”

“Like hating Malcolm Fucking Graham,” Beck added. “I just want to go on record and say that I hated him first.”

Jana raised her hand. “I think technically I hated him first unless you had reason to hate a high schooler when you were in your twenties.”

Colt’s nostrils flared, and his head swung my way. “If blood is drawn I better get a piece of the action.”

Sabrina looked skeptically at the gathered photogs all salivating for us to exit the limo. “There’s no way all these guys showed up for the reopening of a club. All he does for these is change up the floor layout and lighting. He’s done probably a half dozen of these things the last few years, and not once has there ever been more than one or two photographers show up. And, honestly, I think he paid them to come.”

“Don’t be dense, little sister, they’re here for us,” Colt said.

A laugh burst from Jana. “That’s a stretch, gramps. We’re all boring married couples, and some of us are kinda old.”

Evie yawned. “I’m the youngest one in our group, and I feel too old to be here.”

“You’re only twenty-four, that makes you barely old enough to be here,” Colt grumbled.

“Give yourself a break. Gracie has kept both of us running nearly non-stop.” Beck’s eyes flashed mischievously as he glanced sideways at Colt. “We’ve been working hard on a project. It’s a lot of grunt work and has been leaving us completely exhausted. She just needs more sleep than I do.”

“Are you ever going to get tired of making sexual innuendos about my daughter right to my face?” Colt seethed.

Beck slouched back, casually placed his hand on Evie’s knee, and began to stroke slowly up and down her bare thigh. “I don’t think so.” He looked over at me. “You know, he’s pretty protective of his sisters too.”

“You should probably find some new friends,” I joined in teasing Colter.

Sabrina rolled her eyes at their playful bickering. “You still haven’t really explained why the press would care.”

“Look at them.” Jana gestured back and forth between both of them. “We tease them about being old, but they’re hot. Married or not, the ladies in this city are thirsty for the reformed playboy billionaires.”

“And then there’s bump watch,” Evie grumbled.

Sabrina’s eyes flashed to mine, and her hand twitched over her stomach. A move that did not go unnoticed by Beckett and Colter who both shot me questioning looks. I shrugged, not having any information to share, silently or otherwise.

The idea of Sabrina being pregnant already was the biggest turn on. She’d clue into how much I liked the idea soon enough if she didn’t already know. I wrapped Sabrina’s hair around my fist and tugged until she was looking up at me. “I’ve got plans for you when we get inside.”

The driver circled around the car and opened the curbside door. Beck stepped out and helped Evie climb out of the car, followed by Colt and Jana. Then it was our turn. The second we were out the flash bulbs were going off, and the small gaggle of reporters were shouting questions at us. Evie was spot on, and most of their interest was in whether or not Jana was already pregnant, or if Beck and Evie were planning to

have more kids. Thankfully, none of them seemed to give a single fuck who we were.

Until the reporter Beck tipped off noticed us. “Stryker Lawson,” he shoved a microphone in my face, “is it true the private plane you were on crashed in the Rockies? How are you here today?”

I looked past him to where Beckett stood and cocked an eyebrow. He shook his head letting me know he hadn’t provided any details. “It did. Thankfully I’ve had some flight training. Mainly how not to crash in the mountains.”

A few of the reporters laughed. “Is there a reason you got that kind of training?”

There was no scenario where I was going to share my pain of losing my uncle with them. “I’ve taken first aid training too I hope never to need.”

The reporter glanced at Sabrina clutching my arm. I pried her fingers free and tucked her under my arm. A look of confusion crossed his face. “Sabrina Lake? Isn’t your boyfriend inside? Why are you out here?”

I felt her tense up, then relax and wrap her arms around my torso. “You mean my brother-in-law? I don’t have a boyfriend.”

She beamed up at me, every bit of her shining like a ray of sunlight. I knew exactly what she was hinting at. With my free hand, I tipped up her chin and kissed her. “Sabrina is my wife.”

An eerie silence fell over the reporters. The clicking of shutters stopped, the questions they were still trying to get Beck to answer ceased. Almost as one, their attention and cameras swung our way. They all shouted questions at once.

“Stryker, is your brother Malcolm Graham?”

“Why do you have different last names?”

Sabrina winced hearing that. She mouthed, “Sorry.”

I ignored the reporters to set something straight with Sabrina. “You have nothing to be sorry about. My asshole

father is the one who insisted I not use the Graham name. I don't give a shit personally. I don't use it because the woman who raised me is the only parent I knew, and the only one I will ever recognize."

There were a few flashes while I made sure Sabrina knew I wasn't mad at her. I hated sharing such a private moment with strangers, but I would never allow time to pass by letting her feel insecure about our relationship.

The reporters didn't seem to notice we were having a moment and continued to throw questions at us.

"How long have you been married?"

"Are you having an affair with your husband's brother?"

The last question almost sent me to jail. I was trying hard, for Sabrina's sake, to curb my grouchy demeanor. Truthfully, some of it had to do with not having her in my life, but I also generally disliked most people. This was the first time I wanted to plant my fist in someone's face within seconds though.

Hands landed on my shoulders and squeezed. The unexpected gesture startled me and I started to throw back my elbow. Whoever was behind me, they were too fucking close to my wife, and that wouldn't stand. "Settle down, slugger," Beck's deep voice warned in my ear. "Time to take this party inside, yeah? We've done enough to create a buzz. It will not help your case to get arrested for assault. Trust me."

"You got arrested?" I was genuinely shocked. Not that he seemed incapable of knocking someone on their ass. He was built from what I could tell under his fancy clothes. But he seemed more evolved than me. Men like him fought with words and it was just as devastating. I could have been wrong. Maybe, like me, it was a skill he had to learn.

Just as I was starting to question my ability to read people, Colter raised his hand. "That would have been me."

That seemed more plausible to me. There was a wildness to Colter he barely held in check.

He noticed me studying him and pulled the neck of his shirt down to reveal the edge of a tattoo. “Nobody is just one thing.”

Wasn't that the truth. It was also the permission I needed to set a part of myself free. I'd worked so hard to become a respectable businessman and deserve a life with Sabrina, maybe even to prove my father wrong, but that didn't mean I had to stop being the guy who grew up fighting. It was a good reminder because tonight was the final showdown with my brother.



# Chapter Thirty-Four

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## Stryker

A hostess waited to greet us at the end of a short hallway. I expected her to be wearing hot pants and a matching bustier, and she was, but they were under a sheer dress with tiny crystals sewn in. Begrudgingly, I had to admit my brother wasn't a complete idiot. He certainly knew how to work the aesthetic of a location from the decor down to his staff. Too bad for him I was going to use his love of attention against him.

After all, he started it. At least my takedown was only metaphorical, and not a fucking airplane. Not that it wouldn't be equally life-ending. At least it would feel that way for a while. Assuming father dearest didn't work to get him off from all charges. My father didn't run in the same circles I did now though. The Andersons were next level, and apparently part of my new extended family.

We followed the woman through a sparsely crowded dance floor to an upper level VIP area. It overlooked the dance floor but offered way too much privacy for my goals. "This isn't going to work," I said, stopping halfway up the stairs.

Beck held out a large bill casually between his first two fingers. "Anything where we can be less isolated? We didn't come to hide from the crowd, but to join it."

The hostess's face lit up. "Anything for you Mr. Anderson," she purred.

Evie stepped in front of him and crossed her arms. "Anything more than a new place to sit, and I've got it

covered.”

The hostess’s eyes widened, and her mouth opened to an “o”. “I’m very sorry Mrs. Anderson. I wasn’t...I didn’t... You’re more my type than-” Her cheeks flamed red. “Shit, forget I said that. I’ve got a table downstairs that would be perfect.”

Beck smiled at the flustered woman. “We’d appreciate it. And don’t be embarrassed, my wife is pretty hot.”

She ducked her head and led the way back down the stairs. There was a circular booth off the corner of the dancefloor. It was roped off to keep people from getting too close, but still within view of most of the dancefloor. Basically, it was perfect.

“We’re going to be mobbed,” Sabrina whispered. “Trust me. I’ve been around these two my entire life, and I’ve never seen them not draw a crowd. Even after the public knew they were married it didn’t stop their fanatics from seeking them out no matter where they went. It’s why neither of them goes out in public much.”

A server came around. Beck, Colt, and I ordered a round of beer. I expected they’d order some pretentious brew, and I said as much. Jana and Evie exchanged a look and shouted, “space beer!”

Beck passed me a bottle, shaking his head at what was obviously an inside joke. He didn’t leave the rest of us out of it though and explained, “The second time Evie and I ran into each other was at this fundraiser Marjorie Easton hosted. Evie wanted to order a regular beer, but of course, Jana’s mom doesn’t do ordinary. There was a crazy assortment, including one made from barley grown in space.”

“I’m even more happy now that you chose a local microbrew,” I said and took a long pull of the slightly bitter beverage.

We sat around talking, and over the next half hour the dance floor started to fill with people. Once it was nearly full, I was ready to take Sabrina and get lost in the crowd.

Sliding out of the booth, I reached out for her hand. “Dance with me.”

She obeyed instantly, as she always did when I used that tone. A sexy song started to play. I didn’t know it, but the tempo was perfect to rub her body against mine. It was simulated fucking, and within a few chords I forgot that my intentions were to put on a show to draw out my brother.

I knew he’d seek us out once he figured out we were here, but I wanted a moment with my wife before that happened. I told everyone I wanted to put on a show, but not in the way they thought. There was a part of me that got off on dominating Sabrina. Knowing that whenever or however I wanted to touch her she’d give herself over to me. And as much as I didn’t care to share her, or our intimacy with others, the nameless strangers in the crowd didn’t seem to count. They saw what we had and wanted it. They wanted her, but she was mine.

It soothed something in me. It was dark and ugly, but I was tangled in it. My entire life I’d been on the outside looking in. Even with people I was related to I was held apart. My brother had the support from our father, the money, and all the opportunities I had to bust my ass to get. Sabrina was the first person who chose me over him. It wasn’t why I loved her, but it was the icing.

Malcolm knew Sabrina was my wife before he made his move, but that didn’t change the fact he thought she was his. Maybe I was better off being ignored by my father, but I could see for sure that being raised by the man didn’t matter where it counted. Malcolm had grown into a narcissistic asshole who didn’t have the capacity to love anyone as much as he loved himself. Sabrina was in front of him nearly his whole life, and in that time he’d managed to waste every chance to have a life with the most amazing woman on the planet. I was back now, and I had no intentions of stepping aside. Maybe if he was better for her, could love her more, and give her the life she deserved I’d be the bigger man and step aside.

Actually, fuck that. I needed her. She was the sunlight in my dark world, the air in my lungs, and every beat of my

fucking heart. She was the center of me, and there was no way I'd let her go without a fight. Thank fuck I didn't have to fight her to be with her. At least not anymore.

I spun her so her back was against my chest. One of her arms was around my neck while the other moved around her grazing and touching, basically driving every logical thought from my head. Her round ass pushed against my rapidly hardening dick and rubbed in beat to the music.

My fingers dug into the fleshy skin of her hips, trying to hold her still. "Sunshine, if you keep doing that you are going to get fucked here in the club."

She pushed back and rolled her hips again. I guess that was my answer.

My hand slid down her body and guided her other arm around the back of my neck. "Don't drop them," I said in her ear.

Slowly, I let my hand glide down her arm, past her elbow, and wrap around her neck. Using my hold I tipped her face up and claimed her mouth. "You're mine," I growled as I pulled back. "I want to show every man here who you belong to."

With one hand on her hip and the other around her throat, we grinded together as one song turned into another. The people around us disappeared as Sabrina became the center of my world. She was all I saw and felt. Before her I'd drifted through life, bouncing from one place to another. Then she slammed into my world, tilted me off my axis, and I've orbited around her since. Through her I found purpose, direction, and a future. No matter what obstacles appeared before us, I would fight my way through each and every one to stay connected to her.

Sabrina tipped her head back, and the look of love and lust in her blue eyes nearly made me lose every last shred of control. She turned me into a teenager, and I was eager to find a dark corner to chase more of the euphoria I only felt with her.

I drew my nose up the column of her throat and inhaled the sweet scent of her perfume. I nipped the skin below her ear, then her lobe, and tugged. “Let’s go home.”

Her chest heaved, and she turned in my arms. In every other aspect of her life Sabrina took charge. Learning to share her life, and letting me share her burdens was an adjustment for her. As headstrong as she was during the day, when she was in my arms she melted. My desires became her desires. Pleasing me drove her wild. It was the same for me. Her sighs and moans fed my soul. I was greedy for them and tried to get as many of them as I could get out of her.

I turned her in my arms, wrapped her hair around my fist, and made love to her mouth the way I wanted to take her pussy. This kiss was a brutal battle of will. She took everything I gave and demanded more. It wasn’t choreographed or smooth. Our teeth clashed, tongues tangled, and lips pressed hard.

“Please, Stryker, I can’t wait that long.”

“Not here.” I grabbed her hand and went in search of a dark corner.

I took her hand and led her to the stairs. No one had gone up to the VIP area since we’d been up there. There was a dance floor with a glass rail so the patrons who shelled out thousands for bottle service could watch the crowd while they remained above them.

“Hands on the rail,” I told her.

So eager for my touch, she obeyed without question.

“Mmmm,” I purred in her ear. “That’s my good girl.”

Slowly, I let my hand trail up her thigh until my fingers flirted with the hem of her dress.

“If anyone looks up here, they’re going to see my fingers deep in your cunt. They’ll see your skin flushed, and your fingers gripping the rail while you fight not to come. And you’ll fight, because you are a good girl, and what I plan to do to you is very bad.”

A barely audible squeak escaped her, but she didn't move. My hand slipped under her dress and up into her tiny thong. I slipped my fingers over her mound and rubbed her clit. Her head fell back, granting me access to her neck.

Her scent overwhelmed me, and I dove in for a taste of her. I trailed my lips up the side of her neck and back down. I pressed my teeth into the area where her neck met her shoulder. I slipped a finger into her tight channel and found her dripping for me.

I released her shoulder and whispered in her ear. "It seems like my good girl wants to be bad with me."

"Yes," she panted.

With my free hand I turned her face and kissed her savagely. I plunged two fingers inside of her and fucked her hard while rubbing her clit with the heel of my hand. She whimpered into my mouth.

"You like the fact that anyone could see us right now, don't you?" I taunted her.

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. That wasn't going to be good enough. I added a third finger and curled them until I was relentlessly working her towards a climax.

"How bad do you want to be, Sunshine?" I pushed a strap down her shoulder revealing a bare breast.

I tsked. "No bra? Anyone could have seen these beautiful tits if one of these," I slipped off the other strap exposing her other breast, "at any time."

Pinching a nipple and massaging her breast in my hand, I found her G-spot and rubbed until her legs lost the ability to hold her.

"Ride my hand until you soak my fingers. Then I'm going to take you to the bathroom and lick you clean. Would you like that? Do you want me to shove my tongue deep in your cunt? Only after you come for me again will I give you my cock. I'll lean you over the sink and fuck you hard and fast."

She screamed as she came. I pulled my fingers from her. While she pulled up the top of her dress, I stuck my fingers in my mouth, cleaning her juices off of them. I groaned.

“Bathroom, now,” I growled.

I grabbed her hand and dragged her down the hall to the VIP bathroom. On our way, I saw my brother exiting his office. He froze on the spot, face pale, and I knew he was the one to set us up. He looked like he’d just seen a ghost because he’d believed I was dead. I needed to confront him, but there were other needs I had to address first. Mainly how badly my rock hard dick needed some relief.

I reached around her and shoved open the bathroom door. “In,” I barked.

As soon as we were through the door, I threw the lock. I hoisted her up on the sink and knelt in front of her. “I’ve got to clean my dirty girl up.”

I snapped the sides of her thong and stuck the scrap of lace in my pocket. “Pull your straps down. I want to see your tits while I clean up your pussy.”

With shaking hands, she shoved both straps down and her breasts bounced free. I shoved the bottom of her dress up over her hips. Pushing her knees apart, I lowered myself in front of her. Without a word I buried my face in her center. Her scent was an aphrodisiac and I couldn’t get enough of her.

I ate her like a man starved. When I sucked on her clit her back bowed, shoving her breasts out. I watched them bounce as she rocked her pussy against my face. As I promised, I shoved my tongue deep inside of her and gave her a preview of how I planned to fuck her. Hard, fast, and unforgiving. I was going to burn the feel of me into every cell of her body. Her fingers gripped my hair as she screamed. It was loud and long and almost drowned out the sound of pounding on the door.

I knew it was Malcolm. He’d recovered from the shock of seeing me alive and inside his club. I bet he thought he’d gotten me out of the way so he could move in and get Sabrina.



There were probably missed calls from him on her cell phone that was still on the plane. Or maybe the pilot had made it off the mountain and told him Sabrina was on the plane too. Now we were here, alive and he was the one who was going to suffer. First, he was going to have front row seats to the sounds he'd never hear from Sabrina on his own.

I stood up and unbuckled my belt. She reached out, grabbed a paper towel, and wiped off my face. Lowering my boxers I gave my cock a hard yank.

I pulled her to the edge of the counter and rubbed my cock through her slit, coating it in her wetness. "Brace yourself," I warned her.

"This is going to be hard and fast. Right now there is someone on the other side of the door trying to get in."

Her head swung toward the door right as Malcolm began banging on the wood again. "Stryker," she said in a panic and started to pull up her dress.

I held her arms down. "No way, Sunshine. I'm hard enough to cut glass. I told you I was going to fuck you, no matter who caught us. The fact that my brother is the one on the other side of that door doesn't matter. You're going to be bad one more time and let me fuck this pretty pussy. It's time he learned you are mine. When you scream, it's because of me. Because you are my wife, and you'll carry my children."

I stepped back and lifted her off the counter. Then I spun her around and leaned her over the counter. "Now give me what is mine," I demanded and thrust inside of her to the root.

My head emptied, and all I knew was her and the feelings of lightning coursing through my body.

I wasn't going to last long, but I needed to bring her with me. I reached around her and worked her clit as I drove my cock in and out of her. Grunts and the sound of skin slapping filled the room. She rocked back against me.

"Fuck, you feel so good." I couldn't stop myself, and I took her harder than before. So hard she lifted up to the balls of her feet.

When I felt her start to tremble I lost it. I held myself deep inside of her and groaned as I emptied inside of her. Her pussy squeezed every last drop of cum from my body, and she collapsed down on the counter.

The pounding on the door was louder and more demanding after our joint climax. "Time to face the music," I said and forced myself to pull out of her.

I shoved my semi-hard cock back in my pants and helped her clean up. Together we exited the bathroom and found my brother watching the door with a clenched jaw.

"I see my brother has turned you into a whore," he said, looking at her with a sneer.

I took a step forward, but Sabrina grabbed my elbow and pulled me back.

He turned his attention to me. "Or maybe she's always been a slut, and she just prefers to slum it?"

It was my turn to hold her back. "How were we ever friends?" she demanded. She leaned against me. "Maybe we weren't, you did try to have me killed after all. That isn't something a friend would ever do."

"You weren't supposed to be there," he shouted.

"How was it supposed to go then? Enlighten me," I stepped in.

"You were never supposed to have been born. My father offered your whore of a mother money to get rid of you, but she wouldn't listen. I was just correcting an old mistake. Sabrina wasn't supposed to be with you. She wasn't on the manifest. With you out of the way-" He seemed to snap out of his verbal diarrhea and shut up.

"Don't stop now," Sabrina prodded. "What would have happened with him out of the way?"

"You'd come to your senses. You were supposed to be with me," he replied.

"So, I was supposed to wait around while you slept your way through all the eligible women in Washington before you

finally decided to settle down?”

I laughed. “He’s never going to settle down. There’s always going to be someone out there who turns his head. Whoever he marries will have to come to terms with his endlessly roaming eye. He’s just like his father.”

“You don’t know that. I would have gotten this out of my system. We could have had a good life together. We fit like you never will with him. Our fathers are friends, we have history together,” he argued for the thousandth time.

“Save it,” she snapped. “We tried. It didn’t work. I want to know why you tried to murder us.”

He laughed, and I knew he’d cracked. “I only wanted to kill him. You were both sticking your nose in places they shouldn’t be. Maxwell wanted to take both of you out, but I convinced him I could get you back in line if Stryker was out of the picture. Don’t you get it? I was trying to save you!”

“Your actions almost killed her. I’m the one that saved her. I landed the plane and led her out of the wilderness. I’m always going to be the one to save her because she’s *my* wife,” I shouted back at him.

“The better question is, what are we close to finding out that my father doesn’t want us to know,” Jana asked stepping out of the shadows.

“So the entire gang is here? Does this group do nothing alone?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“Answer the question,” Beck demanded as everyone else joined us.

Malcolm straightened up and tried to put on his cocky persona. “You don’t get to order me around Anderson.”

Colt held up a phone and showed he was on speaker. “Doesn’t matter. I’m pretty sure the FBI agent on the other end of this line heard everything he needs to hear. Now, we’ve got a wager going. I’m betting you’re too stupid to recognize when you’re backed into a corner and to save yourself, but Jana thinks you’re selfish enough to turn on whoever you need to in order to stay out of prison.”

His shoulders slumped. “What do you need to know?”

Colt slapped a twenty in her hand. “You win again, brat.”

# Chapter Thirty-Five

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## Sabrina

I'd never been so happy to kick off a pair of heels as I was when we finally made it home. "God I'm tired."

"I was too rough with you earlier," he said, standing in the doorway of our bedroom.

I smiled at him. "I loved it. I'm just tired."

He crossed the room and helped me out of my dress. "Let's get you to bed then."

As soon as he said, "bed" I yawned loudly. "Sleep sounds divine."

He kissed my forehead. "When are we going to know?"

His hand slipped over my belly and left no confusion about what he meant. I threaded my fingers through his, letting both of our hands rest over our hopes and dreams of starting a family. "A couple more weeks. There's been a few times the last few days where I thought maybe I noticed some changes, but it's possibly just wishful thinking."

"What have you noticed?" he asked, and I didn't miss the hopeful lift in his voice.

"Just that I've been more tired lately. My breasts are starting to feel more tender, and I've had some odd cramps. But don't get your hopes up. It could be PMS," I cautioned him.

He pulled back the covers on the bed and handed me one of his shirts. I pulled it over my head even though I had plenty

of my own pajamas, but the idea of being surrounded by his smell soothed me.

I climbed in, and he tucked the covers around me. “I’m afraid my hopes have been up since the moment I came inside of you knowing your pills were on the plane. But we’ve got time. Thankfully my wife is a lot younger than me.”

Another yawn escaped me. “Aren’t you coming to bed?”

“Soon,” he promised. “Colt is coming over. Jana was falling asleep on the way home, so he’s getting her to bed too.”

I smiled to myself. Maybe we wouldn’t be the only ones with a baby on the way.

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I woke up the next morning sore but refreshed. Stryker usually only slept a few hours a night, so it wasn’t surprising to find myself in bed alone. Voices in the next room prompted me to throw on some pants. When I came out of the room I found Beck and Colt sitting around the table with Stryker.

“Hey guys, what brings all of you here this early in the morning?”

Colt rolled his eyes. “Brina, it’s after ten.”

“Wow, I haven’t slept this late since college.” I moved into the kitchen and found there was still coffee in the pot. I poured a cup, added my favorite creamer, and brought the cup up to inhale the sweet caffeine goodness.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “How long has this been sitting here? It smells burnt.”

Beck’s eyes widened, Stryker smirked, and Colt looked at me shocked. “What?” I asked them, clearly I was missing some vital information.

“That’s a fresh pot, Sunshine,” Stryker told me.

He took my cup and poured it out. “You probably shouldn’t have it anyway.”

Colt stared at me with his mouth gaping and pointed at my belly. “Are you pregnant?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. It’s too soon to tell.”

“You move fast, brother,” Colt said and slapped Stryker on the back.

“Fast?” Beck asked. “It took him five years to come and claim his wife. I’d say he moves glacially slow.”

“Can we get back to whatever has the three of you huddled up this morning? We’re not going to figure out whether or not I’ve got a mini Stryker brewing for a few more weeks, so let’s put a pin in that discussion for now.”

“The FBI arrested Malcolm this morning for attempted murder and a host of other things including conspiring to crash an airplane and money laundering. If he’s smart he’s cutting a deal as we speak,” Stryker answered.

“Where’s Jana?” I asked. I found it hard to believe she’d let the guys cut her out of whatever scheming they were doing right now.

“She’s meeting with her mother. Apparently, Marjorie didn’t know Maxwell had hidden accounts and safe deposit boxes. She’s been trying to get Jana to restore her to their previous standard of living, but Jana won’t budge. But if she helps bring Maxwell to justice Jana will help her mother get a decent divorce settlement. There’s no love lost between her parents. Maxwell hasn’t exactly hidden his many affairs from her,” Colt explained.

“Tell me she didn’t have to fly to New York.” After surviving a plane crash, Stryker wasn’t the only one with a fear of flying.

“No, the FBI is executing a search warrant as we speak. Marjorie is answering questions, trying to fill in any holes in what they’ve already figured out. It seems some of the accounts we didn’t know about that he opened in her name. When she found that out she folded. Can’t say I blame her. He



put her at risk of criminal liability. She's also helping figure out where he might be hiding. No one has seen him since news of your survival hit the media," Colt added.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs followed by angry pounding on the door. "What now," I grumbled and went to open the door.

Stryker grabbed my hand and stopped me. "I don't want you going to face whoever is angry enough to beat their way in here."

"I agree," Colt said. "You might have my niece or nephew in there. Let me get it."

He crossed the room in a couple of steps and opened the door to a disheveled and angry Waverly. "Colter, what are you doing here?"

"Sabrina is my sister too. A better question is what are you doing here?"

Her anger returned when she turned to face me. "What have you done? Where is Malcolm?"

"Federal custody," I said simply.

"Fix it. Get him back," she demanded.

"I can't just get him back for you. He tried to kill us," I said, already tired of the conversation.

"I don't believe that. I need him," she whined.

"We don't have time for your theatrics, Wave. I'm even sorrier if you actually think you need that fucker, because he's the most worthless human being I've ever met," Colt sighed.

"Why are you turning on me? I need him because I'm pregnant." She started sobbing, and not a single part of me felt the need to comfort her like I might have in the past.

Colt seemed to agree with me because he didn't make a single move to soothe her tears. "It doesn't matter if he's in jail or free. There's no way he'd ever be man enough to step up and help you raise a baby. He was still trying to get Sabrina back last night."

“Why are you being so cruel? He would want to be here for me. I know he would,” she said, but it sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“I know what it’s like to grow up without a father. I don’t know if we can do anything, but we can try and put a good word in for him. But, this is the last time you will come around making demands of my wife and throwing around accusations,” Stryker laid down the law.

“She’s my sister, I’ll do what I want.” Waverly actually stomped her foot, and I felt so sorry for my niece or nephew to be cursed with a grown child for a mother.

Stryker stepped forward and loomed over her. “She was your sister. You’ve shit on her your entire life trying to please your vapid bitch of a mother. You had the potential to have a best friend for life, and you’ve thrown her away over and over again. So, we will try and do this one last favor for you, but you are out of our lives from this moment forward. When we have a family you will not be bringing your toxicity into our lives.”

Colt walked back to the door and held it open. “You heard the man. Now hear me. I love you, Wave. But you’ve verbally attacked my daughter, tried to ruin the birth of my granddaughter, and you’ve been horrible to our sister. I’ve tried, God knows I’ve tried over and over to try and guide you to be a better person. Maybe who you’ve become is my fault. I spoiled you when you needed tough love. But, Stryker is right, you’re toxic. I can’t let you continue to hurt the people I love. We’re done from this moment forward. Good luck. I do wish you the best, but I can’t be the one to help you get it anymore.”

“Colt, please. You can’t do this. I need you,” she begged and clutched at his arm.

“I know you do, but there are other people who need me more, and as long as you choose to view them as a threat, I can’t have you in my life.” He pried her fingers free and stepped back.

Her tears dried up, and for once she showed him the Waverly the rest of us saw. “Fine. Choose your backwoods daughter and my mother’s biggest mistake. I will be fine without you, but don’t think I’m going to let you in my child’s life.”

Colt nodded. “That’s your choice. Have a good life, Waverly.”

She exited the apartment in the same manner she entered it. He quietly closed the door and leaned against it.

“Are you okay?” I asked him. More than anyone else I know how badly he wanted to save our sister.

He cleared his throat. “Not really, but it had to be done.”

The door opened and thumped against him. He stepped back, prepared to go another round with our sister, but Jana stepped in.

“Why did I just pass a very pissed-off Waverly on my way up here?” she asked.

“It seems Malcolm knocked her up, and she’s demanding we get him out of jail for her,” Beck summarized.

“Are you sure it’s his?” she asked.

Colt laughed, and he sounded on the verge of hysterics. “Fuck, how did I let her become that?”

Beck slapped him on the back. “Let yourself off the hook. She’s your sister, not your kid. Your daughter turned out all right. She’s got much better taste in men than Waverly.”

“Yeah, fantastic. The daughter I didn’t know about until her fuckhead of a baby daddy accused me of having an affair with her turned out just fine,” Colt grumbled.

Beck fought a smirk. “Yeah, sorry about that. I learned my lesson, believe me. I swear to believe any future children are mine without a paternity test.”

“Do you have news?” I asked Jana before Beck started making comments guaranteed to piss him off completely.

It was obvious that Beck was trying to distract him from dealing with the full weight of cutting Waverly out of his life, but it would only delay the inevitable. Some relationships couldn't be saved.

“Diamonds,” she answered me. “Lots of diamonds. They don't have serial numbers, so they'll be hard to track down. The most likely reason is because they're black market stones. After all the scrutiny from the launch of the vodka it seems he stopped using the Cayman accounts. The market value of the stones, after a rough estimate, seems to be a close match to the amounts in Malcolm's records minus the spending we've been able to track.”

“Why was he stockpiling so much money?” Stryker asked the question everyone wanted to know.

There was a knock on the door before Evie pushed it open. “The door was cracked,” she said as she let herself in. “I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Did you know the hallway amplifies sound?”

“You know why my father was stockpiling money?” Jana asked surprised.

“I finally got a hold of Chad. He's still disgusting, by the way.”

Gracie bounced in her arms, and she stopped talking long enough to pull a chubby fist out of her hair.

“Da-da, da-da,” Gracie demanded, reaching for her daddy.

Beck lifted her out of her mom's arms and snuggled her to his chest. My ovaries melted, and I hoped for the dozenth time I was going to get a positive pregnancy test. There was just something about seeing a strong man holding a baby.

“Wouldn't you rather come to grandpa?” Colter asked Gracie.

She smiled a mostly gummy smile, but then snuggled closer to her daddy.

Beck and Colter continued to silently argue over who got to hold the baby, while the rest of us refocused on what Evie

had to tell us.

“If y’all are done watching two grown men argue over who gets to hold the baby, I’ll tell you what Chad said.”

Beck took a couple of steps back and bounced his daughter. Colt pouted, but rejoined the rest of us.

“What I never really understood was the timing of Chad stepping in to take over your position,” Evie said to Jana.

Jana lifted one shoulder. “My father is a misogynist. I really didn’t examine his motives too hard.”

“But see, you had that position for years and it wasn’t a problem. Not until after he made a play for Anderson Global and lost,” Evie theorized.

“What epiphany did Chad inspire?” Jana asked.

“Basically, he had been running all the ideas by your father from the beginning. The most interesting thing I learned was that he was originally planning to follow the suggestions you had been making, but it was your father who changed Chad’s mind and made him think that it was better to try and go viral with influencers rather than utilize traditional marketing tactics. Don’t you see? Your father is the one who tanked the launch,” Evie explained.

Jana’s eyebrows scrunched together. “But why?”

“That’s easy,” Beck began as he rocked a sleepy Gracie. “He knew about the terms of his father’s will, and probably decided to grab what he could from the company in case everything was turned over to you.”

“But why did he lock the money away? The Eastons aren’t known for their careful spending,” I commented.

Colter scoffed. “How did I miss it?” he mumbled to himself.

“Whatever it is, we all missed it. Mind filling the rest of us in?” Stryker said.

“The vodka hype built the exposure for the company. When it failed the company’s stock fell. With the money he

was embezzling from the company he could purchase the stock for less than it was originally worth, and use the company's own money to do it," Colter explained.

"But then we prevented him from purchasing more stock and kept Malcolm at bay as well. When we scheduled a flight to Denver they knew we were going to put it all together once we got a look at Malcolm's records," Stryker added.

Jana walked across the room and stared out the window. I gave her a few minutes then went to join her. She wiped under her eyes. "How can you stand to be around me?"

"You did not do this," I told her.

Another tear rolled down her face. It wasn't like her to cry, even about something her family had done.

"Hey, didn't you say there was a blood test we could take?" I whispered.

She wiped more tears from her face. "I'm being pretty ridiculous, aren't I?"

I bumped my shoulder into hers. "If you can't cry because your father tried to kill your sister-in-law and her husband, I don't know what is worthy of tears."

She started laughing and crying. "My doctor can probably get us in today," she said when she was able to compose herself.

"Make the call," I said.

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“Mrs. Greyson and Mrs. Lawson, if you would follow me,” the nurse said when we arrived an hour later.

She showed us to a phlebotomy lab where a tech drew our blood before leading us into an office to wait for the results.

“This is a weird day,” I said, breaking the silence.

“I don't know what you're talking about. Most of my days start out with dealing with my father's crimes, and wondering

if the next generation of Seattle's tycoons is growing in my womb," she joked.

The first thing I thought was a man his size must have been a massive baby. "Oh god, there might be a little Stryker in here right now." My hands dropped to my stomach as I let that little bit of horror sink in.

"He's almost a foot taller than me. Can you imagine how huge one of his babies might be? This is going to destroy my vagina." My stomach rolled, and I wasn't sure if it was a sign of pregnancy, or if my brain was conjuring symptoms because I'd convinced myself I might be pregnant.

Dr. Singh came in and sat behind her desk. "Jana, lovely to see you again."

She looked at me. "Sabrina, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I had to double check the results before I came back here."

Jana gripped the arms of her chair. "Is there something wrong?"

Dr. Singh took her glasses off and set them on her desk. "Only if you don't want to be pregnant."

A smile lit up her face. "I am?"

The doctor passed both of us a slip of paper. "Both of you are. Which in and of itself makes this the oddest consultation I've ever had."

"Why did you have to double check the results?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "Do yourself a favor and call your husband. If I'm right you're going to want him here."

Jana and I stepped out of the office in a state of stunned silence. "I need to see Colt."

"We're pregnant," I said like she hadn't already known.

We waited out front, even though Jana had driven us here. Dr. Singh wanted to do an ultrasound, but she suggested I have

Stryker come to be here with me.

“Why wouldn’t she tell me what is going on?” I asked. I only knew I was pregnant for a few minutes, and already I felt an extreme protectiveness.

I stared into the distance. Jana bumped into me. “You can talk to me.”

I took a deep breath. “How was she able to give me up? My mother walked away from me when I was a year old and has had very little to do with me ever since. I couldn’t imagine doing anything like that with my baby, and I only just found out he or she exists.”

Jana smiled sadly. “My mom didn’t leave, not physically at least, but I understand what you mean. It’s hard to grow up knowing your parents don’t really want you around. I’m going to be so overbearing with the amount of attention I give this baby that they’re going to have to invent a new word for the kind of mom I’m going to be. Helicopter moms are going to judge me for how much affection I shower on this kid.”

A car screeched into the parking lot and into the spot right in front of us. Colter and Stryker jumped out and ran straight for us.

“Are you both okay? Why are you at the doctor’s office?” Colter demanded.

Stryker watched me for an answer. I bit my lip. “I’m pregnant.”

He stood in stunned silence, a smile slowly spreading on his face as he focused his attention on my stomach. As if he’d be able to see my belly grow in front of his eyes.

“It was nice of you to come here to be with her, but I’m sure Stryker would have come with her,” Colter said to Jana.

She handed him her test results.

“What is this?” he asked while he unfolded the paper. I watched his face while he read the results. The moment he figured it out he swept her into his arms and spun her around.

“I’m going to be a father?”



Jana laughed. “You’re already a father.”

“Again, I’m going to be a father again? And this time I’ll get to be involved.”

She turned to me. “We’re going to go home unless you want us to wait? He’s going to start dancing around any minute, and it’s going to be embarrassing.”

I shook my head. “I’ve got what I need,” I said and looked at Stryker.

“Are you okay? Why did you sound scared on the phone?” Stryker asked me.

“The doctor said she needed to double check the results and to have you meet me here. I’m scared,” I admitted.

He took my hand and kissed my knuckles. “I’m here. No matter what, I’m here.”

When we got inside, the nurse took us back to an exam room. She set a gown on the exam bed. “Please take off everything and put this on. The doctor will be in shortly.”

I stripped down and put on the ugly gown. Stryker paced the room while we waited for whatever the doctor wanted to talk to us about.

After what felt like forever, a tech came in pushing a cart. “I’m going to have you lie back and put your feet in the stirrups. This is going to be a bit uncomfortable, but the doctor wants to get a look at the baby.”

She held up a large wand, and I groaned internally.

“What the hell is that?” Stryker nearly shouted.

“We’ve got to do a transvaginal ultrasound. It’s much too early in your pregnancy to do the transabdominal one.”

She lubricated the wand, and I took a deep breath to ignore the discomfort while she got it into position. Then a fuzzy image appeared on the screen, and I wasn’t thinking about the foreign feeling of the probe any longer.

“How far along did you say you thought you were?” she asked.

“About two weeks. We got stranded in the woods, and I didn’t have my birth control. We decided it was a sign we should just go for it,” I answered.

The tech started taking some measurements on the screen. She made some noises that sounded like commentary, but she never actually said anything.

“Can you tell us why she wanted to run some more tests?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, I can’t, but the doctor will be in here with you soon,” she responded.

She cleaned up the equipment and started packing up the ultrasound machine before she left. I started to get dressed, but before I put my shirt on Stryker came up behind me and put his giant hand across my stomach.

“Stop freaking out. We don’t know anything yet. Just breathe for me, Sunshine.”

By the time the doctor knocked on the door I was a shaking mess. Dr. Singh introduced herself to Stryker when she saw I was pretty incapable of doing anything but wringing my hands together.

“I can see the waiting is a struggle for Sabrina, so how about I cut to the chase?”

“Your hormone levels were much higher than I’d expect for someone only a few weeks pregnant. I wanted to see how far along you were.”

Stryker leaned forward, relaxing a little since she wasn’t raising any alarms. “What did you find out, doctor?”

“You’re farther along than you thought. It looks like you’re about six weeks.” She opened my file on her tablet. “Have you been experiencing morning sickness?”

“Not really. There have been a few things that have made me feel a little queasy, but mostly I’ve just been tired.”

She opened another tab and turned the device around.

Stryker leaned forward and squinted at the image. “What are we looking at, doc? All I see are fuzzy blobs.”

“I’m showing you the reason your hormone levels are higher than what I expected to see.”

I squeezed Stryker’s hand. “I don’t understand. Is something wrong with our baby?”

“No, you have two regularly developing babies.”

Stryker squeezed my hand back and looked at me with an expression of shock and amazement. “Did she say two?”

The doctor smiled. “Congratulations, you’re having twins.”

“You’re going to be unbearable now, aren’t you?” I asked him.

He nodded, a goofy grin spreading across his face. “I’d say there’s a very strong possibility.”

# Epilogue

## Stryker

I set the baby monitor next to the other two on the table on Beck and Evie's back deck. Colt handed me a beer and I joined them in watching our wives set up games for Gracie's sixth birthday.

"I can't believe you got her a pony," Beck grumbled.

Colt tried to hide his smirk. "It's a grandpa's job to spoil their grandchildren."

"He's certainly given you enough kids to spoil," I joked.

"I can't believe he thought he didn't want to have any," Colt told me like Beck wasn't sitting right next to us.

"Not all of us can have them two at a time," he complained as if having two sets of twins was our plan.

"He keeps trying though," Colt complained.

Evie waddled out on the porch, very pregnant with what she insisted was their last baby. "Nope, I'm done after this."

She sat down next to Beck, and he immediately started rubbing her back. "I bet I could talk you into one more."

"You're getting a vasectomy, and making sure it works this time. Five kids is enough," she told him.

"I'm starting to think you've got a breeding kink," Jana said as she joined us.

Colt looked at her with a pained expression. "I know we're all friends, but can we not talk about any kind of kink when it comes to my daughter's husband? It's bad enough that I know

about a lot of his other proclivities from being his best friend since we were kids.”

“What about you two,” Beck gestured between them. “Are you really done with two?”

“I’ve got three kids, remember? And thanks to you being a horny asshole, I’ll have five grandkids in a month,” he said.

We all turned to Jana who looked like she was hiding something. “About that. Uhm, you’re going to have four kids in about seven months.”

“More grandkids?” Fitz practically sang as he carried a platter of food out to the deck.

Sabrina followed behind him carrying a basket of bread. I wanted to keep her next to me so she wouldn’t try and overdo it, but I learned last time that the more I tried to baby her, the more it pissed her off. Fitz, however, could get away with it.

He snatched the basket out of her hands and led her to the bench I was seated on. “You should not be on your feet. Now sit there and let that boy take care of you.”

I sat back and made room for her between my legs. The moment she sat down I put my hands on either side of her very swollen belly. Every time I saw her I couldn’t help but want her all over again. I actually understood how Beck ended up with four kids and one on the way.

She looked back at me over her shoulder, and I could see her eyes heat.

“How are you doing, Sunshine?” I whispered in her ear.

Her tongue peeked out and wet her lips. It made me think of really inappropriate things considering we were with our family in a place about to fill with a hoard of six-year-olds in about an hour.

“Do you need me?” Apparently I didn’t care about where we were. If my wife had needs, I was on board to take care of them.

She kissed me. “I always need you. That’s how I ended up like this again,” she said pointing at her stomach.

“Knocking you up is one of my favorite activities,” I said, kissing her again.

Our four-year-old twin sons were going to be joined by a brother and sister in a couple more months.

“Thank you,” I said to her.

Her nose scrunched up adorably. “What for?”

“For ditching your friends ten years ago and taking a chance on me.”

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“Are you sure you have all the emergency numbers?” Sabrina asked Grace for the dozenth time.

“Yes, darling. Laken and Anderson love staying at Grandma and Grandpa’s house. We’re going to have a lot of fun while the two of you celebrate your anniversary,” Grace comforted her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Anderson. I know they’ll have a great time with you both,” I said to her while trying to drag Sabrina out the door.

Fitz came around and slapped me on the back. “Boy, when are you going to start calling us by our names? Can’t really tell everyone you’re one of our kids if you’re always calling us by our last names.”

I ducked my head. This was a common argument. I loved having family, but even this many years later it was hard to come to terms with being chosen by anyone. Since my mother died, I’d almost forgotten what it was like to have parents, but Fitz and Grace worked hard to make me feel included. I loved them for how they treated our kids. Sabrina hadn’t spoken to her mother since the night of the party she threw for us, and her father wasn’t very involved since she ended her friendship with Malcolm.

You’d think he would have been appreciative for how things worked out. Malcolm was looking at years behind bars.

Even my father wasn't able to pull any strings to get him free. Something that almost ruined his friendship with Sabrina's dad.

Once we found out Sabrina was pregnant she urged me to follow through with what I'd offered to Waverly. He was released, on house arrest, so he could be a part of his baby's life. He had to agree to testify against Maxwell Easton, but otherwise, he was free to serve his time in the comforts of home.

More than a few drunken messages were received by Sabrina telling her he'd much rather be behind bars than cohabitating with her spoiled younger sister. She eventually blocked him, but we still got updates from time to time. Her mother worked hard to rehabilitate his image, and now they were regulars in the social circuit all of our parents belonged to.

Well, except for Jana's. Maxwell was eventually found trying to hide out in the Bahamas. After her mother found millions in diamonds he'd hidden from her in safe deposit boxes, she issued him divorce papers. For the first time in her life, she was having to work since Jana offered her mom the same help she got when her father decided to lock her out of her apartment and accounts.

Maxwell was still serving time in a maximum security prison for money laundering, tax evasion, conspiracy to commit murder, and second-degree murder after they found the body of the pilot. Apparently, his parachute got tangled in some tree branches, and he ended up dying from hypothermia. Couldn't say I was too sorry about his fate. He did take money to try and kill us after all.

"Where are you taking me?" Sabrina asked, breaking me out of bad memories.

"Not far. I know you don't want to spend a lot of time in the car," I said.

I'd put our bags in the car before we came over for the birthday party. Planning an anniversary trip for your seven-month pregnant wife was complicated. Colter and Beck



thought my idea was insane, but I knew that Sabrina would love it.

We drove for an hour into the mountains where I rented a cabin for us for the next couple of days. She laughed when I pulled in front of a small A-frame cabin.

“Please tell me we aren’t going to be wearing sheets for the next couple days,” she asked as I let us inside.

I moved her hair and kissed her neck. “Sunshine, we won’t be wearing anything.”

Her hands dropped to the button on my jeans. “My hormones and I are fully on board with that idea.”

I grabbed her hands and stopped her before she advanced my plans before I was ready. “I’ve got a gift for you first.”

Reaching into one of the bags I brought out a wooden box and handed it to her.

She opened it and stared into the box I’d been adding to it for the last several years.

After a few minutes of sorting through it, she looked up at me with tears in her blue eyes. I hated to make her cry, but there was nothing prettier than her blue eyes when filled with happy tears.

She held up an old plane ticket. “Is this your ticket to Vegas?”

“Yes,” I dug through the box for a few other items. “Remember this?” I asked.

“Is that the key to our old apartment?”

She gasped and pulled out a small box. Flipping open the lid I watched her eyebrows scrunch together. She rubbed the gold rings inside the box. “I...I think I remember these.”

Tears spilled down her face. “How could I possibly have forgotten you? All those years we missed out on.”

I took her into my arms. “Don’t cry. I hate seeing you sad.”

“It’s our tenth anniversary, but for me it’s only been five years.”

Her tears slayed me. “We’re right where we’re supposed to be. I wasn’t good enough for you then. And you needed time to be on your own. You were so young when we married.”

A smirk pulled at the corner of her mouth. “I’m still a lot younger than you.”

“Thank God for that. We’re going to have four kids in a couple of months.”

I rubbed her belly. “I know you’re sad about all the time we missed being together, but I’m not anymore. Who knows if we’d have all of this right now if you had met me that morning. Our road is a winding one, but it got us here. And here is exactly where we’re meant to be.”

# Playlist

*Ça Va Ça Vient* by Vitaa, Slimane

*Bad Liar* by Selena Gomez

*Fever* by Dua Lipa, Angèle

*Billie Bossa Nova* by Billie Eilish

*Fake Love* by BTS

*Boyfriend* by Dove Cameron

*Out of My Head* by Charlotte Sands, Aaron  
Gillespie

*Patience* by Chris Cornell

*You* by The Pretty Reckless

*I'll Follow You* by Shinedown

# Acknowledgments

This has been a wild ride. I can't believe I just finished the last book in a series that wasn't supposed to be a series. Beck and Call started as a joke that became an obsession. I'd thought it would be a stand-alone. Just a fluffy, sexy diversion from another story that was pushing to be told. I should have known better.

Instead what started as a short story to tease my sister with became a way for me to explore the different ways mental illness, poverty, and pride impact us. I might have looked over my sister's reading list to pull out her favorite tropes, but this series became my therapy in much the same way *Pretty Monsters* did.

Like many people, I deal with anxiety and depression. Some days are harder than others, and on those days I often turn to my computer and use these stories to tear off little pieces of what I feel and embed them in my characters. I hope you see something in them that helps you push through the dark moments. The people I'm about to mention are the ones I turn to when the weight is too heavy and I need some help to carry it all. My advice, find your people. Family doesn't have to share blood.

First I need to thank the members of my reader group, Carrillo's Crew. When I published Beck and Call I started getting messages asking me when the next book was coming out. Now that you know the backstory you can imagine my reaction. What next book? But it didn't take long for Colter and Jana to come to me with a story. One I did not get to right away. Thank you all for sticking with me when that other book wouldn't be quiet. You were patient while I wrote the *Pretty Monsters* Trilogy, and gave me the grace to pursue where the muses were taking me.

Linnea Valle, my Jill of all trades, where would I be without you? You're always around to let me work through crazy ideas. If people think I know how to use commas it's because you so frequently take them away from me.

Tracy Black, you are a newer addition to my life, but now I wonder how I am still around without having you for all those years. You keep me on task and helped me uncage myself. Now if people think this book was too spicy (is there really such a thing?) I'm blaming you. You said the series needed to go out with a bang. I might have interpreted that differently than you meant it.

Debbie McQueen and Cambria Hebert, thank you both for being there when I need to vent to another author. This job we do has us alone a lot, and it's hard sometimes for others to understand how exposed we can feel sometimes. Or how frustrating it is trying to be seen amongst the many other great authors out there. Thank you for giving me ideas, and lifting me up when I'm feeling down.

To my mom who is always up for an adventure. I'm sorry I still haven't written that fade-to-black book for you yet. I promise I won't be doing that, but maybe someday I'll blacken out the naughty bits. Thank you for coming with me to conventions, and driving people to come to talk to me. I'm convinced they like you more, but that's okay with me. You're pretty amazing, so I can't blame them.

To my son, the center of my world, you probably won't read this, but everything I do is for you. Everything.

To Fawn, my longest and best friend. You've had my back since we were teenagers. You aren't my sister by blood, but you're still my family. I think these dirty books mean I get to be Blanche when we're living like the Golden Girls someday.

Finally to all of my fans who've stuck with me since the beginning. I don't think you know how much you have changed my life. I hope I bring you as much joy as you bring me. This might be my twelfth novel, but I'm just getting started. Buckle up, because what I've got coming for you is going to be wild!

# About the Author

Kimberly Carrillo is a storyteller from the Pacific Northwest, currently living in a small town with her teenage son and a house full of pets. The author of the romantic suspense Destroy Series, and other books, Kimberly writes tales of beautiful, messy love. When she isn't reading or out supporting her son at sports events she can be found moving a cat off her keyboard so she can help the heroine find the love that she deserves.

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