

A man in a dark suit and white shirt is embracing a woman with long, wavy red hair. She is wearing a red, off-the-shoulder dress and has her eyes closed. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the couple.

THE
OTHER
ONE

THE ONES SERIES
BOOK THREE

KATE RANDALL

THE
OTHER
ONE

Copyright © 2022 by Kate Randall.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locals or persons, is entirely coincidental.

Developmental Editor: Nicole Orsini

Editor and proofread: My Brother's Editor

Cover Designer: Y'all. That Graphic.

To Matt. Always. Love you, babe.

Contents

1. Abigail
2. Jackson
3. Abigail
4. Jackson
5. Abigail
6. Jackson
7. Abigail
8. Abigail
9. Jackson
10. Jackson
11. Abigail
12. Jackson
13. Abigail
14. Jackson
15. Abigail
16. Jackson

17. Abigail

18. Jackson

19. Abigail

20. Abigail

21. Abigail

22. Jackson

23. Abigail

24. Jackson

25. Abigail

26. Jackson

Epilogue

Also By Kate

About Kate

Acknowledgments

CHAPTER 1

Abigail

September

*H*oly. *Shit*. I can't believe Jackson just got punched in the fucking face. Of course, I've wanted to do it plenty of times, but I'm stunned it finally happened. And by Aiden, no less. As mad as I am at the big oaf for blaming this whole terrible night on Jackson and me, I can kind of see where he was coming from. I get it. He completely flipped his shit, finding his girlfriend balled up on the bathroom floor of a bar that Jackson and I took her to, but I won't be blamed for Aiden's actions. Lindsey wanted to go to a bar after not feeling safe enough to step foot outside her apartment after her kidnapping. She's slowly been taking walks and trying to leave more, but she's always had her knight in shining armor with her. I support my girl in all her ideas. This one just didn't work out the way any of us expected. Even though I have violent urges toward Jackson from time to time, this has gone too far. Time for the adults (me) to take charge.

I stand from the couch that Jackson toppled into after Aiden decked his ass and square my shoulders. I'm not about to be

talked down to like a piece of dirt on the bottom of Aiden's shoe.

“Fuck you for making me stand up for him, but Jackson didn't deserve that. And neither do I, for that matter. You aren't the only person who cares about her, Aiden. If you think I won't be beating myself up for this for the foreseeable future, then you are sadly mistaken. Come on, Jackson.”

I hoist Jackson up like a damn sack of potatoes, not to be confused with the bag of dicks I often tell him to eat and carry a huge portion of his weight to the door as Aiden glares menacingly at us. My patience is wearing pretty thin with Captain America right about now.

Walking out into the muggy night air is just making me more irritated with this whole night. I hate being uncomfortable in this weather. It reminds me of all the nights growing up in the South, having to lug around whatever jock boyfriend I had at the time when they were too drunk after a big win or a big loss. But a good girlfriend would never leave her man to deal with his own drunken stupidity. *Heaven forbid, right?*

I unwrap Jackson's arm from around my shoulder when we get to my car. “Get in, I'll take you home.”

Jackson is rubbing his jaw, staring at the apartment window that faces the street. “It's fine, She-Devil. I can call a driver.”

Though the barb is on par with our usual jabs, it's obvious his pride is hurt by almost having been knocked out. Don't ask me why I care at the moment. Maybe seeing my sister from

another mister have a meltdown and being powerless to stop it has something to do with my not entirely hateful feelings toward Jackson. Or maybe I'm falling into old habits. Either way, it seems like I should at least give the man a damn ride.

“Shut up, Little Hayes, and get in the damn car.”

Jackson glares at me for a moment before ripping the door open and sitting down in a huff. Oh, his pout game is strong right now.

“Listen, I know you're probably feeling all kinds of emasculated right now, but you have got to learn how to read a room. What were you thinking, goading Aiden like that?”

Jackson has quite the mouth on him, but I thought for sure he and Aiden had worked out some of their differences. Plus, he should know not to poke that particular bear.

“I really don't feel like a lecture from you right now, Chucky. I have enough on my mind.” Jackson is looking out the window, speaking without the usual heat behind his insults. This is a side of Jackson I haven't seen before.

I don't know how to handle this quiet, introspective person sitting next to me.

Deciding to zip my lips as we drive to his apartment, I feel the weight of regret of the events of tonight.

I glance at Jackson. “You know this wasn't our fault, right? Aiden was totally out of line blaming us.” *Right?*

He looks back at me with regret swimming in his turbulent blue eyes. “No. I don't know that. She wasn't ready, and he's

right, we should have never agreed to go to a bar with her.” He squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a pained sigh. “I just keep seeing her on the floor in that bathroom, having a full-blown panic attack. We had a part in that. No matter how out of line Aiden may have been tonight, he hit the nail on the head with that one.”

I’ve never known Jackson to take responsibility like this with anything. The playboy that we have all come to know, and in my case hate, actually feels guilty about something.

“Then what was all that back there then about Aiden being the fun police?” I ask him, completely taken off guard.

Jackson shakes his head, and a self-deprecating chuckle escapes his full lips. “Just doing what I do, I guess. Deflection at its finest.” He shrugs as we pull up to his apartment.

“I know you hate me and all, but how about a drink? I could certainly use one and since you took just as much of Aiden’s wrath tonight, aside from being punched, I figure you could as well.”

He’s looking at me as if he actually cares about my emotional state. Maybe he’s trying to help, or maybe he doesn’t want to be alone right now. But I know one thing, Jackson Hayes has very good and very expensive taste in wine.

I park my car and turn the engine off. “Sure, why not.” *Into the lion’s den I go.*

I've never been inside Jackson's apartment before. I take a look around when he leads me through the front door into his living room. What strikes me most is how sterile everything looks. Like his designer looked in a magazine and picked out what anyone would consider "hot rich-guy chic." There are no family pictures or personal anything in here. Just black-and-white *blah*. Except for the massive wine fridge in his kitchen. Yeah, that's something someone definitely spent time thinking about.

Jackson walks into his kitchen, which is open to the rest of the space, and grabs a couple glasses before making his way to the vast selection of wine. I follow him and open his freezer, searching for ice or a bag of frozen peas, something to put on his face. Of course, all I find are those fancy giant balls of ice to put in a cocktail. Figures.

"What are you doing?" he asks curiously as I take out some ice and go through his drawers, looking for something to wrap it in. Aha. I find a drawer full of tea towels. Wasn't expecting that.

"You need to ice your face so it doesn't swell to the size of your already huge head," I say, walking over to him with my makeshift ice pack and handing it to him.

He takes it from my hands with a smirk, glancing down at his crotch. "I'm glad you noticed. It is huge, Red."

That earns him an eye roll before I shove him toward the living room. "Go sit down and stop pretending you have anything I want any part of. I'll get the wine."

His selection is amazing. Growing up, I learned all about “good” wine. Not that swill the cheerleaders would drink during field parties after a game. A proper Southern lady needs to know these things for dinner parties and such, after all. Jackson has exquisite taste and even though I can hardly stand the man most days, I have no problem appreciating his knowledge of a good vintage. Looking through his collection, I find the most expensive label, grab the bottle of red and pour us a couple glasses before making my way to the couch.

“Here you go, Prince.” I hand him his glass.

“I appreciate you realizing you’re in the presence of royalty, but there’s no need to be formal.” He gives me a shit-eating grin.

I sit down a good four feet from him. “Don’t get it twisted, my dear. It’s short for Prince of Darkness.” I sip my wine and lean back on a not-so-comfortable cushion, enjoying the dark rich notes of plum and chocolate on my tongue. As I said, Jackson has excellent taste in wine but apparently not furniture.

Jackson laughs before taking a deep gulp of his wine and leaning back, closing his eyes. Seeing him so relaxed and comfortable on his very rock-hard couch has me questioning why we hate each other so much. His wavy dark-blond hair and rich-blue eyes, matched with his tan skin and high cheekbones, are a recipe for many a fantasy for any red-blooded woman. His quick wit and irreverent attitude make the whole “bad boy” thing a tempting package indeed.

“I wish I could figure out where I went wrong with you, Abigail.” He opens his eyes and rolls his head to the side, giving me that playboy smile he’s perfected over the years. I remember the first time I was enraptured with that smile and also why he pisses me off so much. Seriously, he doesn’t remember what happened?

“Well, Jackson, let’s take a little walk down memory lane, shall we? The first time I met you, I was covering a charity event thrown by your mother. You smiled at me from across the room and, to my surprise, made your way over to me. You liked my fiery-red hair, and I liked your bespoke suit. I couldn’t believe *the* Jackson Hayes was talking to me. You wanted to know if I was busy later and, of course, I wasn’t going to just fly into your arms, so I said I was. But then you wanted to know if you could take me out the next day or any day. You just *had* to see me again. My hair reminded you of a beach bonfire and my green eyes were the color of spring. You couldn’t possibly go your entire life without knowing the secrets behind them.” I roll my eyes at the cheesy lines. And the fact that I liked them.

“Obviously, I knew you were full of shit, but I was still charmed by your terrible lines and adorable smile. Then, not thirty minutes later when I was wrapping up and needed my coat, I tried to find the attendant. Lo and behold, guess what I found instead?”

I’m seething and he looks ashamed. That’s new. Shame isn’t an emotion I would ever associate with him.

“You, with your tongue down the girl’s throat, only coming up for air to tell her that you needed to know the secrets behind her eyes.” I give him a pointed look and see a pained expression cross his face. Good, I hope it is painful for him to be reminded that he’s a complete cad and total phony.

“Abigail, I really am sorry about that. That was a total douche move.”

I scoff.

“Really, I am. There’s no excuse for that behavior. I know I haven’t always shown you the best side—“

I get up from the couch, too angry to stay still. “No, you haven’t. What you did show me were your true colors. I didn’t expect you to fall madly in love with me from one little conversation, but I certainly didn’t expect you to be playing tonsil hockey with another girl only half an hour after asking me out.” My voice is shrill even to my own ears. God, I sound like a jealous girlfriend. Ugh, I hate it.

“You know what,” I begin. “I don’t need or want your apologies at this point. It’s fine. I don’t need this.” I turn to grab my purse from the kitchen where I left it when I went searching for ice for his stupid damn face. Jackson gets up from the couch and stops me before I make it to the door, grabbing my hand and spinning me around, bringing us mere inches from one another.

“I’m sorry. Really. Please don’t hold this against me for the rest of our lives.” He looks back and forth like he’s debating something important. “Fuck it,” he breathes out.

Before I know it, his lips are covering mine in a desperate kiss. I open my mouth to protest, but that just gives him an opportunity to slip his tongue into my mouth. He brings his hand to the side of my face, holding me in place. I'm swept away in the moment and drop my purse before grabbing his shirt and yanking him closer. We kiss like we fight, holding nothing back. His arm bands around my waist and pulls me closer to his erection. He certainly wasn't lying about having a huge head.

He breaks the kiss and we're both panting hard as he leans his forehead against mine.

"Please," he whispers. "It was a dumb move, and I hate myself for it. I honestly don't even remember the other girl."

His words are a bucket of cold water thrown over our very hot moment. I remember those words being said to me by another rich playboy who I thought actually wanted a future with me. I was wrong then, and I'm sure as shit wrong now.

I push Jackson away from me and stare him dead in the eye. "Keep your hands off me unless you want another black eye, Jackson Hayes. This will never happen."

I grab my purse and storm toward the door. Thinking better of it, I turn and grab the expensive bottle of wine still sitting on the kitchen counter. I strut to the door with my head held high, looking back for a moment, seeing confusion in his eyes as he runs a hand over that fucking handsome face of his.

I walk toward the elevator like a queen with her prize wine, hoping with everything in me that he doesn't follow. I am so

over this shit tonight.

“Come on, stupid elevator,” I mumble as I hit the call button about a dozen times.

Finally, it opens, and I step in, hitting the close door button over and over. Just as the elevator door begins to slide shut, I see Jackson’s open, and he steps out. *Oh hell no.* I hold up the bottle of wine and a choice finger in his direction. Thankfully, he doesn’t make it in time before they firmly close, cutting off my view of his flustered expression.

I make it to my car without him catching me and hightail it back to my apartment. Once I’m safely parked, I bang my head on the steering wheel. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” Straightening my tense shoulders, I close my eyes and take a deep breath in through my mouth and out through my nose, trying to calm my galloping heart. He kissed me. And I let him. And for the love of God, why did it have to feel so damn good?

Shit. At least I grabbed that bottle of wine.

CHAPTER 2

Jackson

Well, that went spectacularly awful. God, this entire night went sideways in a brutal and heartbreaking way. Why did I agree to go to a bar with Lindsey and Abigail tonight? I mean, I know why I went. Two reasons, actually. One, there was no way I was going to let Lindsey go by herself. Since the kidnapping, she's turned into the sister I never knew I wanted, but here we are. Two, Abigail. We don't get along. Not by a long shot, but there is something that I get from being around her. Maybe it's the way she meets me insult for insult. I never imagined myself a masochist, but I can't say I don't enjoy it immensely. Maybe it's the way she has never been impressed by the Hayes name. I've had enough clout chasers to last a lifetime. Or it could be the challenge I find her to be. Never let it be said I don't enjoy a good challenge. Doesn't matter though. That girl hates the air I breathe.

The fact that I kissed her in the middle of an argument? *Stupid move, Hayes.* I kind of want to punch my own face right now. But dammit, I had to taste the fire coming from her. I should have known she wasn't going to receive it well. I've never had any indication to the contrary.

Fuck, this is going to make things awkward now in our little group. She's definitely going to run to Lindsey and Kasey with this story, I'm sure painting me as the bad guy. That's all I am to her. I can't touch her again. Simple, right? I'll forget about the few brief moments when my arms were around her and I got to taste her mouth for the first time. I can absolutely forget about the way she squirmed against my hard cock that was doing its damndest to punch a hole through my slacks to get to her. I'll surely forget about the way she felt molded to my chest like that's where she belonged. We'll go back to the status quo. No problem.

“Okay, brother, let me know how he's doing when you get there.” I hang up the phone with Donovan and scrub a hand over my face. *Shit*. Aiden's mission in Columbia went south in a big way. Now he's at a hospital in Costa Rica having surgery to repair some internal bleeding. Fuck. How is Lindsey going to deal with this? She may not have admitted it yet, but she is head over heels in love with the guy. She could have chosen worse. After punching me in the face, he did buy me a drink and apologize after all. At least he can admit when he's wrong. It's something I'm getting better at. Maybe. Or maybe not according to a certain redhead, but hey, I'm a work in progress.

Abigail and I haven't spoken since that night. I figure I'll just see her when I see her and take it as it comes. My face is

still healing, so I'd rather not have the other side bruised if she's still pissed at me.

After sending Lindsey a quick text to let her know I'm here if she needs me, I get ready for my day and head to my club. Most people think that running a club means I only work nights and while I am here more nights than not, the business side of things is handled in daylight, the pleasure side is for after dark.

Club Noir doesn't look that much different during the day than it does in the evening. There aren't any windows to let light in, so it always maintains the mysterious, sexy element that my partners and I strive for. The only difference is the lack of warm bodies.

To say my brother was irritated with the fact that I bought a sex club is putting it mildly. I thought he was going to explode when he found out, that little vein in his forehead visibly pulsing like I'd never seen before. What he didn't understand at the time was I would never be the type of man to follow the path laid before me like he did. I don't fault him in the least for following in our father's footsteps, but politics was never going to be my calling, nor was running some Fortune 500 company. I like things a little darker, a little more outside the box, shall we say.

I dabbled in the kinky side of sex during my college years. Of course, being part of the rich kid fraternity at UPenn, there was never a shortage of parties or girls willing to do all kinds of things to themselves and others with an audience. It was

exciting and new and something I definitely explored in and outside of the frat house. I learned I liked public sex, group sex, rough sex, soft sex, basically all sex as long as it was consensual and everyone was having a good time. I never boxed myself into one or two kinks. If a girl had a particular taste, I was always willing to indulge, realizing that it was the giving and receiving of pleasure that got me off. There's little I'm not willing to experiment with as long as I see nothing but absolute pleasure on my partner's face, knowing I put it there. *Maybe my ego is my kink.*

Not long after going through invoices and double-checking inventory—lube is not something you want to run out of in a sex club—I'm ready to head home. I'm just gathering my things when a text pops up on my phone.

She-Devil: Did you hear anything about Aiden?

I've had Abigail's number for months. Ever since the incident with my stalker and Lindsey's kidnapping, I've texted her periodically to check on Lindsey or Kasey when she and my brother weren't speaking, but this is the first time she's initiated any conversation with me.

Me: Nothing yet. But I'm sure we'll get an update when there is one.

She-Devil: Keep me posted please.

Me: Sure thing Chucky

She-Devil: Fuck off Prince

And just like that, we're back to normal. Well, normal for us.

I get the call to come to Costa Rica from my brother. Aiden is out of the hospital and since my brother rented the house they're staying at for another week, we decide to make it a family affair. Of course, when I walk up the steps into the private jet Donovan chartered, I realize that "family time" includes Abigail.

She looks up from whatever trashy tabloid she's reading and gives me a quick glare before licking her finger and turning the page.

"Should have known you would be here. And here I thought I'd have an entire plane ride in luxury all to myself," she snarks.

Walking to the bar and pouring myself a finger of scotch that was so helpfully stocked by the flight attendant, I turn to where the Mistress of Satan herself is sitting. "Chucky, so nice to see you too. I can't even begin to tell you how excited I am at the thought of spending a week with you. You know, because I'm not."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't glance up from her magazine.

"Let's just pretend the other person isn't here. I think it's the only way I'll be able to keep my lunch in my stomach," she says.

I sit down in a seat on the other side of the aisle and buckle in. “Fine by me.”

Soon, the plane is getting ready to depart. I take a look at Abigail just as we begin to take off and see her eyes squeezed shut while her hands clutch the armrests. So, my little She-Devil has a fear of flying, huh?

“I would have thought you would be used to flying, what with that broom of yours.” Snickering, I take a sip of my scotch.

Her jaw clenches even tighter than I would have thought possible, considering I could practically hear her molars cracking earlier.

“Oh, you mean the one I’m about to shove up your ass if you don’t shut up?”

“Oh, ass play. Why Chucky, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“You know what, Little Hayes, if you’re not careful, I will be sticking my five-inch Louboutin heel straight into your scrotum. I have no interest in hearing your grating voice the entire flight. God, I should have flown commercial. I had a sinking feeling in my gut that you would be on this plane. Listening to a baby scream their head off the entire flight would be more appealing than enduring your tired, old, recycled insults. I would have thought for a college graduate and all, you would be able to come up with something better than I’m a witch so I must have a broom or talking about butts. Really, you’re disappointing me.”

She is on fire and happy to tear into me right now. I don't want to admit it, but it's causing a stir in my trousers. But one thing she isn't anymore is scared. *Mission accomplished.* Not that I would point that out to her. I like my balls exactly where they're at, thank you very much.

When we make it to the house, after lugging all of Abigail's bags from the plane to the car, then the car to the house, everyone seems in good spirits. It's weird to see Aiden injured and fragile. That's never a word I would have used to describe him, and I admit, it's a little unsettling to realize how close Lindsey came to losing him. That girl has endured more than her fair share in the last few months, but she's handling everything like a trooper. Not that I ever expected anything less from my girl. She's a fighter through and through, so it only makes sense for her to end up with a man who's a fighter himself. Who's worthy of her.

After settling in and getting drinks, I'm enjoying a beer with my brother while he grills steaks for dinner. Reclining in a patio chair and having a view of the pristine water is not a bad way to spend an evening.

"How's business been?" Donovan asks as he closes the lid on the BBQ.

"Not bad, brother. Still catering to the rich and deviant. How's the campaign going? Still kissing babies and petting puppies?"

Donovan chuckles as he takes a sip of his drink. “Yup.” He gives me an excited yet slightly apprehensive look. “I have a good feeling about this, Jackson. I really think I have a shot at being elected.”

“I didn’t realize you ever had a doubt.” My brother is nothing if not confident in his abilities to get elected and serve in public office.

“Of course I had doubts. Especially after the shooting. I wasn’t sure if I had it in me to continue. Especially without Kasey. I lost my drive there for a while.”

I remember all too clearly the state he was in after the shooting. I was the one who stayed with him and took care of him. Thank God Kasey found it in her to move past his colossal mistake of being suspicious of her sleeping with him for a story. I’ve never seen my brother happier or more laid back than he is with her. Don’t get me wrong, he’s still the driven man that started his campaign all those months ago, but there’s a peace he has now that was never there before. That’s all Kasey.

I look into the house through the wall of glass and see Abigail talking to Aiden. Seeing her smile at him, giving him her full attention, I wonder if I’ll ever have someone that brings me peace the way Kasey does with Donovan.

Dinner is loud, with everyone talking over everyone else. All of us are excited to be away from the city.

Kasey turns to Abigail with her wineglass in hand. “So, Abs, how was the flight? I know how much you hate flying.”

Kasey leans around Abigail and looks at me. “Tell me, Jackson, was she squeezing her seat the entire time?”

I look at Abigail with a small smile playing on my lips, remembering how I distracted her. “I noticed but only for a second. She was too busy giving me the what for to be scared.”

Abigail raises her perfectly sculpted eyebrow in my direction and shakes her head. *Busted.*

“Honey bunches, I would endure a thousand more flights to be wherever you girls need me. How about a toast to Captain America here for, you know, not getting blown to pieces?” Aiden shakes his head and mumbles something about being British. We all raise our glasses in a chorus of cheers before Aiden leans over and gives Lindsey a light and sweet kiss.

Looking around at the couples in love is making me feel lonelier than I have in a long while. I must be going soft or something because I’ve never wanted to be tied to another person the way they are. The idea never occurred to me that I could be missing out on something. When I look at Abigail, she has a smile on her face, talking with her girls and laughing. She seems so relaxed and happy, but I have to wonder, does she ever feel lonely like this?

Hours later, I’m tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable. Why am I having a hard time relaxing in paradise? I’m not one of those people that can’t sleep in a new bed. If I was, I would have been a zombie in my college days from all the strange beds I crawled out of in the early morning.

“Fuck this,” I mumble as I roll out of bed. If I can’t sleep, I’m going to at least enjoy being awake outside instead of staring at these four walls. I walk into the kitchen and grab some water before making my way to the deck to enjoy the ocean. Stopping at the glass door, I see I’m not the only one that can’t sleep. I open the door and see coppery locks blowing in the breeze.

“Can’t sleep either?” I ask.

Abigail jumps and turns to me with her hand on her chest. “Jesus Christ, you about scared me to death. I wasn’t expecting anyone else to be up,” she says breathlessly.

“Sorry.” I chuckle.

She rolls her eyes. “Mm-hmm. Sure you are.” She turns back to the ocean and takes a deep breath. “It’s so beautiful here. It’s been too long since I’ve taken a vacation.”

I move to the other end of the couch she’s on and take a seat. I don’t know why I didn’t pick one of the four other chairs out here. That’s a lie. I know exactly why.

“It is,” I answer, but I’m not looking at the ocean. Her soft pale skin in her barely there tank top is capturing my attention at the moment. What I wouldn’t do to have her curves pressed against me instead of sitting those few inches from me.

“Hey, thanks for getting me out of my head on the plane. Fuck, I hate flying.” She brings her knees up and rests her chin on top, tilting her head in my direction. She looks so

unguarded in this moment with me. Like we're two people who don't have a history of constant insults and lost moments.

"Why?" I ask, just wanting to talk to her and keep us like this for a few minutes.

"I read somewhere that most plane crashes happen right after takeoff. I don't know if it's true, but ever since, takeoffs and landings freak me the hell out."

Abigail just gave me an open and honest answer without any thinly veiled insults, which is our normal interaction. I can't stop staring at her, a little stunned.

"I know, I know, the Wicked Witch is afraid of flying." She rolls her eyes again, putting words in my mouth that I wasn't even thinking.

"Not at all. I was just thinking I read that too." No, I haven't, but I'm not about to let on how caught off guard I feel.

Stretching out my legs to rest my feet on the coffee table in front of us, I stare into the dark waves. There's something about being here with Abigail that's seriously fucking with my head. Why are we the way we are? I mean, I get now why she thinks I'm a complete asshole, but why have I always risen to the challenge when she throws barbs at me? I could have asked her months ago why she hated me, but instead I played this game with her of who could hit below the belt the hardest.

Looking at her profile, it hits me how damn beautiful she is. I've always thought she was a looker but seeing her in the

moonlight with a soft glow coming from the house behind us, it punches me in the chest how truly stunning she is. Her copper hair sets off her milky skin and mischievous green eyes. She's got one of those cute little noses that turn up at the tip and full lips made for soft kisses, or maybe sharp jabs in her case.

She turns her head toward me. "What are you staring at?" she whispers.

The wind has blown strands of hair across her face. I reach out to tuck the unruly locks behind her ear. Abigail closes her eyes and gently leans into my touch. What is happening here? Not one to waste an opportunity, I lean in close to her mouth, breathing the same air.

"I want to kiss you," I whisper, my soft voice thick with desire.

She looks at me with wide eyes. I see indecision, but I don't hear a no, so I lean in and press my lips to hers. Abigail hums and brings her hand that was resting on her knee to the side of my face and gently runs her fingers into my hair, pulling me closer. I open my mouth to deepen the kiss, our tongues swiping and swirling. Fuck, she tastes amazing, a mixture of the wine from dinner and something else uniquely Abigail. I grab her knee and pull it over my hip so she's straddling me. My hands run down her shoulders, over her spine to her ass as I tug her hard against my quickly growing erection. We're a frenzied mess of teeth and lips and pants and moans.

Goddamn, this is the hottest fucking kiss of my life, and it's with the one woman who I swore off months ago.

Abigail gasps when she feels my cock straining through my pajama pants, searching for purchase against her center. I bite her lip and move her up and down over my length. Shit, I might come in my fucking pants like this.

Just then, she looks behind us and jumps off my lap. What the fuck? I turn my head and see Lindsey with her back to us, grabbing a pill and some water, presumably for Aiden. She's completely unaware of our presence on the patio.

"Abigail," I start, but it's too late. She's headed to the door, flushed cheeks and embarrassment clear on her face.

"This never happened," she tells me before slipping inside and closing the door.

Goddammit, cockblocked by Captain America.

CHAPTER 3

Abigail

October

We've been home from Costa Rica for a few weeks. I haven't seen or heard from Jackson since. Well, that's not entirely true. He tried calling a couple of times when we got back but I sent his calls straight to voice mail, and he didn't leave a message, so I guess technically I haven't *heard* anything. I made sure to keep my distance the rest of the week we were there and never ventured onto the deck again after our kiss. A kiss that was very close to being something a lot more.

Total lapse in judgment on my part. There was just something about the ocean and the conversation and the way his eyes always dance with mischief that had me ready to throw our feud, or whatever this weird tension we have is, out the window. Thank God we were interrupted by Lindsey. He needs to stay in his lane, and I need to stay in mine. The last thing I'm willing to do is jeopardize our circle. I love Lindsey and Kasey as sisters, and I never want them to feel like they have to choose between me and Jackson. Considering my own blood sister didn't even choose me, I couldn't take the

heartbreak of finding out they wouldn't either. Nope, best to let sleeping dogs lie. Woof woof.

Kasey's been telling me about her and Donovan enjoying the perks of having his brother own a super exclusive and private sex club. The first time I found out she went all those months ago, I was shocked and a little jealous. Okay, really jealous. I've never been to one, but of course I've read about them. I think it's safe to say any woman with a healthy appetite for sex has read a few books in her time that were set somewhere similar. No? Just me? *Yeah right.* But being in one has always stayed firmly planted in the fictional world I sometimes find myself in when I read a spicy romance novel. Until tonight.

"Oh my god, Abs, I love the earrings. Fun and loud. Just like my bestie." Kasey laughs as I primly move my hair behind my ears and strike a little pose, showing off the marvelous pineapple earrings I saw on my way home from work the other day.

"Yellow sapphires and emeralds. How could I possibly say no?" These beauties make a statement, especially against my red hair. I'm feeling fabulous and sexy in the little black number I have on with these earrings, giving my outfit a pop of color and flair.

"I'm excited to finally see what all the fuss is about," I tell Kasey. "But promise me you won't go wandering off with your main squeeze tonight and leave me all alone in a sex club, mm-kay? I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea

about a single girl there by herself. I just want to be a casual observer tonight.”

She waves off my concerns with a flick of her wrist while she puts on a coat of lip gloss. “No way. Donovan is well aware that we’re going for drinks and dancing. And for you to see what it’s like. That’s it.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I’m sure Donovan is the one who had to be told, you little vixen.”

Laughing because she knows she’s been called out and it’s true, she shrugs her shoulders. “Come on, I need to pull my man away from whatever campaign call I’m sure he’s still on and get him out to have some fun.”

We head down the stairs of Kasey and Donovan’s apartment and sure enough, Donovan’s on a call talking about security for the next event.

“Babe, give poor Aiden a break and let’s go,” Kasey tells him.

He turns to her, putting a hand over his heart as he appraises her stunning red minidress and black sky-high heels with the red soles that she borrowed from me. I can hardly believe this is the same friend I used to have to beg to wear anything an inch above her knee and shoes higher than a kitten heel. Although, I think seeing the appreciation on her boyfriend’s face may have something to do with the shorter hemlines she fancies these days.

Donovan ends the call and beelines to Kasey, wrapping her in his arms before giving her a little lick on the neck.

“Just needed a little taste, beautiful,” he growls into her neck and a very girlish giggle escapes her. I feel like I’m intruding on a private moment that could get out of hand very quickly.

“Come on, lovebirds. Sex clubs wait for no man.” Kasey shakes her head at me as she grabs Donovan by the hand, leading him to the door.

“Abigail has been waiting months to check out Club Noir. Let’s not keep her waiting,” Kasey tells him, and we head out, dressed to the nines and ready to see what kind of mischief we can get into.

This is it? It’s just a nondescript steel double door with the address in red neon above it. Obviously, they can’t have it advertised on the street what’s actually inside, but the plain and dreary entrance of the building isn’t exactly eliciting any high hopes for the evening. We don’t stop in front, instead heading to a private underground parking garage that gives the impression of being for an entirely different building.

“Jackson takes the privacy of his members very seriously,” Kasey explains as she looks over at Donovan with a small smile playing on her lips. He reaches over and squeezes her

knee, a conversation obviously taking place between them without words.

I'm not going to lie, I kind of feel like a third wheel here, and I'm not a fan. I think a couple good, stiff drinks and dancing my ass off to shake this icky feeling in the center of my chest is in order. Maybe it's just nerves at seeing Jackson again. I know he's here a lot of the time, but hopefully I'll luck out and he'll have called it an early night. One can dream, right? Or maybe it would be better if he's here. Rip the Band-Aid off and get over the awkwardness of seeing each other for the first time since I put a swift and complete halt to our little make-out session in Costa Rica.

After exiting the car, we walk to a private entrance just as plain as the first one, except for the burly security guard whose neck seems to blend with his head. This man definitely gives off the vibe that no one is getting in here without express permission. The whole secret parking garage and private entrance make me feel very important. I realize it has nothing to do with me, but I'm enjoying the feeling, nonetheless.

We walk through a hallway with several doors on either side. I can't see what's going on in any of the rooms we pass, but I have a sneaking suspicion I would catch an eyeful of some serious hanky-panky if one of the doors swung open.

When we get into the main area of the club, I'm blown away at how classy yet sexy it is. I knew Jackson had money to throw at the place, but I'm pleasantly surprised to see it's not some sleazy decor with whips and chains hanging from the

walls. I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but nothing really screams sex club in here. Until I get a look at the patrons. Some are dressed in designer suits and dresses, and some are in barely anything at all. When I spot a couple on the dance floor, I see the man's hand dip under the woman's very short skirt and move tantalizingly under the fabric. The look of ecstasy on her face is a solid indication of what his hand is doing under there. You know what? Good for them. I can respect people who have no problem relaxing their inhibitions in a place like this. That's what it's here for, right?

Donovan leads me and Kasey to a shrouded booth off the dance floor, and we have a seat on plush red velvet couches with a bottle of champagne on ice waiting for us.

"It's like they knew I was coming," I say, looking at the label on the bottle. My favorite.

Donovan chuckles as he takes the bottle and begins pouring the three of us a glass. "I let Jackson know we were coming tonight so he would have a booth ready for us."

Of course. For as irritating as the man can be, one thing I will never fault him for is his taste in expensive alcohol. The fact that he was probably the one who put this bottle in here because he knows my taste in champagne is giving me a feeling I don't want to look too closely at when I'm trying to get the man out of my head.

I lean forward to talk to Kasey on the other side of the table. "Hey, not to put a damper on the night, but how is it that Donovan's comfortable walking through here? Isn't he afraid

someone is going to take a picture or video of him being here?”

Kasey and Donovan have been here a few times together. Not saying anyone in here would have the malicious intent to out the senatorial candidate as some sort of sexual deviant, but I figured it would be something he would be concerned with.

“Cell phones aren’t allowed in here. Usually members or guests check them when they come in,” she replies.

“We weren’t asked to hand ours over,” I say, confused.

“We’re the exception to the rules. Perks of having an in with one of the owners.” Kasey smiles mischievously. “Don’t take it out of your purse, though, or someone might get the wrong idea, and that would look bad for the club. And Jackson.”

I nod my head in acquiescence. I’m not asshole enough to test that theory, no matter how much Jackson grates on my nerves. Though, it wasn’t my *nerves* he was on in Costa Rica. *Stop it, Abigail.*

Sipping on my champagne, I look across the dance floor and spot Jackson. Damn, that man is fineness personified in a custom-tailored suit. I can almost look past the horrid personality. Oh, who’s kidding who here? If he didn’t come with a truckload of baggage, I would have ridden him from here to kingdom come and back again. He’s everything I used to go for in a guy. Tall, handsome with a killer body and cocky personality to match. But I’ve grown up dammit, matured, and I refuse to fall into bad habits. Been there, done that and it crashed and burned spectacularly.

Jackson makes his way over to us with a confident swagger that has several pairs of hungry eyes, male and female, appreciating him. If they only knew the evil that lies beneath, or maybe he reserves that side of his personality just for me.

He reaches our booth and gives Donovan one of those manly hugs with a loud smack on the back before bending to kiss Kasey's cheek in greeting. When he looks at me, his eyes are full of mischief, making me uncomfortable. Not in the "I need to get away from this weirdo" way but in the "I need my panties not to go up in flames" way. What kind of strange power does this man have over me? When his perusal stops at my earrings, he chuckles.

"Nice earrings," he says.

"I know, they're fabulous." The way he said it wasn't complimentary, but I ignore the deliberate dig. It's typical Jackson behavior.

"I was surprised when Donovan told me you were coming tonight to check the place out. You've been avoiding me since Costa Rica." I can't believe he's bringing that up right in front of Donovan and Kasey. Is he trying to embarrass the hell out of me? This is Jackson, so of course he is.

"Why do you think I'm avoiding you? Is your ego so fragile that when I don't drop everything and run to my phone to answer your call, you sit alone in a dark room and think about all the better ways I'm spending my time?"

"Oh, She-Devil, if I'm in a dark room, I'm rarely alone, and I'm certainly not wasting my time wondering about you," he

snarks back.

“Good for you, but your hand doesn’t count as company.” I wave my hand dismissively and turn to Kasey. “Come on, let’s dance.” I grab her hand and hear Jackson behind me, trying to call after me, but I pay him no mind as we make our way to the dance floor.

When we make our way through the crowd, a sultry beat is running its way through my body as I sway to the music. My girl is feeling the music as she moves her hips, casting seductive glances at Donovan. Again, that feeling of being the third wheel pops up. I quickly try to shake myself out of it by closing my eyes and letting myself get lost in the music.

“Hey,” Kasey yells over the music. “What was Jackson going on about you avoiding him since Costa Rica? What happened?”

Okay, play it cool, Abigail. “Who knows.” I roll my eyes. “Jackson just being his annoying self as usual. Avoiding him is practically second nature to me at this point.”

I think I played that off. Hopefully.

There’s an air of suspicion in Kasey’s gaze as she waits for me to elaborate. It sucks having a best friend who’s a reporter sometimes. This girl is like a human lie detector.

“Honestly, Kasey. I have no idea.” It’s all lies, but I’m not about to cop to the steaming hot make-out session we had before we were interrupted. That shit is going with me to my grave.

Thankfully, she lets it go and we enjoy a few more songs before she gets thirsty and tells me she's going back to the table. I don't want to stop dancing though. This is the first time in too long I've been able to forget everything and let loose. I feel someone come up behind me, not quite touching me, but almost. I turn my head to glance behind me and am met with a pair of deep-brown eyes. I give him a smile and he dances a little closer, taking my smile as the invitation it was intended to be. He looks over my shoulder and smiles at the beautiful woman in front of me who comes up to us and begins dancing.

Her fingers come up to my face, grazing my ear. "I love your earrings," she says just loud enough for me to hear.

I notice she is wearing a necklace with a little pineapple on it too. Now I wish I would have bought the matching necklace.

"Thank you. I love your necklace too."

The man behind me and the woman in front of me put a hand on each hip and begin to lean closer in. Now listen, I am fine with the whole when-in-Rome philosophy, but I don't want to give these two the wrong impression. While I'm thinking about how to extricate myself from this hot couple sandwich, I look over to our booth and see Jackson rise from his seat with his eyes blazing, searing into me. He's on his way over here and is definitely not happy.

CHAPTER 4

Jackson

Watching Abigail on the dance floor is an exercise in patience the likes of which I was not expecting. Her curves move seductively to the music as she closes her emerald-green eyes and lets herself go. Lust rockets through my system, making my palms sweat with a need to touch her as I try to carry on a conversation with my brother. Donovan isn't much better than I am at this point, based on the looks he's shooting at Kasey. At least he'll get to take his girl home tonight, I'll be stuck with nothing but my hand for company, as Abigail so helpfully pointed out. Damn, the mouth on that woman. I wish she used it for something else other than busting my balls every chance she gets.

Kasey comes back to the table to cool off with the champagne I had ready for them. I knew it was Abigail's favorite, so I ordered a few bottles when Donovan told me they would be coming in tonight.

"Are you having fun, beautiful?" my brother asks Kasey.

She leans over and plants a kiss on his lips. "I am. What's been going on here?"

“Oh, just contemplating world domination. You know, the usual,” I reply with a smile plastered on my face while trying to ignore the intense urge to go to Abigail and take her in my arms. Kasey playfully rolls her eyes and turns back to Donovan.

“Well, in that case, we should get Abigail over here. She would definitely be the one to lead the army.” We all laugh at that. Yup, Abigail has that feisty redhead thing down pat. She could bring any man or woman to her knees with that sharp as fuck tongue of hers. And now I’m thinking about her delicious kisses as her tantalizing tongue swept through my mouth. *Shit.* Looking back to Abigail on the dance floor, I’m assaulted with memories of that night in Costa Rica. I swear to God I’ve had to handle business with myself at least three times a day since we’ve been back. Every time I remember how perfectly she melted into my body during our hot as fuck make-out session, I get a raging hard-on that won’t go down. The kind that is quickly happening now. Dammit, I’d really rather not have this situation while I’m mere feet from my brother and his woman.

A man comes up behind Abigail to dance. I recognize him. He and his wife like to frequent the club to find other couples with the same proclivities as them. Nice enough couple. And attractive. They enjoy the swinger lifestyle and bring a lot of money into the club anytime they’re here. They also like to make use of our voyeur rooms, always putting on quite the show for our members.

His wife dances up to Abigail’s front, her hand sweeping against Abigail’s ear. She noticed the pineapple earrings. I

chuckle to myself because I'd known it wouldn't be long until someone did, but the longer I watch, the less amused I am. The couple isn't being overtly sexual toward her, but when they move in closer to Abigail, I see her discomfort. I thought it would be funny to see how she extracts herself from this very thing, but it's quickly turning out to not be so amusing.

Okay, I've let it go on long enough. It's clear Abigail has no idea what the pineapple earrings she's wearing mean. Usually, upside-down pineapples are a signal you're into the swinger lifestyle, but I have a feeling this couple is feeling her out. I *was* perfectly willing to sit back and watch her put herself in an uncomfortable situation she wouldn't be prepared for. I'm here so I knew I would be able to pull her away before anything went too far, but what I wasn't expecting is the surge of jealousy I feel when I see her dancing with the couple. *What the hell, Hayes, get it together.*

I stand just as Abigail meets my eyes. Anger at seeing their hands on her swirls in my gut as I make my way to the dancing threesome.

Reaching out, I grab Abigail's hand. "A word, please."

I don't wait for a response as I tug her to me and begin guiding us toward the bar. We're off to the side, away from members and prying eyes.

She rips her hand from my grip and takes a step back. "What the hell, devil spawn? You saw I was having a good time and decided to come ruin it?"

I crack a sarcastic smirk at her. “Is that what you call it? You liked having their hands all over you? Do you even know what they thought was going to happen?”

“We were dancing. This is a club, is it not?” She sweeps her hand in the air, challenging me. Always challenging me.

“It didn’t strike you funny that she was wearing an upside pineapple charm on her necklace, almost the same as yours?” A confused look washes over her face, but just as quickly disappears.

“So?” she replies like I’m the biggest idiot on the planet.

“So,” I begin. “An upside-down pineapple is a signal that you’re into the swinger lifestyle. They thought you were here to meet another couple for some play time.”

Her eyes widen a fraction, obviously trying to hide the surprise, before they swiftly turn molten with, if I had to guess, rage.

“You asshole,” she exclaims. “You knew when you saw my earrings what people would think. I can’t believe you didn’t say anything. Oh wait, yes, actually, I can. I’ll bet you couldn’t wait to watch me embarrass myself. You’re such a dick, Jackson.”

Fuck, she’s really mad if she’s using my actual name and not some rude nickname.

“I’ll admit I thought it would be funny, but when I saw it happen, I found it anything but.”

Abigail scoffs. “Oh yeah, why’s that?”

I grab her slim waist and pull her body flush with mine so I can lean down and whisper in her ear. “Because I realized I’m not a fan of anyone else having their hands on you, regardless if you have any intention of going home with them.”

She tilts her head back to look me in the eye. Fuck, she smells amazing. Like coconuts and desire.

“Well, Hayes, be prepared to hate what I do next.”

Her mouth is so close to mine I can practically taste the sweet champagne she’s been sipping all night. What I wouldn’t give for that taste on my lips. I’m about to lean down and take it right before she puts two hands on my chest and forcefully shoves me away.

Fuck. What did I just start?

Apparently, Abigail has made it her mission to piss me off. I’ve been sitting here for hours watching her dance and flirt with every available man in the place. Brazen little thing, especially considering where she’s at and what most of these men are probably here for.

Donovan and Kasey left about an hour ago, but Abigail decided to stay. She wasn’t done torturing me apparently. She told them she would just call a ride service when Donovan offered to send his car back. I gave him a look that conveyed I had her covered. I’m not really needed here for actual work

tonight, but I'll stay until she's ready to go home. Or until I can't take it anymore, whichever comes first.

I'm sitting at the bar, sipping on a scotch while I watch her dance with yet another asshole. She did take the earrings off, thank God. In hindsight, it was a shitty joke to let play out, and it certainly backfired on me spectacularly. Every once in a while, she'll shoot me a mean smirk, almost daring me to try to ruin her fun. I'm content sitting here watching her have a good time while trying to make me jealous at the same time. Maybe content isn't the right word, but I'll be damned if I let her see me sweat.

There was a moment a bit ago when she seemed to forget her objective to irritate me and let herself get swept in the music and just dance. It was glorious to see her move her body in a way that wasn't meant to be seductive but still was in the best—and worst—way. Then yet another random asshat came over and started to dance with her, reminding her of her plan to piss me off.

They're still dancing as I turn to get a refill on my scotch. When I turn back around, the man has his hands all over her body as he invades her space. She isn't moving out of the way, and I don't see any signs of discomfort on her face. His face is getting closer to hers as though he thinks he's going to lean in and kiss her and I see red. My patience for this little game has reached its limit.

I slam my drink down and stalk over to her, possessively grabbing her around the hips and tugging her back. "Okay,

playtime's over. Time to go." The man she was dancing with gives her a questioning look, but she's too busy staring daggers at me to notice. I shoot him a glare that he rightfully takes as his cue to leave.

"Again, what the hell?" She turns to shake off my grasp and stomps back to the booth with me hot on her heels, grabbing for her glass of champagne. Taking a long pull from the glass, she empties it before turning her attention back to me.

"Jesus, you used to call Aiden the fun police. Who's the asshole now?" she sneers.

I take her glass and set it on the table, grabbing her purse and handing it to her.

"Were you enjoying having his fucking hands all over you? Did you want to kiss him? Maybe go home with him? Let him fuck you while you wished it was me?" I'm seething and she has a look of satisfaction on her face, like I'm giving her the exact reaction she was hoping for. I would care that she's winning this round, but I'm too worked up at this point.

"Maybe I would have. Maybe I was ready to see how his body could move horizontally." She smiles deviously and flips her wavy red hair over her shoulder. "Maybe I wanted him to erase your kisses. Seemed like he would have been up to the task."

I grab her around her waist and yank her into my body, my face barely an inch from hers. "You and I know that's not going to happen, Chucky."

She shoves me back and glares at me. “God, you are such an unbelievable asshole.” She stomps her foot. “I’m leaving.” Abigail turns on her heels and struts toward the back exit. I easily catch up to her and grasp her hand.

“I’m taking you,” I tell her, steering her toward the private entrance.

“No, you most certainly are not,” she seethes, snatching her hand back from mine and stopping in the hallway.

“I told Donovan I would make sure you got home safe, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

“I’m perfectly capable of getting home myself. I don’t need or require your assistance.” I love the way Abigail’s sweet Southern drawl comes out when she’s had it with me. “*Asshole.*”

Maybe sweet isn’t the right word, more like adorably menacing.

“Fine.” I raise my eyebrows. “I’ll call Donovan and have him send a car here to take you then. Never mind that I’ll probably be interrupting their much-needed sleep at this late hour. But if you insist, then I’ll do what I think is best.”

One thing about Abigail is she never wants to feel like she’s putting anyone out. Stubbornly independent, this one.

She squints her eyes and shoots me another nasty look. “Fine. Take me home then.”

I look up at the ceiling and blow out a breath. “Finally, she sees reason.” That earns me a smack in the chest with her

purse as she walks past me, mumbling something under her breath about me being a drama queen. She can say whatever she wants, I still won.

“Of course you have a penis-envy car,” Abigail tells me as we drive to her apartment.

I choke out a laugh. “Excuse me, I have never had any complaints in that department,” I reply as I exaggeratedly adjust myself.

She rolls her eyes and chokes out a sarcastic laugh. “Whatever you have to tell yourself to help you sleep at night.”

“I sleep just fine. And usually not alone.” I instantly curse myself for reminding her of all the women I’ve slept with. She pisses me the hell off and that tends to lead to shit spewing from my mouth.

“Yes, we’re all aware of the many conquests of Jackson Hayes. Honestly, with as much as you brag about it, I’m surprised you have time to run a business. Tell me, Prince of Darkness, how do you find the time?”

“I’m sure this is the part where I come back with some snappy retort, but quite honestly, I’m exhausted.” We pull up in front of her building and I park across the street, turning toward her. “Honestly, Abigail, I haven’t had anyone in my bed since the kidnapping. I figured that was a pretty clear

fucking sign that I needed to take stock of how my actions were affecting the people around me.”

Abigail looks at me in confusion, blinking a few times, trying to comprehend what I told her. She shakes her head slightly and moves to exit the car. I open my door and head around to her side to help her out. Of course, I’m too late and she’s already shutting the door. This stubborn-ass woman can’t let me be a gentleman, as if it would be too painful for her.

“What are you doing?” she asks as I follow her toward the building entrance.

“What the hell does it look like? I’m trying to be a gentleman and walk you to your door.”

She rolls her eyes and huffs out a breath. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Why do you always have to make everything so hard?” I ask as we enter the elevator, and she presses the button for her floor.

“I make you hard? Good to know,” she says, a small grin tugging on her full lips.

I purse my lips and shoot her an annoyed glare. “Wench.”

She simply bats her eyes and gives me a saccharine smile before exiting the elevator on her floor and striding toward her door.

I follow and stand behind her as she unlocks her dead bolt.

“Okay, oh gallant one, you can report back that you saw me safely to my door. I believe you’re relieved of your duties.”

“Would it kill you just to say thank you?” This woman is the most infuriating creature.

She puts her hand on her hips and gives me another menacing glare. “Gee, I don’t know, Jackson, would it have killed you to let me have some fun tonight without dragging me off like a fucking caveman the second a man got too close to me, then guilting me into accepting a ride home from you?” Her fist goes to her hip, and I swear to God the fire dancing in her eyes has my pulse quickening and the blood rushing south.

“We’re seriously back to that again? Because I don’t feel a damn bit of guilt over cockblocking that slimy asshole,” I grit out, exasperated yet turned the fuck on by her fire. This ping-ponging between lust and anger is seriously fucking with my head.

“Yes, Rosemary’s Baby, we are—“

I cut her off from whatever scathing remark was about to come out of her mouth when my arm bands around her waist, hauling her body tight to mine before leaning down and smashing my mouth against hers in a rough, scorching kiss. She tenses for just a moment before dropping her purse and looping her arms around my neck, almost climbing up my torso. Grabbing her ass, I push her into the wall next to her door as I continue my assault on her mouth, dragging desperate moans from her throat and swallowing them down. I break away from her lips only to trail hot, wet kisses down her

neck as I knead the soft flesh of her round ass. The ass that's been tantalizing me all night while she swayed and teased seductively at my club.

“Invite me in,” I growl into her soft skin as her nails score the back of my neck.

“Why? Do you need an invitation to enter someone's home, Prince?”

I pull back and look into her eyes. Her gaze burns with the same lust and overwhelming need I'm sure are swirling in mine right now.

“Fuck, Abigail. That mouth. Let's see what else it does other than give me a hard fucking time every goddamn day. Invite. Me. In.” I lift my hand from her ass and collar it around her throat. I don't squeeze, just hold it there as I nip her bottom lip.

She lets out a shaky breath, her pupils dilating, almost blacking out the deep green of her eyes.

“Come in,” she whispers.

CHAPTER 5

Abigail

My mind is screaming that this is a terrible idea, but my pussy obviously has other thoughts. The almost painful need in Jackson's voice and the determined way he demands entry to my apartment have my panties practically bursting into flames. I'm probably about to make one of the biggest mistakes of my life, and I can't seem to find the fucks to give.

Jackson wastes no time, reaching over and opening my door. He raises his hands to my face, cupping both of my cheeks as he ravages my mouth with his and leads us through the door, slamming it shut with his foot.

Goddamn, but this man kisses me with desperation and passion like he's dying of thirst and the only place he can quench it is my mouth. We're a mess of moans and hands racing to tear each other's clothes off. After throwing my purse somewhere, not caring in the least where it lands, I tear his shirt from his pants, running my hands up the taut planes of his stomach then scraping my nails down.

“Fuck,” Jackson grinds out through a clenched jaw. His lips trail down my neck before he savagely bites my shoulder. I groan loudly at the bite of pain followed by the soothing lick of his tongue.

“Fuck. Maybe you really are a vampire,” I muse while I start to undo his belt.

He chuckles, pulling his head away before gripping my hair behind my head and tugging it back. “It’s not your blood I plan on having flood my mouth tonight.” Then he dives in and takes my lips in another savage kiss.

Holy shit. *Yes, please.*

“Bedroom?” he asks, pulling away from my lips only long enough to get the word out.

I’m so lost in the kiss I don’t answer right away, but his quick slap to my ass startles me enough to remember he asked a question.

“Second door on the left,” I say into his lips.

He begins to move in that direction as he pushes me backward with his body. Hope he’s paying attention to where we’re going because the only thing I can concentrate on is the riot of sensations his kisses are causing in my body while trying to get the damn buttons on his shirt undone. Multitasking is a real bitch sometimes.

We make it to my bedroom unscathed, and he fumbles along the wall looking for a light switch. He finds it and switches it on, bathing the room in a soft glow.

“No, leave it off.” I’m not embarrassed by my body or anything, but I’ve always kept the lights off when I’m making whoopee. *Jesus, who am I, my eighty-seven-year-old grandma?*

“If you think I’m missing this opportunity to get a good long look at all the delicious curves you have under that sexy-as-hell dress, then you are sorely mistaken. I plan on tasting all of them as well. Fair warning.”

Watching the defined cut of his abs and chest ripple when he tosses me on the bed has me appreciating his idea of keeping the lights on. The smoldering way his eyes flare with hunger makes me glad I can see him.

“Look at you, sprawled on your bed so ready to see what comes next.” He slowly sheds his unbuttoned shirt, letting it fall to the floor. “I’m ready for a taste.”

Jackson kneels in front of me, slipping my shoes off before he runs his hands softly up my calves to my thighs, bringing the hem of my skirt above my panties.

“Pull your dress down. I want to watch you play with your nipples while I eat your sweet pussy.”

Holy shit. I’ve never had a man talk to me like this during sex. I have seriously been missing out.

His hands go to the inside of my thighs, pushing them apart as I drag my top down under my breasts. He leans into my center and runs his nose along my panties, inhaling deeply. I

moan at the contact, and he turns and gently bites my inner thigh.

“Fuck, Abigail. You smell amazing. I can’t wait to have my tongue on you, playing with your clit as I make you come around my fingers.” His voice is thick with need as he drags the scrap of material down my legs and tosses it behind him.

“Promises, promises,” I say with a challenging smirk.

He narrows his eyes at me and chuckles before leaning back down to my center, taking a long, slow lick up my slit. His tongue parts me before his lips clasp around my clit and he sucks, swirling his tongue around and around. I moan at the intense sensation and tilt my pelvis farther into his face.

“Fuck, Jackson,” I groan out as he slides two fingers into my drenched channel. I claw at the sheets, my fingers tightening and relaxing around the fabric. He looks up at me and pulls his head away but doesn’t remove his fingers.

“I told you I want to watch you play with your nipples, not the sheets.” He lifts a brow, signaling that he’s waiting for me to comply before he proceeds.

My fingers move to the hard points as I plump my breasts with my palms and begin twisting. The bite of pain combined with the delicious way his fingers are moving inside me has me close to the brink of orgasm.

“Good girl,” he says before lowering his head and swirling his tongue around my clit again.

I moan and writhe on the bed, his mouth working a magical spell over me.

“Fuck. Please,” I beg him. I’m almost there. I just need a little more to push me over the edge I’m quickly approaching.

Jackson chuckles and turns his finger, massaging over the spot inside that has me seeing stars as he continues to ruthlessly flick his tongue on my clit. That’s all it takes and I’m flying, my orgasm flooding his mouth as I scream out my release.

He leans back on his heels, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips before he prowls up my body and wipes his finger that was just inside me over my bottom lip.

“Open,” he commands. I do, and he sticks his finger in my mouth.

“Now suck. Clean your juices off my finger.”

I eagerly follow his command. It’s sinfully intoxicating, tasting myself as I suck and twirl my tongue around. He pulls it out and leans in, giving me a hard, open-mouthed kiss, sucking my tongue into his mouth.

“Goddamn, Abigail. You taste fucking exquisite.”

I lie back, boneless and satiated. But when he whispers those words to me, lust comes barreling back into me, needing more.

Jackson lifts off the bed and takes his wallet out of his pants, grabbing a few condoms and throwing them on the bed next to me. It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes. I’m

glad he's prepared, but it's a reminder of what a manwhore Jackson is.

"Get that look off your face, Abigail. I knew I was seeing you tonight."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I reply weakly.

Jackson cocks his brow. "I saw the way your eyes cooled considerably when you saw me pull out the condoms. I wasn't assuming this is where we would end up tonight, but I was hoping and thought I'd come prepared."

The idea that he thought about me sends a thrill of excitement through me. His foresight into making sure we're protected is a fucking turn-on. Not that I would ever tell him that.

"Enough talk, more clothes off." I sit up to undo his pants and begin pulling his zipper down. He looks at me like he wants to say something else until I pull out his hard cock. Wrapping my hands around his shaft, I give it a few hard pulls, and Jackson's eyes go half-mast.

"Goddamn, baby. Your hand feels so good. I can't wait to feel how good your pussy feels." He steps back and pulls his pants and boxer briefs down his legs so he can step out of them.

I scoot farther up the bed and prop myself on my elbows, rubbing my thighs together in anticipation. His eyes are heated as he takes his length in his hand while he gazes at my naked form.

“I could stare at those perfect tits all night,” he tells me, biting his lower lip, continuing to stroke himself.

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind.” I smile cheekily at him, and he chuckles.

“Definitely not,” he says before leaning over to grab a condom. I never thought watching a man sheath himself in latex would be sexy, but fuck, Jackson doing it naked with that look of untamed desire in his eyes could make anything tempting as hell.

He grabs me by the ankles and yanks me to the edge of the bed once more, resting my ankles on his shoulders as he slides his hard cock into me. I throw my head back and a loud moan escapes my throat.

“Fuuuuck,” Jackson moans out. “Goddamn, Abigail, you feel better than I ever imagined.”

With that, he pumps in and out of me vigorously, making the breath whoosh out of my lungs. This man is on a mission, and it’s to make me see fucking stars.

“Oh my god.” My hands go to the sheet next to my head as I hold on for dear life as he fucks me fast and hard, bringing me so close to the edge. I watch him with rapt fascination as a bead of sweat drips from his forehead to his chin while he stares at where we’re connected, mesmerized by the sight.

“Look at how well you take my cock. I fit inside your pretty pussy like it was made for me.” He thrusts hard and stills as one of his hands comes to my clit and he begins rubbing.

“I want to see your delectable ass that’s been teasing me all night while I’m buried inside you.” Jackson pulls out and grabs my hips before he easily spins me over to lie on my stomach. He climbs on the bed to his knees, yanking my hips up so they’re level with his cock, and slams back into me. He’s so fucking deep like this and the change in angle has me screaming out in pleasure as another orgasm barrels through me.

“That’s it. Come all over my cock.” He gives my ass a quick slap and I yelp, not prepared for it, but I moan in pleasure when he rubs his hand over my stinging flesh. I never thought I was the kind of girl that liked to be spanked. Apparently, I was wrong.

“Do it again,” I moan.

Jackson rewards my plea with two more quick slaps to the other cheek before bringing his hand around to my clit and begins rubbing it again furiously.

“I want one more. Give me one more, Abigail,” he commands.

I’ve never had three orgasms in one night, let alone in such a short amount of time.

He pulls out and buries his face in my center from behind. Oh my god, I’ve never been eaten out like this before. My body is still racked with delicious tingles from the last two earth-shattering orgasms he gave me. The musky scent of sex and sweat hangs thickly in the air as his fingers expertly work

my clit while his tongue laves me, and I feel the tingling of another orgasm. *Holy shit.*

Jackson sits up on his knees and pulls me so that my back is pressed against his front as he enters me again.

“Give me your mouth.”

I turn my head and kiss him desperately and viciously, tongues dueling and teeth biting, tasting myself again in his mouth. I feel my aching walls start to flutter around his hardness.

“That’s it. Let me have it,” he moans between kisses. Jackson groans into my mouth and I feel his cock pulse inside me, which sets off my third and most intense orgasm of the night. My head spins as the edges of my vision become hazy while the waves crash over me again and again. If I had the power of thought, I would wonder if it’s ever been this intense and amazing with another person. Spoiler alert—it hasn’t.

Our movements and kisses slow, both of us finally spent and satisfied. My brain is mush. If it wasn’t, I would probably start second-guessing everything that just happened, but all I can manage is to fall directly on my face, turning my head toward Jackson and stretching my lips into a giant smile..

“Wow,” I whisper.

Jackson chuckles as he gets up to take care of the condom. When he comes back from the bathroom, I feel the mattress dip from his weight and a light kiss where he smacked my ass. Smacked. My. Ass. If anyone would have ever told me I

would let this man even see my ass, I would have told them they had lost their goddamn minds. I loved every second of it, though. I knew Jackson and I would have chemistry from our kiss in Costa Rica, but this is something else entirely. This is some “knock the world off its axis” kind of shit, and I’m not sure how to reconcile that in my head.

Jackson makes himself comfortable in my bed, his head resting on his hands linked behind his neck, while I look at him and giggle. *Crazy.*

He shoots his eyes at me. “I’m not sure I like you laughing after I just gave you the best sex of your life.”

At that I let out a full belly laugh. “It was... adequate,” I reply with a wink.

His hand goes to his heart, and he rubs his chest. “Ouch. I’ll have to try harder next time. Give me about twenty minutes and I’ll raise my score.”

I scoot up the bed and lay my head on the pillow next to him.

“Who says you get another shot?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes and grabs me so that my head is now on his firm yet warm chest. It’s still damp from his intense efforts, but for some reason, it doesn’t gross me out like it usually would. *Weird.*

“I didn’t take you for an after-sex cuddler,” I tell him as I relax on him.

“I didn’t take you for a screamer, yet here we are.” I smack his chest and he laughs.

“Better get some rest, Red. You issued a challenge and I intend to rise to it.”

My eyes are heavy and close on their own accord as I’m lulled to sleep by his fingers trailing up and down my arm and the rhythmic sound of Jackson’s heartbeat under my cheek.

Waking up the next morning, I turn my head to see Jackson sleeping peacefully next to me. Shit. I hadn’t meant to let him sleep here. We were both exhausted after round two but managed to rally for round three a few hours ago. That one was softer, yet more intense than the two times before. I should have had him leave then. Made up some excuse of why he couldn’t stay, but I was fucked into a daze and couldn’t form words. *Damn.*

Moving slowly and quietly from my spot, I see my robe on the hook on my bedroom door and grab it, wrapping myself in the silk. I sneak out of my own damn bedroom and walk to the kitchen to get the coffee going. I’ll toss him out after I get a shot of caffeine in me.

My cell phone starts ringing in my living room, and I rush to find it, not wanting the noise to wake Jackson up. I’m not ready to face him in the cold light of day.

“Hello,” I say quietly into the phone after seeing Kasey’s name on the screen.

“What’s up, buttercup? Did you have fun last night?” She sounds way too chipper for the early hour.

“I did. What are you doing up so early?”

“Why are you whispering? Oh my god, is someone there with you?” she squeals into the phone.

“What? No, of course not.” I let out a high-pitched laugh. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You’re lying. And badly, I might add. Who is it?”

“No one. I just got up and I’m not fully awake yet, that’s all.” She really needs to drop it.

Suddenly, I’m grabbed from behind and pulled into a hard chest as Jackson buries his face in my neck and growls.

“What the hell was that?” Kasey asks suspiciously.

She’s right, I’m a terrible liar and she is definitely about to bust me for it. My head is screaming *Abort! Abort!*

“Nothing. I just stubbed the shit out of my toe on this annoying wall behind me. No big deal. I gotta go, though. Don’t want my toe to swell. Talk soon, love muffin.” With that, I hang up on her and turn, smacking Jackson in the chest.

“Goddammit, you demon bastard, Kasey heard you.”

“So? What’s the big deal? You should have invited her over for breakfast. I would have cooked for all of us.”

I look at him like he sprouted another head. “Are you crazy? We aren’t telling anyone about this,” I exclaim, marching back into the kitchen. I need coffee, STAT.

Jackson follows. “Why the hell not? I had a fucking amazing time last night and I know you did too. What’s the issue?”

He looks delicious in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs with his hair sticking up in all directions from me pulling at it all night, and it’s practically begging to be pulled some more. No, Abigail. Stay focused.

“The issue is this isn’t happening again. We had an itch and we scratched it. End of.”

I turn to make myself a cup of coffee and hear him go back to my room. Moments later, he’s back in the kitchen with pants and a shirt on, thank God, and he eyes me as I lean against my counter, sipping my coffee.

“Let me make this clear,” he starts before he sits down to put on his shoes. “This is not the end. Last night was fucking electric, and you damn well know it.”

“You and I both know nothing good will come of a repeat. We can barely stand each other and I’m not one for casual hookups.” He quirks his brow, and I roll my eyes. “Last night notwithstanding.”

Jackson walks up to me, crowding me against my counter before grabbing my cup from me. He takes a sip and sets it back on the counter. He studies me with a determined look on

his face and leans in for a hard and fast kiss. I whimper because, damn, that man knows how to use his talented tongue. When he pulls back, I'm panting, but I refuse to budge. This isn't going to happen, magical tongue or not. Nope. No. No way.

He shoots me one of his infuriating winks, as if I just issued him another challenge. "We'll see, Red."

And he saunters out the door.

What the hell have I done?

CHAPTER 6

Jackson

November

Three weeks. Three fucking weeks that Abigail has been avoiding me. Damn, it must be true what they say about redheads. Her stubborn streak is miles long and just as wide. She hasn't returned a single phone call or text, just completely ghosted me. Even after I sent her flowers three times a week. Not a thank-you or fuck off to be had. Just nothing.

She can't avoid me forever though, no matter how much she's trying. Tonight is the celebration dinner for Donovan. I am now the very proud brother to the next senator of Pennsylvania. We're all at my parents' estate, even Lindsey and Aiden came for the event, so I know damn well Abigail won't miss it. She sure is taking her sweet time getting here though.

Donovan asked that my parents keep it small, citing Lindsey's fear of large crowds. I know Kasey wanted her sister here and Donovan wanted Aiden here too. There're maybe fifty people in attendance tonight, mostly Donovan's campaign staff and a few big donors who have known my family since we were kids. My mother is busy tending to her guests and

Donovan's staff is busy drinking the expensive and free booze. I can't blame them, they worked their asses off to get here, and I couldn't be happier that all their hard work resulted in my brother living his dream of being a public servant.

While I'm sitting with Aiden and Lindsey catching up on the last few weeks, I see a couple heads turn to the entrance, the men sending appreciative looks to whoever just walked in.

"Oh look, Abigail just got here," Lindsey tells us.

I turn my head and the wind is practically knocked out of me by the stunning vision in front of me. Abigail is standing at the entrance of the room, taking a glass of champagne from a passing server as she scans the large space, probably looking for Kasey. Her dress is a deep ruby red that contrasts perfectly with her smooth, milky skin, skimming the top of her knees. The long silky waves of her fiery red hair rest just above the plump breasts that I feasted on not too long ago. It's only been three weeks, but it feels more like three years the way my body desperately yearns to be up close and personal with hers again.

I blink and swallow the urge to march up to her and pull her in for a very indecent hello by way of my mouth devouring hers where she stands.

Get your shit together, Hayes.

When I turn back to Lindsey, she's staring at me with squinted eyes, looking at Abigail, then back to me. Why did I ever say I liked being an older brother now? I certainly don't appreciate the microscope I feel like I'm under right now.

“What’s going on?” she asks curiously, quirking her brow.

“Nothing. What’s going on with you?”

Nice deflection, idiot.

“Why are you staring at Abigail like you wish there was no one else around?” She reaches over with a napkin in her hand and wipes my mouth.

I yank my head back. “What are you doing?”

“You had a little drool there,” she replies, tossing the napkin on the table. “Now answer my question.”

“Leave him alone, Sunshine.” *Thank you, Aiden.* “Abigail would never give him the time of day.” *Fuck you, Aiden.*

“I’m going to go congratulate my brother.” Getting up from the table, I hear Lindsey laughing at me. Abigail said she didn’t want anyone knowing about what happened, and I’m trying to respect her wishes, but she had to have known that showing up here looking like an absolute smokeshow would test my resolve. *Probably why she did it.*

I spot my brother on the other side of the room chatting with the son of one of my father’s associates and Kasey. James, I think, is his name. Nice guy. Boring as hell, but a decent human. Abigail walks up to Donovan and Kasey, and I see the way James greedily eyes her. Never mind what I thought, this guy’s a fucking prick.

Making my way over, I hope my distaste for the man who can’t stop eye-fucking Abigail isn’t plastered across my face.

“Jackson, there you are. You look so handsome.” Kasey leans in and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Ladies, you both look lovely tonight,” I tell Kasey and Abigail. “Brother, congratulations on your win. I knew you would pull it off.” I grab his hand and pull him in for a backslapping hug.

“Thank you. You remember James?” Turning toward the man, I shake his hand.

“Ah yes, nice to see you again.” He winces slightly with the force of my handshake. *Pussy*.

“Jackson, nice to see you again. Donovan was just telling me—“

I cut James off before he could continue. “She-Devil, Lindsey was looking for you. She and Aiden are on the other side of the room. Come, I’ll show you.” I grab her hand and pull her away, nodding to James and glancing at my brother and Kasey, who are wearing matching expressions of confusion.

Abigail yanks her hand from my grip before we’re halfway across the room. “That was fucking rude, Jackson.”

Stopping before we make it to Lindsey and Aiden’s table, I turn to her and lean in. “I’m sorry, would you like to go back and have James ogle your tits some more? Tits that I had in my mouth not long ago while I fucked you as you rode my cock.”

She takes in a sharp breath, her eyes dilating and a rosy flush creeping up her neck. The lust-filled look only lasts a short moment before it's replaced with anger. Good. I want her anger. It's better than the radio silence I've gotten from her the last three fucking weeks.

"You better shut the hell up right now, Hayes. I will shove this heel up your ass so hard it will take a team of proctologists to figure out how to get it out," she seethes.

"You have a kink for sticking things up my ass, Red? I have to say I've never indulged in ass play myself, but I'm up for it if you are." I give her a wide, devilish smile, and if looks could kill, my mother would be planning my funeral instead of Donovan's celebratory dinner party.

She turns to stalk off, but I stop her with my hand around her wrist.

"Stop manhandling me," she says between clenched teeth.

"I need to talk to you. You've been avoiding me and I'm not a fan of the silent treatment."

"It's not silent treatment, Devil Spawn. I just have nothing to say to you and have no interest in anything you have to say to me."

"Let's talk in private. Or I can tell Kasey how I was the one at your apartment when she called you a few weeks ago." Would I ever divulge that information? No. But I'm not above Abigail thinking I might. I'm also not above fighting dirty, and everything with this woman is a fight.

She squints her eyes at me. “Fine. Lead the way.”

I take her limp hand in mine and lead her out of my parents’ ballroom and up the stairs to my childhood bedroom. I’m not sure what there is to say that I haven’t already texted her, but I needed her alone. And away from James and his annoying ogling.

Abigail allows me to guide her into my room, where I quietly close the door so as not to alert anyone that may be up here. She spins on her heels and shoots me an icy glare.

“Well, you got me alone. What do you need to say?” she says, throwing her arms out, indicating that I have the floor.

“Why are you avoiding me?” I demand. The irritation from her radio silence and the potent electricity coursing between us has me ready to fucking snap.

She laughs sardonically. “Oh, I’m sorry. Was I supposed to be impressed with your attention? A few texts and some flowers and I’m supposed to fall all over myself at your affections? Please, Jackson. I’m a grown woman who is well aware of how empty those gestures are from someone like you. I was simply waiting you out until you gave up like I knew you would.”

“I didn’t give up on shit,” I spit. “I knew you would be here tonight, and I knew you wouldn’t be able to run from this. From us.”

A biting laugh falls from her lips. “There is no us. We had a night, and yes, it was amazing, but it was one night.”

“You know damn well it was more than that. There’s a fire between us I’ve never felt with a woman before and I know damn well you can’t deny it,” I say as I step closer to her, intentionally crowding her space.

“Watch me,” she challenges as she eyes me, defiantly staying rooted to the floor.

“Challenge accepted.” I grab her around her waist and yank her body flush with mine. Grabbing her face with my other hand, I lean in and take her mouth in a bruising kiss. She can’t resist, can’t deny this chemistry we have, and she devours my mouth. My hand reaches from her waist down to her round ass and I squeeze, pulling a sultry moan from her mouth.

“We don’t have the time that I need to do all the things I’ve been fantasizing about for the last three weeks, but I need to be inside you,” I whisper into her skin as I kiss down her throat, around her shoulder and move farther south to the swells of her perfect breasts.

“Hurry,” she groans out while pulling at the strands of my thick hair.

I spin us around so she’s facing the wall next to my doorway.

“Hands on the wall and spread your legs. Don’t move.” Her breaths come in pants, and I’m grateful for the extra height her heels give her. I take a step back to unbutton my pants. A shiver ripples down her back when she hears me pull my zipper down, knowing how good my cock makes her feel. She

can't hide it from me, and I have no doubt that fact pisses her the hell off.

I grab the condom from my pocket and slip it over my length. One hand goes to the hem of her dress, lifting it over her ass and the other goes to the front, pulling it down so I can feel her amazing tits in my hand. I slide her black lacy thong out of the way and align myself at her soaked entrance.

“You have to be quiet. We don't want the staff knowing you're in here getting fucked.” I bite her earlobe. “Hard.” With that as my only warning, I thrust into her tight heat and begin pounding relentlessly. My hand goes to her exposed nipple and I twist roughly, exactly how I know she likes it, eliciting a loud moan from Abigail. My mouth goes to her ear again.

“Shh,” I tell her before she turns and glares again. I can't resist her lips and I take her mouth in a punishing kiss. I'll never understand why she has to make it so difficult to give in to what we both obviously want.

Pulling back, I can't help the snarl on my lips. “We could have been doing this for the last three weeks, but no, you had to be stubborn and deny us.” My thrusts become faster as I feel her walls flutter around my engorged cock.

“Fuck, Jackson. Hurry up and make me come already.”

“Rub your clit. I'm almost there.”

She does as I say, moving her fingers back and forth, chasing her orgasm.

“If you don’t come on my cock, don’t worry, I’ll eat your delicious pussy until you do.”

My words elicit a deep moan from her, and I feel her pussy clench, gripping me so fucking good as the waves of her orgasm wash over her, taking me over the edge with her. This woman loves my dirty mouth and I’m more than happy to oblige.

“That’s it. Come all over me. Give me your mouth.” She turns her head and I take her mouth in another hard kiss, moaning loudly.

My movements slow as we’re both left panting, trying to catch our breaths. After pulling out of her, I gently kiss her shoulder and head to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When I walk back into my room, Abigail has her dress righted, and she’s finger-combing her wild red mane.

She walks to my dresser mirror and removes her lipstick from her purse, reapplying that sexy-as-sin red. God, she’s beautiful.

“We are not doing that again, Jackson,” she says after putting the lipstick away, refusing to meet my gaze.

“Try looking me in the eye and telling me that.”

She does. “It’s not happening again.” I should have known she would. Heaven forbid she gives in to what I know she wants.

With that declaration, she wrenches the door open and stomps out of my room.

Goddamn, that woman and her fucking stubborn ass.

Abigail

Sneaking out of the party was probably not the best way to handle the situation, but what's a girl to do when all she can feel is the delicious soreness in her center as a result of the quickie she just had? It's all I could think about as I was trying to carry a conversation with Lindsey and Aiden or when Kasey came over to check on her sister. I didn't have it in me to put on a happy smile and pretend I hadn't just made a huge mistake. Again.

When I get home, I pour myself a generous glass of wine before trudging over to my couch and sinking in, so ready for this day to be over. My phone rings on my coffee table and I pray it isn't Kasey wondering if I'm okay, or Jackson trying to reach me again. Peeking at it from my seat, I see my mother's name on the screen. Ugh. I have no interest in a conversation with her right now, but considering I've been dodging her calls for the last week, answering now is really my only option.

"Hi Mom," I greet her, trying to sound chipper.

"Abigail, there you are. I was about to start calling hospitals if I didn't hear from you soon."

My mother, ladies and gentlemen, the overdramatic drama queen who wields guilt like it's a goddamn broadsword.

“Sorry, it’s been busy at the paper. I’ve been meaning to call you back.” Lies.

“Sweetheart, you’re a life and style reporter for a local paper, not some doctor or lawyer’s wife who has luncheons or any events to plan.”

Looking at my phone as though she can see the shocked expression on my face is an exercise in futility. This is how she thinks. A Southern doctor’s wife who has spent years at the top rung of the social ladder in Charleston, she can’t fathom that either of her daughters would think there’s more to life than galas and ladies’ lunches. And she never misses an opportunity to make sure I know how little she thinks of my life choices.

“Is there a reason for the phone call, Mom?” There’s no point in telling her how hurtful her words are. I’ve tried and failed many times.

“Well, if you had listened to any of my voice mails, you would have known I need a head count for Thanksgiving. The caterers call me every day asking for the final tally. It’s really quite rude that you haven’t returned my calls to tell me, Abigail. I have enough on my plate without having to try to track you down to get an answer.”

Yes, because she is the only one who juggles a million things. My mother has never once scoffed at a last-minute addition to her Thanksgiving table if the guests have the right last name. Unless it’s me. Then I get a fifteen-minute lecture

on my rudeness and all around lack of manners that she is sure she raised me to have.

“Sorry, I can’t make it this year.” I’m not sorry at all. I avoid going home whenever possible.

“I figured as much. You will be home for Christmas this year though.” It’s not a question.

“Actually, about that. Because of my schedule with all the holiday events, I don’t think traveling that far is going to work this year.” Really, Kasey invited me to go to the Hayes’ cabin for a few days, which sounds like a much better idea than having to spend it with my parents and my sister’s fiancée’s family, talking about her Valentine’s Day wedding until everyone is blue in the face. Especially not when I’d have to deal with *him*.

“I can’t believe you’re going to miss Christmas with your family, Abigail Barnes.” The disappointment in her tone would have had me withering and caving to her demands a few years ago, but when everyone decided to take *his* side, I quit giving a flying fuck about familial obligations.

“Nothing can be done about it, unfortunately. Is there anything else?”

She lets out a long-suffering sigh. “Your sister still hasn’t received your RSVP for her wedding.”

Oh, here we go.

“Because I haven’t figured out if I’m going to be able to make it yet.”

“You can’t possibly be so inconsiderate to your sister’s feelings as to not show up to her wedding. I did not raise you to be this selfish, Abigail.”

“No, Mother, you raised me to sweep everything under the rug, even if it means turning a blind eye to betrayal and heartache.”

“That’s a bit dramatic, no? You can’t possibly still be upset over the Davis incident. That was years ago. Everyone has moved on.” I can’t believe we’re having this discussion again.

“‘The incident,’ after which you and Cesily told me to forget about it and to understand that someone in Davis’s position was bound to wander, but it doesn’t really mean anything? Or the ones where you would still invite the Callaway family to all of our family functions and not so subtly try to put Davis and me next to each other anytime we were in the same room. Or would it be the one where I told you if you didn’t pick me, your daughter, over the dream you had of me being married to Davis and Cesily being married to Dawson and having little Callaway babies together, I would leave Charleston and not come back? There’s so many, Mother.” My Southern accent gets thicker the longer I talk to her and the angrier I get.

“I thought that was all water under the bridge. After all these years, I would have thought you would have gotten past this.”

Seriously? Davis’s betrayal was one thing, but when my family decided it was “just one of those things that come with

being married to a rich man,” and I made too big of a deal about it, that was the last and most painful straw.

Honestly, I don't have the time or energy to put in another conversation that won't go anywhere.

“I'll think about the wedding and let Cesily know. Now, I have to go. We'll talk soon, okay?” Please let this be the end.

“Very well. I expect to hear from you next month. Goodbye, Abigail.” She hangs up without waiting for a response.

My eyes squeeze shut as an exasperated growl escapes me. At least I was able to avoid the holidays. I can't wait to get away from the city and see what Kasey was talking about when she told me how amazing Donovan's family cabin is. Just a few more weeks, then it will be nothing but rest and relaxation for the holiday.

As long as I can avoid a certain dirty-talking sex god, all will be hunky dory.

Ugh.

CHAPTER 7

Abigail

January

Why did I decide to drive back from the cabin with Jackson? Or rather, why did I allow myself to be talked into it? I must have been halfway in a sex-drunk coma to think an hour trapped in a vehicle with this man would be a good idea.

And let's talk about this "cabin" for a minute. Try palatial estate on a lake. The place was huge on a giant piece of property that, had the weather been warmer, Jackson and I would have found plenty of places to get in trouble together. We found quite enough in the house itself as it was.

Then my mother had to call and bitch at me about still not returning Cesily's RSVP. I made the mistake of confiding in Jackson about the pressure she was putting on me to let it go like I'm a fucking Disney princess and go to the wedding. It was an after-sex vulnerable moment, okay? I didn't plan on telling him about any of it, and I certainly didn't expect him to offer to go with me as my boyfriend, fake of course, to make sure they didn't try to set me up with my newly divorced

douche of an ex-boyfriend. It wouldn't have been the first time.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat as Jackson drives us back to the city.

“You know you don't really have to do this,” I tell him with as much confidence as I can muster in my voice. I may not feel it, but I'll be damned before I let him see that.

It would definitely make the trip to Charleston easier for me, but after the long weekend we spent together, I know damn well I'm going to have a hell of a time keeping my hands off the man sitting next to me. My emotions are getting too invested in him. I tell myself once again I will not have naked-tango time with him in Charleston. Or anywhere else. Giving Jackson a shot at breaking my heart isn't going to happen. Our lives are too intertwined to take the risk.

“You've told me a million times, Red.” He glances at me then back to the road. “I know what it's like to feel like the family disappointment. The one who doesn't follow expectations. If my being there gets your family off your back just a little, then I'm happy to do it. That's what friends are for, right?”

My lips curl upward as I look in his direction. “We're friends now, huh?”

“Well, we were definitely friendly this weekend.” He shoots me a wink and chuckles before refocusing on the road.

“Yeah, about that. We aren’t doing that again,” I tell him firmly.

Jackson shoots me a knowing look.

“I know I keep saying that, but I don’t want to be there and have things get confusing between us. Obviously, we have great chemistry.”

He smirks and nods in agreement. “But I don’t want things getting awkward for everyone when whatever this thing between us fizzles out.” I give him a decisive nod and turn forward.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see his jaw clench before he sucks in a breath like he’s about to disagree. He thinks better of it and remains silent as he drives a little faster than the speed limit. *Oh, someone’s touchy.* It’s not like he can predict the future if we didn’t work out.

I’ve already been in a situation that resulted in my family taking the side of the man who burned me just because they didn’t want to upset the “balance.” I’m not going through that again. Jackson’s blood, I’m not. It’s not a stretch to think Kasey and Lindsey will pick Jackson over me. Maybe not at first, but eventually the phone calls and invites will die off until I’m the girl they used to be friends with. It was hard enough to endure that with my actual family. Kasey and Lindsey are the sisters I was never blessed with growing up. It would be devastating to lose that.

We need a subject change before my mind wanders any further down that rabbit hole.

“Okay,” I start. “Let’s get our stories straight about our relationship,” I prod.

“The one you refuse to have with me?” he asks, obviously annoyed with me.

“Look, if you don’t want to help me because you aren’t getting your way, that’s fine. I can easily not put a plus-one on my RSVP. No skin off my nose.” I cross my arms and hold my head high. I’m not accepting his help if he’s going to behave like this.

“No, no. Sorry. Last comment, I swear. From here on out I’ll be on my best behavior. Scout’s honor.”

I glance at him doubtfully. “Were you ever a Boy Scout?”

He chuckles. “No, that would have been more up Donovan’s alley.”

I let out an irritated sigh. “Are you going to take this seriously? I really don’t want to waste my time if this is just one big joke to you.”

“Yes, Red. I’ll take it seriously. I will be the best fake boyfriend you’ve ever had.”

Looking at Jackson skeptically, I notice his irreverent smile. Somehow, I don’t feel better about this situation we’ve found ourselves in.

“So, when did you realize I was the one to tame you?” I ask. “I’m sure you’re going to be asked.”

He chokes out a laugh. “Tame me? Like I’m some wild animal?”

My mind conjures images from late nights in the cabin. There were definitely some animalistic noises coming from him. From both of us, if I’m honest.

Stop it, Abigail. Focus.

“You do have a reputation. It’s not out of the realm of possibility that people will want to know. What’s your answer?”

He looks out of the windshield thoughtfully for a moment before answering. “When I came to visit Lindsey at her apartment after she got out of the hospital, you stopped by after work, sweeping in like a hurricane with your jokes and a bottle of wine. The jokes were, of course, at my expense, but it was the first time I’d seen Lindsey laugh since the kidnapping. I was sitting there just trying to be a steadfast, safe presence for her and when you came in, it was like she just lit up, y’know? I thought to myself I want to immerse myself in the magic you seemed to possess.”

Wow, he’s good. My heart is fluttering, and I let a smile spread across my face at his sweet words.

“Or it could have been how delectable your ass looked in that tight-as-fuck skirt you were wearing, but I doubt that’s the answer anyone would be looking for.”

Ah, there he is. I roll my eyes and smack him in the chest as he chuckles. Leave it to Jackson to ruin a moment when he

opens his mouth.

“You almost had me going, so I think my family will eat it up. It’s perfect,” I tell him.

“It’s true, you know.” A small smile graces his full lips. “You have a way of lighting up a room with just your presence. People are drawn to you, want to be around you. It’s something I’ve always envied of you,” he says softly.

I don’t know what to say to that. Kind words coming from Jackson aren’t our norm, unless we’re naked and he’s about to make me come. *Don’t go there, girl.*

“Thank you. That was uncharacteristically sweet of you.”

“Just keeping you on your toes, Red.” He winks and we both settle into a comfortable silence, with music softly playing from the car speakers.

My mind is racing with what he said to me. Priority number one is to keep my guard up when we go to Charleston. Jackson is hard to resist being the sexy asshole that we all know, but his sexy and sweet side that I’m getting to know, that may just prove to be impossible *not* to cave in to.

Jackson

After dropping Abigail at her place, I head back to my apartment. Spending the week with everyone would usually make my soundless apartment feel calm and comforting, but

today the silence is stifling. I like having my own space to relax in, but being surrounded by the vivacious liveliness that is Abigail Barnes for almost a week makes everything feel empty and soulless within these walls.

I pour myself a glass of scotch, not really in the mood to drink, but there's an anxious energy still swirling in my head that needs to quiet. I blame the excitement of slinking around the shadows with Abigail at the cabin on why I agreed to go with her to her sister's wedding, thinking it was the perfect opportunity to have her all to myself while we're in Charleston for the days leading up to the wedding. What I didn't anticipate was her resolve in not sleeping with me again. She was fighting the attraction, but stupidly I thought we had turned a corner at the cabin. Now, I'm likely to get to Charleston fighting a nasty case of blue balls because that woman is as stubborn as they come.

The fucking situation with her ex isn't helping my cause either. What kind of family picks the side of a cheating bastard over their own flesh and blood? My family may have its own problems, mostly me actually, but I've never been completely disregarded in that way. Made to feel like I wasn't doing anything important? Sure. How does one live up to the already perfect son that is my brother? I stopped trying a long time ago. I was on the receiving end of plenty of disapproving looks and lectures from my father, but I never felt ostracized like Abigail was. My family didn't know what to do with me, but I never felt like they didn't love me.

Sitting on my couch with my glass of amber liquor, I hear my phone ring. Pulling it out of my pocket I peek at the screen, hoping it's Abigail wanting to meet up. No such luck.

"Hey, Lindsey," I say in greeting.

"Hello to you too. So, funny thing. I didn't want to say anything while we were at the cabin because I didn't want to scare anyone, but have you ever been told your cabin is haunted?"

Huh?

"Um, no." I chuckle. "Why are you asking?" What a weird question.

"Well, I heard some moaning and groaning coming from your end of the hallway. You know, where your and Abigail's rooms were. The only plausible explanation I could come up with was that it must be a ghost." The deadpan tone of her voice suggests otherwise.

Choking on the sip of scotch I just took, I try to catch my breath before answering. "Huh. It's an old house. Old pipes and all that," I nonchalantly reply.

"Sounded like someone was getting their pipes cleaned, that's for sure," she snickers.

"Alright, enough out of you. Fine. Yes, it was me and Abigail," I admit.

"Aiden, you owe me twenty dollars," she bellows.

I sigh into the phone. "Really, Lindsey?"

“What? He told me there was no way Abigail would have ever slept with you and it was probably just Donovan and Kasey. Those two can’t keep it quiet to save their lives. I told him they were on the other side of the house so there was no way it would have been them. Now I’m up twenty bucks. So, thanks,” she says cheerily.

“Did you tell your sister or Donovan about it?” The last thing Abigail wants is everyone finding out. Of course, Donovan and Aiden already know, but I don’t want her thinking I’m keeping secrets from her. Plus, if Abigail finds out I told them, it’ll be a cold day in hell before she lets me in her bed again.

“No. I figured if you guys wanted them to know you would tell them in your own time. So, tell me, what the hell’s going on?”

“What happened to talking about it in my own time?” A chuckle escapes me at her insistence.

“Them. Tell *them* in your own time. I specifically didn’t include myself. Spill it, Hayes.”

“What do you want me to tell you? Yes, Abigail and I have been enjoying each other’s company.”

She scoffs into the phone. “Oh, come on, when did it start? Who initiated? Are you guys, like, dating now?”

Why does one of my best friends have to be a reporter?

“I feel like I’m being interrogated. Maybe being a prosecutor would’ve been a better fit for you than being a

journalist,” I grumble.

“I’m just surprised. All you two have done for months is snark and snarl at each other.”

“Well, you were the one who used to say we should fuck it out. We took your advice.”

I take another sip of my drink, really not wanting to have this conversation while I’m still trying to figure out how to get Abigail to give me a real shot.

“Look, we had a couple moments, shall we say, after the night Aiden punched me. Then after she came to my club, one thing led to another, and we slept together. She’s made it clear from the start that she has no interest in a relationship with me, but I don’t know, when we’re together the attraction kind of takes on a mind of its own. One minute we’re fighting and the other we’re naked and going at each other in a completely different way.” That’s putting it mildly. Every time she opens her mouth to give me shit, it’s all I can do to not devour her sexy-as-fuck lips.

God, I’m screwed.

“Wow. I had no idea. And she refuses to take it further?” Lindsey sounds as shocked at Abigail’s hesitance as I am.

“One hundred percent against it. She had a bad experience with a breakup a few years ago. Her family apparently thinks she should’ve given her ex another chance, and they’ve tried to push them together several times. I guess that’s why she

decided to move from Charleston. They still give her shit about it, too, so she rarely goes back to visit.”

“She’s mentioned her ex, but all she’s said about her family is they aren’t close. I know her sister’s getting married next month, but she wasn’t sure if she was going.”

“She’s going, and I’m going with her. Hopefully, with me there as her date, they won’t try to push this jackass on her.”

“Wait, wait, wait. So, *you are* dating then?” Lindsey asks, confusion lacing her words.

“No. I’m not a *real* boyfriend. Her mom was giving her shit about her not going, and I offered to go with her to take the pressure off. She’s certain they’ll try to hook her up with her ex again,” I explain.

“Well, aren’t you just her knight in shining armor. And there’s no chance you could be using this as an in with her? Maybe show her what an amazing boyfriend you would be so she gives you a shot at the real thing?” The way Lindsey phrases the “questions” has me thinking she’s not actually asking.

“Of course, I want her to give me a chance. But this is more than that. You should have seen her talking to her mother. It’s like she was caving in on herself. I fucking hated it.” And I really want some more time with her away from what she considers prying eyes in Philly. She’s worked for a newspaper long enough to know if we were ever in public together, we’d surely get noticed by someone from the press. Now that my

brother has found happiness with Kasey, everyone is waiting to see if I'll ever settle down.

“This whole thing is like one of those books my mom likes to read. Girl meets boy, girl hates boy, boy comes in and saves girl from her horrible family. I love it,” she says with a giddy tone.

“Don't start getting excited over there. The girl, in this case, is as stubborn as they come and refuses to give the boy a chance. I'm not counting on this working, but I'm hoping it's a step in the right direction. Her family and her ex have done a real number on her.” I'm not one-hundred-percent sure what that entails exactly, but I have a feeling it's more than a simple case of her parents wanting her and her ex back together and her parents being all-around assholes.

“Don't worry, I'm not planning any double dates or anything. I have to admit I find it amusing that the one girl you want is the one girl who, up until a few weeks ago, couldn't stand you.” Lindsey laughs at her observation. I don't find her particularly amusing.

“Please don't run to Kasey with this. Abigail finding out anyone knows could put a serious wrench in my plans.” I'm not above begging at this point.

“My lips are sealed,” she promises. Just then, I hear Aiden yelling something about her lips being sealed around something else and Lindsey laughs.

“Okay, I gotta go. Keep me posted. I can't wait to hear how this turns out.” I hear the smile in her voice and mirror it with

one of my own. I appreciate her optimism.

“Alright. We’ll talk later.”

When we hang up, it’s all I can do not to call Abigail. I just want to hear her voice. That woman has me in knots today, but I have to be careful about how I go about everything with her. She spooks easier than any other girl I’ve known. But maybe that’s the difference. She’s a woman, not a girl. My usual charm and wit aren’t enough to impress a woman like Abigail. She needs to have someone fight for her affection.

Good thing she has no problem putting me in a fighting mood.

CHAPTER 8

Abigail

February

I've successfully avoided being in the same room alone with Jackson since January. There have been two group dinners I absolutely couldn't get out of, only because I didn't want to make it obvious I was avoiding him. One at Donovan and Kasey's to celebrate Donovan being sworn into office and another at Lindsey and Aiden's to celebrate Aiden's birthday.

At both dinners, I could sense Jackson was waiting to get me alone. Or maybe the longing glances and knowing smiles were my imagination. I was too busy concentrating on convincing myself what a bad idea it would be to slip my panties off and into his pocket to pay much attention. There's something about him that makes me want to be reckless and impulsive, knowing he would love it. But it took me a solid week not to get butterflies in my stomach after the cabin every time my phone chimed with an incoming text, hoping it was him.

After almost two weeks of radio silence, he started sending me random texts every few days. None of them were sexy or flirtatious, just questions about my likes and dislikes. When I

asked him if he was writing a tell-all about my life, he said he figured it would be a good idea for him to know personal things about me. You know, to sell the whole boyfriend story.

Currently, I'm lying on my bed after having folded laundry and thinking I need new outfits to wear in Charleston. I'm no slob by any stretch of the imagination, but there is something to be said about a hot new outfit and a pair of fabulous heels to make a girl feel confident walking into a room filled with people that've done nothing but make her feel like complete crap over her life choices. Some new battle armor, if you will. While searching through one of my favorite sites online, I get a text from Jackson.

Son of Satan: If you had to choose between a log cabin in the mountains or a house on white sandy beaches which would you choose?

Me: Where are you getting these questions?

Son of Satan: Just answer, Red.

Me: I love a good beach.

Me: Now tell me where you're coming up with these questions.

Son of Satan: One more. If you could be invisible for the day, what would you do?

Me: Definitely not murder you in your sleep so that no one would ever know it was me.

What the hell kind of questions are these?

Son of Satan. Last one. Promise. Would you rather have super strength or x-ray vision?

Me: Oh my god! I don't know... Super strength, I guess.

Son of Satan: Why?

Me: Pickle jars are hard to get open sometimes and I live alone. It would just make things easier, I guess.

Son of Satan: Makes sense. I think we should get together and figure out our story and all that before the trip.

Me: I don't know. I'm pretty busy 'til we leave.

Really, I just don't know if being alone together is the best idea. I'm under a lot of stress with the upcoming trip and sex with Jackson is a mighty good stress reliever.

Son of Satan: I promise to be on my best behavior.

Son of Satan: Unless you don't want me to be ;)

Me: Did you actually just wink face me over text.

Son of Satan: Please don't ever tell anyone. I'm embarrassed for myself.

Me: I'm embarrassed for you.

Son of Satan: Dinner at my place tomorrow. I'll keep my hands to myself.

I put my phone down and scrub my hands over my face. He's right, we really should figure out our fake relationship if we plan to sell it to everyone. Taking in a deep breath, I close my eyes and blow it out. Besides, this will be good practice for

me to control my hormones around him. It has to be done at some point, and I don't want to be distracted by it while under the scrutiny of my family and the Callaways.

Son of Satan: Red???

Me: God are you so desperate for a dinner date that you can't give me a second to check my calendar? I'll see you at 7.

Son of Satan: ;)

Me: Stop embarrassing yourself.

Son of Satan: I can't help it now. I'm going to start winking at everyone in texts now. I've created a monster.

Me: You're an idiot.

Son of Satan: But I'm your idiot ;) See you tomorrow ;) ;)

I don't bother with a reply, but a girlish giggle escapes my mouth. He can be stupidly charming when he wants to be, I'll give him that.

As long as that's all you give him.

There will be no sex tonight. There will be no sex tonight.

This mantra is on a loop in my head as I make my way to Jackson's door. I'm not nervous about tonight per se, but the

no-sex rule is still in effect, and it doesn't hurt to remind myself one or two thousand times.

"There will be no sex tonight," I mumble as I lift my fist to knock. The door swings open before my hand even touches the door, making me jump a little.

"Jesus, eager much? What were you doing, waiting with your eye to the peephole?" I ask as I shove past Jackson and set my purse on his kitchen counter, sliding out of my jacket and hanging it on the back of his barstool.

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Nice to see you too, Red. Sorry, I heard someone talking outside my door, so I was curious." He gives me a knowing smile. Busted.

Clearing my throat, I take a look around his place. Same as last time, cold and impersonal, but tonight the smells emanating from the kitchen are making my mouth water.

"Did you cook?" I ask, slightly perplexed by the idea. I don't know any men who cook for themselves, and certainly not anything that would smell this amazing. Jackson walks toward the kitchen, grabbing a bottle from his wine rack on the way.

"Ah, no. I ordered Italian from my favorite place down the street. They make the best eggplant parmesan I've ever tasted." He grabs a wine key from the drawer and opens the expensive bottle of red, pouring a generous amount into a glass before handing it to me.

“Trying to get me drunk so you can have your way with me?” I ask, only half joking.

“Nope.” He pops the *p* for effect. “I heard you loud and clear. There will be no sex tonight.” He winks and heat crawls up my neck. Dammit, I thought I was being a lot quieter than I actually was when I gave myself that little pep talk at his door.

Clearing my throat, I take a sip of the delicious vintage. “Italian is my favorite. Eggplant parmesan specifically.”

“I know. I asked you, remember?” The corner of his mouth tips up before he clinks our wineglasses together and shoots me a wink.

I do remember him asking the question during one of his weird “get to know Abigail” text-a-thons. It just surprises me that he remembered. There’s an unwanted feeling swirling in my gut, making me feel slightly uncomfortable. Taking a page out of my mother’s book, I decide to ignore it and change the subject.

“Let’s eat, and we can discuss the plans for next week.” Grabbing my wine, I have a seat at the set table just off the kitchen. Jackson grabs the food that he plated in serving dishes, most likely a gift from his mother, and sets them between us. We dish up our plates and dig in.

“Mmm.” A moan escapes my lips when my lips wrap around a forkful of the cheesy goodness. Jackson looks at me for a moment with fire flaring to life in his eyes before looking back to his plate. This whole no-sex thing is going to be harder than I thought if he keeps giving me those heated looks. I

repeat my mantra in my head a couple of times for good measure.

“So, Red, we established when I decided you were the girl for me. How about when you came to the same conclusion?”

Tilting my head for a moment, I contemplate how to answer. “I have to think about it. I should probably stay as close to the truth as possible.”

Jackson looks at me expectantly like I’m supposed to come up with something on the spot.

“It’s hard to say, Jackson. We didn’t exactly get on well the first several times we were together.” I think about the night our attraction exploded. In this very apartment. Maybe dinner here wasn’t the best idea. “I would probably say the way you came to my defense after the night out with Lindsey. Aiden was so angry, and you refused to let him make me feel bad. You had my back. That’s not something that happens often.”

Jackson looks at me with sad eyes. “Yeah, from the little you’ve told me about the situation with your dumb-as-fuck ex, it doesn’t sound like the people who are supposed to be on your side really are.”

Letting out a sardonic laugh, I stab my fork into the thick eggplant. “You don’t even know the half of it.”

“Let’s hear it. If we’re supposed to be in a relationship, it stands to reason that you would have shared this with me, no?” He sips his wine thoughtfully and sets his glass on the table, giving me his full and undivided attention.

Here goes.

“Davis didn’t just cheat on me with some random skank at a frat party. Well, apparently he did that too, but we’ll get there in a minute.” I take a fortifying sip—or giant gulp—of wine and continue. “I walked in on him getting a blow job from my best friend at his parents’ house right after our senior year at college. It was their annual Fourth of July barbecue. I thought we were on our way to the altar since we finished school and he’d be working with his dad. Apparently, he was just on his way to beating the record for most blow jobs received on summer vacation. Only, I guess he didn’t realize that it wouldn’t count toward his fraternity’s disgusting competition since he graduated. A fact that probably still irritates him to this day. Supposedly he was the reigning champion or some shit.”

The old feelings of hurt and disgust try to make their way to the surface. I shove them down with another swallow of wine.

“What the fuck?” he exclaims. “I’ve heard about stupid competitions like that happening in frat houses, but fuck, Abigail. I don’t even know what to say. What a dick.”

Hearing Jackson so outraged for me when my mom and sister wanted me to forgive and forget is soothing the wound that opens slightly every time I remember my mother’s opinion on the situation.

“Boys will be boys, honey,” she told me. “Don’t worry, he’ll tire of the other women, but you’ll be the one wearing his

ring.” Like I would touch any ring he was going to give me with a ten-foot pole.

“My mom and sister were less than supportive, shall we say. Cesily had just started dating his brother, and my parents were really rooting for both of their daughters to marry into the Callaway legacy.” I roll my eyes in exasperation. “It would have been the feather in my mom’s cap for sure. Another thing for her to lord over the country club bitches.” A laugh escapes me, but there’s no humor behind it. “Guess I destroyed her plan for social domination once and for all.”

“Then they tried to push you two together even after that?” he asks incredulously.

“Yup. Our mothers refused to let the dream die. A few months after catching him, I had enough and told them if they didn’t stop, I would leave Charleston. They didn’t, so I left. I graduated with a degree in journalism that my mother was sure I would never use, and when I applied at The Sun, Gus decided to give me a shot. He was aware of my background as a debutant, and I guess he felt like I’d be a good fit for the life and style spot they had open.” Thank God for that man. “The pay was crap to start, but I have a trust set up from my grandparents that I was able to pull from after I graduated. I would have gotten the whole thing at once had I gotten married, but the monthly checks are a great supplement to my salary from the paper. It keeps me in fabulous shoes and lacy underthings.” I realize as soon as it escapes my mouth how that sounds.

“Yes, I do appreciate your hot-as-fuck heels and little ‘underthings.’” Jackson’s eyes go molten, and I remember our time during his brother’s celebration dinner at his parent’s when he fucked me against the wall in his childhood bedroom. My heels made me just the right height for him to be able to bury himself deeply inside me, the scrap of lace I had on pushed out of the way to allow him access. I gulp some more wine.

“Well, that’s my sad story.” We need a subject change STAT. “What horrific, life-changing stories do you have for me?” I laugh, trying to shake off the suddenly charged energy in the room.

“You already know the worst one. I would definitely call that life altering.”

Ah yes, Lindsey’s kidnapping. It was Jackson’s stalker that had her, claiming that Lindsey was trying to break up her and Jackson. There was a scuffle, and the gun Helen held had gone off, killing her. From what I understand, she died in Jackson’s arms.

I reach over and touch Jackson’s arm. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “No apology necessary. It’s not something I really talk about. I did the therapy thing for a while. I figured if I was going to make Lindsey go, I should probably talk to someone too.”

I didn’t know this.

“I didn’t feel particularly guilty about the way Helen died. I know that probably sounds harsh, but she was going to shoot my brother. I won’t ever be sorry for stopping her.” My hand is still on his arm, and he reaches over and links our fingers. “But having someone die in your arms is on a whole other level. Seeing the light go out of her eyes, that’s not something you can really describe.” He squeezes my fingers. “And seeing how my thoughtlessness affected everyone around me? That definitely had me rethinking a lot of things.” He shakes his head and looks out his dining room window as his thumb strokes my hand.

“Like what?” I ask softly.

“It was my fault she was in our lives. I didn’t really know her, but my lifestyle didn’t lend itself to getting to know people. She was just a girl in a club to me. Maybe if I had been more aware of what was really happening around me instead of always looking for the next thing that excited me, I would have noticed her hanging around me and there was something off about her.” Jackson shakes his head and lets out a breath. “I will never forget the blood that covered my brother’s chest or the terrified look in Kasey’s eyes when she was holding his head before the paramedics got there. Or the state Lindsey was in when we found her. That’s the shit that changed me. Made me realize life isn’t one big party and women aren’t interchangeable to suit my mood.”

Wow. Something like that happening to anyone would have a profound effect on them, but I’m still surprised to hear Jackson’s admission. It’s not like he’s less human than anyone

else, but I've never been privy to this side of him. It's doubtful many people have.

“But everyone made it out and is alive and healthy now. That's because you stopped her. You were the hero in that story.” My words are hopefully reassuring to him.

He looks at our clasped hands and a soft smile plays across his lips. “No, I'm not the hero there.” He shakes his head slightly, then looks me in the eyes, his gaze doing things to my insides that I'm not ready to deal with. “But maybe I can be in yours.”

Okay, this sweet and thoughtful side of Jackson is playing some serious tricks with my mind. Jackson Hayes being my hero is so out of the realm of anything I ever thought possible. That's not what this is. I don't need a hero, just a date to a wedding. That's as far as I'm willing to go, even if the idea is tempting.

Pulling my hand away from his, I clear my throat and stand from the table. Things are getting too intense, and Jackson and I, in emotionally charged situations, have proven to be dangerous time and time again.

I grab my purse and jacket as he stands from his chair.

“Thanks for dinner. It was delicious.” It's suddenly awkward between us. This is why we should keep things light and slightly combative.

As I stiffly make my way to the door, trying not to turn around and kiss that damn handsome face of his, he follows,

that irreverent smirk still on his lips.

He opens the door for me, his hand grabbing the top edge, holding it for me. As I step over the threshold, he stops me with his hand on my wrist and leans over, softly brushing my cheek with his lips.

“Good night, Red,” he whispers in my ear.

I swallow hard. The proximity of his body and the feel of his breath against my cheek have my pulse going into overdrive. We’re quickly approaching a danger zone I swore I wouldn’t put myself in again.

Clearing my throat and stepping back, I give him a wide, friendly smile. Because that’s all this is going to be. Friends.

“Night, Prince.”

Turning on my heels, I make my way to the elevator. Jackson doesn’t follow, but he’s still standing in his doorway, gazing at me with an expression I can’t quite put a name to. Not lust, though there is that, but something more. Before the elevator doors close, I give him a slight wave and then blow out the breath I was holding after they seal shut. Leaning back on the wall, I bang my head a couple times.

This is getting complicated. Again.

CHAPTER 9

Jackson

Something has changed between Abigail and me. I can't put my finger on when, but if I had to hazard a guess, I would say it was probably the night she had dinner at my apartment. We've fought plenty, we've allowed the raging chemistry between us to take over and succumbed to the lust we felt, but we've never just talked. That night I got to see a softer, vulnerable side of her. And I showed her mine. I could tell she was uncomfortable, so I turned on the charm when she left. Not necessarily so she would end up in my bed again, which I wouldn't have been opposed to, but to put us back somewhere she was familiar with. But when those elevator doors closed and I was alone in my empty apartment again, I couldn't help feeling like that was the most comfortable I have ever felt with her. Or anyone.

What's worse is I've missed her this last week. So many times I've picked up the phone to call or text her, but there was really nothing for me to say. I just wanted to hear her voice. She's made it clear she's not interested in me, and although even a friendship would be something for me to build off, I'm not sure she would be up for that. Her texts have been about

our trip and nothing else. Every time my phone dings with a notification and I see it's her, my chest flutters with excitement like I'm some prepubescent teenage girl with a crush. And every time it's a text about our trip, nothing more. I've tried to engage her on more than one occasion with a silly question or some random thought that pops into my head, but those only get one-word answers or nothing at all. I know I should take the hint, but let's be honest, giving up isn't in my DNA.

Operation Perfect Boyfriend has begun, and I'm starting it with a bang. Knowing Abigail's fear of flying and her aversion to anyone seeing her vulnerable, I decided to charter a private plane. It's similar to the one we took to Costa Rica, and I already have a selection of Abigail's favorite wines on board. It's not a long flight, but I figured more is better when it comes to wine and Abigail.

"Well, well, well," I hear Abigail's voice as she boards the plane. I've already made myself comfortable with a glass of scotch and a paper in the cabin.

"Still too good for commercial, I see." She quirks a brow at me as she throws her purse and jacket on the seat across from me. I'm certainly not going to tell her I chartered the plane for her, that could give her some sort of ammunition to use against me, so I shoot her a wicked smile.

"I didn't expect you would be up for joining the mile-high club in such a cramped bathroom. The one on this plane is bigger. I already checked." I wink and take a sip of my scotch.

She scoffs as she plops down in the other seat across from me. “Dream on, Hayes.”

The way Abigail’s hands are twisting in her lap as she nervously looks around the plane like someone is going to jump out at her any moment tells me she’s nervous as hell about flying. The anxiety coming off her in waves reminds me of why I agreed to do this in the first place. Her eyes hold the same expression they did when I saw her talking to her mother at the cabin. She doesn’t want to be here, and she certainly doesn’t want to be going to this wedding.

The flight attendant makes her way over and offers Abigail a glass of wine before preflight. When the attendant rattles off the selections on board, Abigail gives me a small smile and orders a glass of her favorite champagne. She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t have to. She knows I made sure it was here for her.

After accepting the glass from the flight attendant, Abigail turns to me with a thoughtful expression. “I just want to say thank you again for coming with me and coming up with this little ruse to keep my mother and sister off my back. I *really* didn’t like the idea of coming alone.”

I smile at her again. “You should never have to come alone, not when I’m here to help.”

Catching on to the direction my mind has wandered to, she rolls her eyes and shakes her head at me. “You can turn it off, Hayes. No amount of flirting is going to make you a member of the mile-high club.”

I let out a chuckle. This is our normal. Me making inappropriate comments and her giving me shit. The familiarity is having the desired effect on Abigail, her spine isn't as stiff and the anxiety in her eyes is all but gone. Until the plane begins to taxi down the runway. Her jaw clenches as the hand that isn't holding her champagne clutches her seat.

“Hey, I have a question,” I begin. Though her eyes are pointed in my direction, she isn't really seeing me, already lost to her anxiety during the takeoff. “Let's talk PDA. We should really sell this whole relationship thing. Tongue or no tongue in front of your family?”

Her eyes laser in on me. *Ah, there you are.* “What? Who says we have to kiss at all in front of them?”

“It needs to be convincing, doesn't it? How do you feel about the occasional ass grab? Nothing gratuitous or anything, but everyone can see you have an amazing ass. I think it would be weird if I didn't help myself to the occasional handful.”

The plane is picking up speed, but Abigail isn't paying it any attention, too busy glaring at me to notice.

“You most certainly will not be grabbing my ass, Hayes.” Her sweet Southern accent is getting thicker as she continues. “I don't know how many girlfriends you've had in the past, but the day I let you grab my ass in public or try to shove your tongue down my throat in a roomful of people is the day you buy a parka to wear in hell because that is exactly where you'll be going, and it will be frozen.”

She is stunning. What began as a way to take her mind off the takeoff is quickly backfiring on me. I lean back in my seat, throwing my ankle over my knee, discreetly adjusting my hardening length. Up until now, the joke about joining the mile-high club was just that, a joke. But goddamn, at this moment, I wish she would flip up the tight knee-length skirt she's wearing and come sit on my lap. Somehow the dressing down she loves to give me has become my biggest turn-on. I certainly didn't see that one coming a few months ago.

Abigail huffs out a breath as she looks out the window and sees that we're gliding through the clouds. Her narrowed gaze turns to me. "You did it again."

Confused for a moment and trying not to make the tightening in my pants too obvious, I look at her with drawn eyebrows. "Did what?"

"Got my mind off flying by pissing me off." She laughs and shakes her head. "You realize how fucked up we are, right?"

I give her a wide smile. "I wouldn't say fucked up. I would say perfectly suited. I say things completely inappropriate, and you get to give me a ration of shit, taking your mind off whatever has you tangled in knots. I call that a win-win."

"I don't see how you benefit from that."

My reward is getting to see the fire in her eyes but telling her that would probably be too much for her to hear at the moment. She's comfortable living in denial, at least where the idea that we could be more than verbal sparring partners is concerned. "I get knocked down a few pegs. I've been told my

ego can use the occasional deflating by a certain redhead on more than one occasion.” I tip my glass to her before taking a sip.

Abigail laughs. “She sounds like she knows what she’s talking about.” Taking another sip of her drink, she relaxes farther back into her seat.

“So, about the ass grabbing. Hard no?”

Her tinkling laughter flows through the cabin. “Shut up, Hayes.”

Abigail

That wasn’t the worst flight I’ve ever been on. Having Jackson distract me with his ridiculous commentary is definitely helpful. I love and hate the fact that he’s so in tune with my moods. Fighting the intense attraction was a lot easier when I thought he was nothing more than a callous party boy who thought of no one but himself. He’s proving me wrong at every turn and I kind of love it. But hate it at the same time. *Ugh*. Going into this farce of a relationship would be a hell of a lot easier if I didn’t have these conflicting thoughts about him.

When we make it to Charleston, and I step out of the plane for the first time, I’m reminded of why I love my hometown. While it’s about forty degrees during February in Philadelphia, Charleston is a beautiful seventy-three degrees today, the air

already smelling like early spring. If only the weather could make up for the residents that reside here, namely my mother and Davis.

Jackson arranges for the bags to be loaded in our car as I soak up the warm rays.

“Ready?” he asks after the car has been packed to the brim with all my things.

I never know what I’m going to be in the mood to wear on a trip, so I tend to overpack, something Jackson once again commented on when he saw the number of bags I brought.

“As I’ll ever be.” Time to pull up my big girl panties and go see my parents.

As we drive through the charming streets of downtown Charleston, flashes of my childhood and teenage years run through my mind. Seeing all the little shops and restaurants nestled around beautiful oak trees brings back memories of being in high school with my sister and going to lunch after a day of shopping or getting our hair and nails done. It may sound like we were spoiled little Southern debutantes, which is partly true, but it’s more than that. We had a close relationship and driving through our old stomping grounds is making me nostalgic for our once easy camaraderie.

Jackson puts his hand over mine as he drives us through the streets. “You’re going to make your palms bleed if you squeeze your fists any tighter, Red.”

Huh, I didn't realize I was doing that. I relax my clenched fist and give him a small smile in thanks then take in a deep breath, letting it out slowly through my mouth.

"I'm more nervous than I thought I'd be. Being here reminds me so much of my old life, you know?"

He puts his hand back on the steering wheel. "Have you been back much since moving to Philadelphia?"

"I only come back once a year if I can help it. I like to visit my dad. He was never a huge fan of my relationship with Davis, but he kind of lets my mom rule the roost. Since she wanted us back together so bad in the beginning, he went along with her. I don't think he had a hand in trying to get us back together, but he never stopped my mom from inserting herself into my life. My sister and I don't really talk anymore. She sided with my mom and the Callaways after our breakup. That betrayal was more than I could handle, so I left."

Jackson squints his eyes, and I practically hear the question on the tip of his tongue. "I never asked, what happened to your best friend? The one you caught with the asshole?"

I laugh and shake my head. "Raelynn, that was her name, ended up marrying the asshole about a year later. She thought she had it made. Snagged herself a Callaway from right under my nose. Joke's on her, though. From what I hear, Davis was more interested in spending their money at some seedy strip club than paying his bills. When the house went into foreclosure, his dad had to bail them out. Raelynn realized they didn't have any of their own money. Apparently, lap

dances are expensive, and whatever else Davis was spending their money on. She left him and moved back home, disgraced and broke. I'm sure she's figured out how to bounce back and destroy another relationship by now." I shrug my shoulders and look out the window, thanking God once again that wasn't my fate.

Jackson whistles out a breath. "Jesus, Red. Your people picker sure was busted back then."

I look at him with a smirk on my face. "You think it's gotten better since?"

He gives me an incredulous look and pretends to clutch his pearls. In a heavy Southern accent, he drawls, "Are you trying to insinuate that I'm no better than those two assholes? Why, I never!" His mock accent really is something.

"Keep your panties on, Hayes. I was joking. I absolutely lucked out when I met Kasey and Lindsey." I laugh as he reaches over and squeezes my thigh hard, making me jump away from his grip.

"Stop, you're driving. No horseplay in the car." The more I try to squirm away from his grip, the more he tickles the inside of my thigh.

"Take it back, Barnes. Admit it. I'm the best thing to happen to you since moving to Philly, and you know it."

"Fine, fine, I'll admit it," I finally cry out breathlessly.

He nods his head in victory and puts his hand back on the wheel.

“You’re not the *worst* thing that’s ever happened to me.”
Giving him a wide smile, I catch his side-eye glare.

“You’ll pay for that,” he growls out.

Oh jeez, the sinful places my mind goes with that declaration.

Pulling up to my parents’ house on the tree-lined street just outside of Charleston isn’t quite the same experience as seeing the Hayes estate for the first time, but it’s nothing to turn your nose at. My mother is not a fan of less is more, but Southern geniality dictates that she not overtly flaunt their wealth. The perfectly manicured green lawn and thriving flower garden along the walkway and house demonstrates the care she takes in her gardening. Or rather, the care she pays people to take. The house itself is a large white two-story built sometime in the 1800s. From the outside looking in, you would never imagine the chaos that once resided here when my sister and I were younger. Teenage screaming matches, sneaking in after curfew, and I think there was even an incident involving too many wine coolers and my mother’s hydrangeas. But looking at it now, all I see is a house I used to consider a home, but only to those willing to toe the line.

After Jackson parks in the circular driveway, we make our way to the door, and I knock.

“You knock at your childhood home?” What he doesn’t realize is even though his family grew up wealthy with nannies and household staff, there was still love and room to make mistakes and all the shit kids do, without worrying about what people at the country club would think. Not every wealthy family was like that. Mine included.

I give him a tight smile with nerves causing a riot in my gut. “It’s not my house.”

My mother is not one to appreciate people walking into her home unannounced, even her daughter.

The door swings open, and there stands my mother, Loretta Barnes, Loli for short, but I think the only person that has ever dared to refer to her as that other than my grandparents is my father. And if memory serves, he only did so a handful of times and never in public.

A smile stretches across her face, but it’s tight, and for Jackson’s benefit, I’m sure.

“Abigail, you made it.” She leans in for a kiss on the cheek.

“I told you I would,” I say, pulling away.

“Yes, well...” Her thought trails away as she takes in Jackson standing next to me, a genuine smile gracing her lips.

My mother daintily holds out her hand for introductions. “You must be Jackson. Pleasure to meet you. I’m Loretta Barnes.” Her voice is light and sweet, really playing up her Southern charm.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Barnes,” he says, shaking her hand.

“Oh, please call me Loretta. We don’t stand on formalities around here.” I nearly laugh at that one but quickly gain control of myself. Don’t stand on formalities, my ass.

My mother ushers us into the house. “Let me find Marshall to help you with your bags.”

“No need, Loretta. I booked Abigail and me a suite at a hotel.” Jackson smiles at my mother in that charming way that he reserves for the cameras. It almost looks like she swoons for a moment before gaining her composure.

Yeah, join the club.

“I believe I told you that Jackson and I were making other arrangements. I knew you would have your hands full with the wedding, and we didn’t want to be underfoot.” I’m positive I told her, actually. But I’m sure she did what she always does, disregarding what I have to say in favor of her plans.

“Oh, yes. I have just been so busy with Cesily’s wedding that it must have slipped my mind. Can you come in and stay for some tea? I just made it this morning.”

I would bet dollars to donuts that the housekeeper made it, not her.

“That would be lovely, thank you, Loretta.” Jackson’s smooth voice expertly cuts through my irritation. “Please, lead the way.”

Into the mouth of hell we go.

CHAPTER 10

Jackson

Turning on the charm is second nature to me, and Abigail's mother eats it up. She's pleasant enough when she invites me into the sitting room. But all I can think of as we have a seat on her uncomfortable and very formal cream couches, is how awful this woman made Abigail feel.

No matter what the woman says, she is the very definition of formal in her pale pink pantsuit with a string of honest to God pearls around her neck. There isn't a hair out of place in spite of how many times she claims to have been running around like a lunatic trying to do *everything* for her daughter's wedding. I don't buy it. There's no doubt in my mind she has a staff of at least ten doing it all.

"I thought I heard company," a booming voice calls from the hallway. A towering man in his sixties comes sauntering in the room with a wide smile aimed at Abigail.

"Hey, Dad." Abigail rises from the sofa and walks to her dad, wrapping her arms around his thick middle.

"Hi, sweetheart. I'm glad you could make it. Your mother has been so excited to have you home." Abigail smiles up at

him, not bothering to acknowledge the comment. She knows it's a lie for her benefit. My understanding of her father is that though he wasn't complicit in the scheming to get Davis and Abigail back together after the dumbass blew it, he didn't exactly stand up for his daughter.

“Good to see you. Let me introduce you to Jackson.”

Standing from my seat, I hold out my hand to Abigail's father. “Jackson Hayes. Nice to meet you, sir.”

“Marshall Barnes.” He grips my hand in his meaty palm and squeezes in a firm but amiable shake.

“Marshall, honey, can I get you a glass of tea?” Loretta asks.

“Sure, Loli. Thanks.” Abigail glances at her mother with an expectant expression, but Loretta just smiles and leaves the room. I look at Abigail to try to determine what that look meant, but she isn't paying me any attention.

When Loretta returns with our tea, which is so damn sweet I'll be making an appointment with my dentist as soon as we get back, she takes a seat next to Marshall and settles in for a “meet the boyfriend” chat. Abigail takes her seat next to me, and I take the opportunity to link our hands. She shoots me a nervous look, and a reassuring smile stretches across my face.

“Marshall, did you hear that Jackson's brother is a newly elected senator?” Loretta asks her husband.

“I did. Nasty business, politics. Your father was a congressman as well, if memory serves.”

“He was, Mr. Barnes. My mother made him retire after his heart attack, which he was none too thrilled about. Now it’s my brother’s turn to take the helm.” I smile and sip my tea, successfully avoiding choking on its syrupy sweetness.

“What do you do, son?” her father asks conversationally. Abigail stiffens next to me like she’s afraid I’m going to tell them I run a sex club in the city.

“I have my fingers in a lot of pots. Mostly real estate investments and startup companies. I also just started a small nonprofit that helps find programs and therapy for victims of violent crimes.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Abigail whip her head toward me. Her eyes widen in surprise for a moment before she schools her features. Considering she’s supposed to be my girlfriend, this is something she would have known about. Yeah, I don’t tell many people about it, and Abigail had no idea. My mother helped me get in touch with the right people and has helped with the small fundraisers we’ve had. She was thrilled when I called her with the idea. Fundraising for a worthy cause has always been something she excelled at, and with my father out of politics, her plate hasn’t been as full these last few years.

“I remember something in the papers about your brother being involved in a shooting. Is that what made you decide to start it?” Marshall, or rather Mr. Barnes, asks. He didn’t offer for me to call him Marshall, and I’m certainly not going to take any liberties. I’m a thoughtful fake boyfriend.

“It was. A good friend of mine has been deeply affected by what happened to her. She was the one who was held captive. We were able to find the resources to help her deal with the aftermath, but not everyone is as fortunate or as financially capable. And unfortunately, getting back to ‘normal’ can be challenging to say the least. That’s where we come in. We find and fund the therapy and support groups to help people. In some cases, we pay for some type of job retraining if they’re unable to go back to their former line of work due to PTSD.”

When I finish my explanation, Abigail has a soft smile on her lips, and she squeezes my fingers. The job training was something Lindsey thought of. She still hasn’t resumed her career as a reporter and doubts she ever will. Abigail knows this but didn’t know anything about what I was doing since I asked Lindsey not to tell anyone. I’m not sure why, it just wasn’t something I wanted to draw personal attention to. My reputation isn’t exactly one of selflessness, and I didn’t want it tainting the good I’m hoping can come from this.

“What are your plans for dinner, Abigail? I’m sorry we can’t get together this evening, but I simply couldn’t reschedule our plans with the Allens.”

Abigail smiles amicably at her mother but the glint in her eyes tell me she’s about to go in for the kill. It’s a look I’ve had directed at me many times. “Ah yes, how are the Allens? Has their daughter found another rich man to fund her lifestyle that she became accustomed to during her marriage to my ex-boyfriend?” Abigail turns to me. “The Allens are Raelynn’s parents. My former best friend.”

I'm stunned. I can't believe her parents still have a relationship with the girl's family. The fact they have no loyalty to their daughter is once again driven home with the revelation.

"Really, Abigail? I can't believe you're still holding such a grudge." Loretta shakes her head with disappointment at Abigail's response. Her father sits quietly, checking something on his phone, completely checked out from the conversation.

"Sorry, Mother, but it's not every day you walk in on your best friend sucking off the man you thought you were going to marry. I guess the scars run a little deeper than your loyalty to me." Abigail offers a completely fake smile as she sips her tea, like what she just said is simply polite conversation.

"Abigail Barnes, I cannot believe you are using that language in front of your father," Loretta exclaims. Marshall lifts his confused gaze from his phone as though being mentioned has clued him in that something is amiss. He isn't outrightly rude, just disinterested in anything more than polite conversation. I have a feeling he's not often afforded the luxury of having an opinion that differs from his wife's.

I hold back a laugh at Loretta's reaction. That's offensive language? She doesn't know the half of it. The number of times Abigail has threatened to castrate me in very colorful ways or commented on my lack of manhood would send her into an early grave. This woman has no idea who the ballbuster sitting in front of her really is. I love that I do.

“Let’s not argue on Abigail’s first day back, honey.” Marshall finally clues into the tense standoff the ladies are having. He rubs her shoulder while Loretta closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath, blowing it out slowly through her pursed lips. When she opens her green eyes again, she smiles as though the last couple of minutes didn’t happen. It’s a bit eerie how easily she slips her mask back on.

“Yes, well, I’m sure you and Jackson are tired from your trip, and I just have a million things to do today. You’ll be at the bridal luncheon tomorrow, yes?”

This woman’s one-hundred-eighty-degree change in demeanor is enough to make my head spin.

“Yes, Mother. I wouldn’t miss it,” Abigail replies stiffly as they both stand.

“Jackson,” Abigail’s father begins. “While the ladies are indisposed tomorrow afternoon, what do you say to a game of golf?” I have zero interest in playing golf tomorrow, in fact, I hate golf, but it’s what a boyfriend who’s trying to get to know his girlfriend’s family would do, and I did tell Abigail I would crush the whole fake boyfriend thing.

“That sounds great,” I say, standing along with Marshall before making my way to the front door.

Abigail and I say our goodbyes quickly before getting in the car. She blows out a breath, her entire body deflating once the doors are closed.

“Did you see the way she so easily dismissed what that bitch and my piece-of-shit ex did? It’s like the very idea of her having even the smallest amount of loyalty to her daughter is the most preposterous thing imaginable.” She shakes her head and looks at her parents’ house with disappointment shining in her gaze.

“Hey,” I say as I put my hand on her knee and squeeze to get her back here with me. “Let’s check into the hotel, and I’ll let you take me to dinner at your favorite restaurant in town, the only condition being that they have a full bar and look the other way when it comes to overserving sexy as hell redheads.”

I give her a charming smile, hoping to take her mind off the bullshit with her mom. Seeing her look defeated by the interaction with her parents is so out of character for her. It makes me want to do anything and everything to bring back the stubborn-ass, take-no-prisoners woman who I usually have the pleasure of dealing with.

Abigail throws her head back on the headrest and lowers her sunglasses to cover her eyes. “You read my mind.”

So, here’s the thing. When Abigail agreed to let me play her wonderful fake boyfriend for the week, I also offered to make the room accommodations. I knew this was going to be a stressful week for her and wanted to make sure she had a place she could unwind and maybe be pampered a little. I also

wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to have her to myself in a hotel suite. That being said, I don't feel bad about getting a suite with one bed, even if Abigail looks ready to smother me with a pillow in my sleep.

"Goddammit, Jackson. I knew I should have made the reservations. I specifically told you two beds."

"I swear, I thought this one had two when I made the reservation," I tell her, playing up the innocent angle. A little white lie never killed anyone, right?

"Maybe the hotel has another room available. I'm going to call the front desk and ask." She grabs the phone to dial the reception desk. Too bad for her, I already anticipated her doing something like this and generously tipped the woman at the front desk to make sure Abigail knows they're fully booked for the week. Regardless of whether or not they actually are. It might be an asshole move, but I never claimed to be anything else.

"Thank you for checking, I understand. Charleston is a great place for a Valentine's vacation." She hangs up the phone gently and shoots me an irritated glare.

"No luck?" I ask.

"No. They're booked solid this week." Abigail falls into the love seat and huffs out a deep breath. "God, this day. I'm ready for several drinks and for it to be over," she groans, closing her eyes.

Sitting down next to her, I feel a little guilty about making her day harder on her. But only a little.

“I can sleep in here if you want,” I offer. *Please say no.*

She opens one eye and peers at me, contemplating my offer. “No. I’m not going to make you do that. The bed is huge, and I’ll just get some extra pillows from housekeeping and build a pillow wall between us.”

I scoff at her idea. “Seriously, a pillow wall? If you think a pillow wall is going to keep you from ravaging me in the middle of the night, then have at it.” I send her a wicked smirk, and she laughs.

“I’ll do my best to withstand your potent masculine charms.” She rolls her eyes and stands, spreading her arms wide. “Now feed me and ply me with all the alcohol, good sir. I need it after our afternoon with my parents.”

Grabbing her purse from the coffee table, she swings the strap over her shoulder and saunters toward the door. The way her ass moves in that formfitting skirt practically begs for me to grab a handful. If I didn’t appreciate my dick exactly where it is, I probably would. But I’m going to play it safe for now. Abigail not storming out of the room and demanding I find her another hotel or deciding to stay with her parents is a win in my book. No need to push it, even though she makes it so fucking tempting.

This isn't exactly what I had in mind when I suggested dinner and drinks. Abigail and I pull up to a poorly lit dive bar way off the beaten path. And when I say way off, I hope she knows how to get back to a main road after the sun goes down because I didn't see any streetlights to guide our way.

When I offered to have her take me to her favorite restaurant in the city, I was expecting something... else. We walk through the old wooden door, a short woman with raven-black hair pulled in a messy top-bun looks over from a couple of guys she's talking to at the bar. She breaks off mid-conversation and whoops so loud I assume someone she knows walked in behind us. Nope. That was all for Abigail.

"Well, I'll be damned. Look at what the cat dragged in." Her smile and laugh are infectious, and I can't help but grin at her obvious excitement at seeing Abigail. So much different than the reception she got from her mother.

"Duke, get out here and see who's come for a visit," the loud woman hollers to someone in what I'm assuming is the kitchen.

Abigail laughs as the woman comes around from behind the bar and wraps her in a tight hug, swaying her back and forth.

"Hey Roxy. Long time," Abigail says into the woman's mess of black hair.

Roxy loosens her grip but doesn't let go right away, looking Abigail up and down as though she's checking to make sure it's really her.

“You are a sight, honey.” The two women are smiling widely at each other as an unusually tall man with a graying beard and stained apron walks out of the kitchen. He has kind eyes and a wide smile when he sees Abigail in Roxy’s arms.

“Girl, get over here and give me a hug.” Duke opens his arms, and Abigail practically skips into his embrace. Another tight hug, this time Abigail is lifted off her feet and swung back and forth as she squeals.

“It’s been too damn long, girl. When did you get back?” the giant asks Abigail as he sets her back on her feet.

“Just this morning. We flew in for Cesily’s wedding.”

“We?” he asks, looking toward his wife, who is standing a couple feet from me. When he spots me still by the door, he wipes his hands on his apron and comes to stand in front of me. Abigail and Roxy are beside him as Abigail makes the introductions.

“Jackson, this is Duke and Roxy. They own the place. There’s nowhere else within a hundred miles with better shrimp and grits.”

Duke puffs out his chest a little, preening at the compliment on his culinary skills.

I hold out my hand to Duke, and he shakes it with enthusiasm. “Nice to meet you, Jackson. If Abigail brought you in to meet us, that says all we need to know about you.” He gives Abigail a wink, and she laughs.

I turn to Roxy and extend my hand, but she just tsks, pushing my hand out of the way and giving me a hug instead.

“None of that now. Duke’s right. If you’re here with our girl, you’re family too.”

Abigail’s related to them? I wonder on which side because neither of these people are anything like her stiff-as-hell, high-society-obsessed parents.

Not being used to such outward affection from strangers, I pat Roxy’s shoulder a bit awkwardly. Abigail looks on with a smile, knowing exactly how uncomfortable I am right now. She finally takes pity on me and pulls me away.

“Now, Roxy, don’t go trying to steal my man right in front of me,” she jokes as the older woman releases me with a laugh.

“Oh honey, I have my hands full with this one over here.” Roxy points her thumb in Duke’s direction as he lets out a full belly laugh.

“Yeah, *I’m* the troublemaker here.“ He winks at Roxy, who waves her hand at him.

“Get back in the kitchen. We have hungry kids out here.” She turns to Abigail. “You’re staying for dinner, right?”

“And drinks. *Several* drinks,“ Abigail confirms.

Roxy gives her a sympathetic look. “Saw your parents then, I take it?”

Blowing out a breath, Abigail nods her head. “Sure did.”

Roxy shakes her head in disappointment, obviously aware of the situation with her family. “Well, go sit down, and I’ll fix you up.”

We head to the table without Roxy taking our order.

“Where’s the menu?” I ask Abigail, who just smiles and shakes her head.

“That’s not how it works here. You heard the lady, we’re family, plus I’ve been coming here since I was a kid. She knows what I like.”

“But she doesn’t know me. What if I don’t like what she brings us?”

Abigail shoots me a smirk. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

She sits back and has a look around. Happiness and nostalgia are plain as day on her face. Much different than when we went to her parents. Relief washes over me. This right here is the Abigail I know and... *Woah, slow down there, buddy.*

The front door opens, sending light blasting through the dim interior. A tall blonde woman about Abigail’s age stands in the doorway a moment before spotting us. As soon as she sees us, she marches over, her dusty boots loud on the wood floors, making her height even taller and a bit intimidating. The urge to put a protective arm around Abigail is immediate and strong.

“What in the ever-lovin’ hell are you doing here?”

CHAPTER 11

Abigail

A wide smile instantly springs to my lips and Jackson looks about ready to jump out of his seat to defend my honor. I'd love to see him try. This girl has three brothers who she's sent running away in tears on more than one occasion after they've tried to pull a fast one on her. This girl in front of me can fight dirty with the best of them, which is one of the reasons I love her.

I stand, the move clearly making Jackson even more nervous and wrap my arms around my very loud and very dirty friend.

"Julia. God, I've missed you." She returns my tight hug, and from the corner of my eye, I see Jackson relax back into his seat.

"I can't believe you didn't call me and tell me you were coming here for dinner. I would have met you," she says to me, squeezing a bit harder. "It's been too long, Abigail."

We separate, but I keep her hands in mine as I look at one of my oldest and dearest friends in the world. This girl in front of me is as tall and beautiful as any runway model out there. But

she would rather spend her days on her family's ranch shoveling hay and cow shit than ever be caught dead in couture.

“Sorry Julia, it's been a day. Let me introduce you to someone.”

Jackson stands from his seat and extends a hand to my friend. I think he's had enough hugging from Roxy for the day.

“Jackson Hayes, nice to meet you.”

Julia takes his hand in a strong grip. “Julia Beauchamp. The pleasure is mine.” She looks him up and down, an approving gleam in her eye.

“Please, join us,” Jackson offers.

A laugh escapes me. Julia is not the type to wait for an invitation. I knew as soon as she walked in it was going to be a long night catching up with my friend.

When she sits, Roxy comes over to deliver our drinks. She hands Jackson what looks to be an old-fashioned. I get a clear drink I know is a gin and tonic, and Julia is handed a beer.

“I saw you walk in, honey. You staying for dinner too?”

“Thanks, Aunt Roxy. Yeah, I'll have what these two are having.”

Roxy nods her head and walks back to the kitchen to tell Duke to fix another plate.

“So, are you two cousins or something?” Jackson asks.

I look at him curiously. “No. Why would you think that?”

“Is it because everyone from the South must be related or something?” Julia snarks at him. It’s all in good fun, but Jackson doesn’t know her from Eve and almost spits out his cocktail.

“What? No,” he exclaims, obviously worried that he offended one of my friends.

“I’m just pulling your leg, Yank.” We both laugh, and Jackson sends me a relieved smile.

“I see why you two are friends,” he tells us, waving his index finger between us.

“She’s one of my best,” I say. “Julia and I have known each other since grade school. I used to get riding lessons from her mom, and we hit it off right away.” I smile at Julia. Bringing up her mom can be a touchy subject with her, depending on the day.

“Mama loved you like her own. God rest her soul.” She lifts her glass in a toast and sips her beer.

Julia’s mom passed away when we were in middle school. One day she was out in the field with her horses, and the next, she was gone from a heart attack. It’s so uncommon in women, the doctors said she probably didn’t recognize the signs.

Since then, it’s been Julia and her dad and brothers. Duke and Roxy stepped in to help where they could, but they had a bar to run that kept them plenty busy. Many afternoons were spent doing homework at that old bar top.

“Duke and Roxy are Julia’s aunt and uncle. I spent so much time here with her, they just kind of took me in as their other niece,” I explain to Jackson.

Duke comes from the kitchen with three plates of shrimp and grits. No fancy restaurant in town can come close to being as delicious as his secret family recipe. He sets the plates in front of us and leans down to give Julia a kiss on the crown of her head.

“How’s it goin’, sweetheart?” he asks her.

“Can’t complain, Uncle Duke. Good friends, good food, and cold beer. Life is pretty fantastic right now.” She smiles brightly at her uncle.

“I heard Grayson Abernathy was back in town, sniffing around your place,” Duke states irritably.

Julia rolls her eyes at the mention of his name.

“He was. Until he found himself at the business end of Dad’s 12-gauge shotgun.” Her wicked smile is wide as she looks at her uncle. Duke shakes his head and chuckles as he heads back to the kitchen.

“Let me know if you’re still hungry,” Duke calls before the door swings shut.

My mouth is watering as I smell the spicy goodness of our dinner. Jackson looks a little green around the gills at the mention of Julia pulling a gun on someone.

“Don’t worry, Yank, I didn’t shoot him. His car tires? Different story.” Julia laughs, and I just shake my head.

Grayson Abernathy was one of her brother's best friends. He lived on the ranch that borders Julia's. He was her first crush and also her first heartbreak when he decided ranching wasn't for him after college and decided to become some big-time real estate developer. That's a betrayal in and of itself in Julia's eyes. He inherited his family's land after his parents' death, but hated the ranch life. He blames it for their early demise. Talk is he plans to sell it to a big-name resort, but they want more land and have their eyes on Julia's. I guess we'll see how that plays out.

After practically licking our plates clean, the three of us are stuffed and happy. I can tell Jackson's getting a little tired, it's been a long day after all, but I'm having too much fun catching up. The place has picked up, everyone having gotten off work and ready to unwind for the evening.

I lean over to Jackson. "You can leave if you want. Julia will be more than happy to take me back to the hotel." He turns his head, and our mouths are mere inches apart. It would be so easy to lean in and taste the sweetness from his old-fashioned. *Control yourself, Abigail.*

"Nope, I'm good. It's nice seeing you relax and having a good time." My stomach is doing somersaults, and it has nothing to do with the huge meal I just devoured.

"I'm going to the restroom, then I'll get us another round, yeah?" he says softly. As I nod my head in agreement, he gets up and makes his way to the restrooms. A loud whistle sounds from my right.

“Damn, girl. That look almost had me sliding off my chair. Spill while he’s gone. Who is he? How do you know him? Are you sleeping with him? And if not, mind if I take him for a spin?” Laughing at her rapid-fire questions, I shake my head.

“Jackson Hayes. My friend is practically married to his brother. Not at the moment and don’t even think about it,” I answer in order.

“Not at the moment? As in, you were or just not at this moment? Because, you know, public place and all.” My shoulders shake from laughter as I smack her arm.

“I mean, it’s complicated. We’ve known each other for a while and, yes, we’ve slept together a few times, but he’s related to my friend’s brother. I’m just worried about what’ll happen when we inevitably part ways. I don’t want it to be weird.” Julia picks up on what I’m not saying.

“Raelynn is a class *A* bitch for what she did to you, and don’t even get me started on Davis. But honey, not everyone is as vapid as your mother and sister. From what you told me about your friends in Philadelphia, they love you and would never choose between you or anyone else. Not like Loretta and Cesily did.”

I want to believe her, I really do, but that wound is still fresh in my mind, especially after this afternoon. Even all these years later, I don’t know if I’ll ever be comfortable potentially rocking the boat in any of my important relationships again.

Jackson returns with another round, and the jukebox gets turned up. George Strait starts crooning through the speakers

and Julia gives me a toothy grin.

“Let’s go, girl.” She grabs my hand and pulls me to the small, crowded dance floor. It’s been forever since I danced to country music, but the moves come back to me like I was just out here last week.

Gin and music are flowing through me, and I’m having the time of my life being here, back to my roots, with my oldest friend. Glancing over at Jackson, a wide smile is on his face as he watches me move my hips, adding a little flair to the line dance. Even though this man is tired and completely out of his element, he looks perfectly content, sipping on his drink and watching me have a good time. If only he wasn’t Donovan’s brother and this whole thing with us *didn’t* have disaster written all over it.

After dancing to several more songs and working up a sweat, Julia and I head back to the table to cool off.

“So, Jackson, tell me a little bit about yourself. You grew up in Philadelphia?” Julia asks, guzzling the beer in front of her.

“I did. My dad was a congressman, and my brother was just elected senator.”

Her eyes go wide, realizing who his family is.

“So, I’m sitting next to royalty then. Well damn, I would have worn my clean boots if I’d have known,” Julia jokes, and Jackson laughs with her, used to people viewing his family like that.

Of course, she doesn't care one way or another. As long as you're good people, that's enough for her.

“What do you do then? Have your eye on the governor's mansion?”

Jackson laughs and shakes his head. “No way. Too many skeletons in my closet, I'm afraid.”

“Oh, now it's getting good. Tell me about these skeletons you have.” Julia rests her chin on her hand and gives Jackson her undivided attention.

I nudge her in the ribs. “Enough of that. Jackson didn't come all the way down here to be grilled by you, missy.”

She looks from me to Jackson. “No, I suppose not. Why did you come, Jackson?” Her tone isn't as playful. It's the tone of one friend protecting another and making sure this guy is up to snuff.

“Honestly? I saw the look on Abigail's face when her mother was giving her shit on the phone. I didn't like it so I offered to come down and be her date because I knew she would never ask.”

Julia nods. “Good answer,” she says with a smile playing on her lips.

Jackson leans over to Julia and whispers loud enough for me to hear. “She's also hot as fuck, and I was hoping my good deed would win me some extra brownie points.” He turns his face to me and winks.

I roll my eyes at him as Julia laughs. “Even better answer,” she says and clinks their glasses together.

“Everyone is under the impression that he and I have been dating for a while. I’d like to keep it that way,” I tell her.

Julia presses her lips together, pretending to lock them. “No one will hear different from me.”

The drinks keep coming and the conversation keeps flowing, and soon after my and Julia’s third time shaking our asses on the dance floor, I look at my phone and realize it’s way later than I thought. Shit, I have to be up and presentable tomorrow for my sister’s bridal brunch. Tomorrow is already going to be hell. Add on a hangover, and I’m ready to get back on the plane to Philadelphia right now.

Jackson and Julia are going head to head in a friendly game of quarters when I show Jackson the time on my phone screen.

“Okay, Julia, be prepared to lose. I need to get my girl back to the hotel.” He bounces the quarter, and it lands in her glass.

“Son of a bitch, Yank. I see where you excelled in your fancy university,” she says before drinking her beer down.

“Money well spent. You need us to give you a lift?” Jackson offers. Thankfully he hasn’t been drinking like Julia and I have.

“Nah. My brother is on his way.”

“Oh, which one?” I spent a lot of time with Julia’s brothers growing up and haven’t seen them in ages.

“That one.” She points to the tall man that just walked through the door, making his way over with a smile on his face that has dropped many a panty in his day.

When he gets to our table, I stand and throw my arms around his thick neck. He wraps his arms around my waist and picks me up, swinging me side to side.

“Easton, it’s so good to see you,” I squeal.

He sets me down to hold me at arm’s length, looking me up and down like he can’t believe I’m really here.

“Damn girl, you are a sight for sore eyes.” He brings me in for another hug, thankfully keeping my feet firmly planted on the ground. I really don’t need the shrimp and grits making a reappearance after all the gin I’ve consumed.

I look over at a scowling Jackson and can’t help the giggle that escapes. “Easton, this is Jackson. Jackson, Easton.” I wave my hand between them, and Easton puts his hand out for a shake. Jackson clasps it a little harder than necessary.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Abigail’s boyfriend,” Jackson says by way of an introduction.

Easton looks between us, and a loud laugh bellows out of him.

“No need to mark your territory, bud. I’ve known this girl since she was runnin’ amuck with my sister, trying not to get caught and dunked in a horse trough for some prank they pulled on my brothers and me. She the little sister I never

wanted,” he replies as he scrubs a meaty palm over my hair. Of course, he would bring that up.

Jackson visibly relaxes and looks at me, quirking his brow. “Get dunked in many troughs there, Red?”

“Only when they could catch me,” I reply, trying to smooth down the mess Easton just made of my hair. “Or if their mama didn’t catch them first.” Another loud laugh from Easton has half the bar turning toward us. He’s one of those guys that every woman wants a piece of and every man wants to be friends with.

“I wish we could stay, but I have to get up and be my charming self way too early tomorrow,” I tell Easton.

“Oh yeah. Here for the big wedding and all the bullshit that goes along with it, I hear. If you need an escape, come out and see us, or just because we miss the hell out of you and want to see you again before another three years pass.”

Even though he didn’t mean anything by it, a pang of guilt hits me in the chest. Regret fills me when I realize I let a few bad apples keep me from the people I care about. The ones that aren’t going to screw me over or tell me to smile while my life falls apart. The Beauchamps would have given me a shotgun and empty beer cans to work out my frustrations, then sat with me and drank until I couldn’t remember why my heart was broken. Hell, I had to stop Hank, Julia’s oldest brother, from finding Davis and rearranging his pretty boy features. That’s the support I should have gotten from my actual family.

“I promise we’ll figure out a day for a visit before we leave,” I tell him.

Jackson and I say our goodbyes and get in the car to drive back to the hotel. After buckling in, I turn to look at him. He’s gazing at me with a soft smile on his lips.

“What?” I ask, feeling like I’m being scrutinized but not knowing why.

“This was nice. Seeing you out with the friends you grew up with. I feel like I got a little glimpse into your life.”

He starts the car and backs out of the parking space in front of the bar.

“It’s nice being home and around people that have known me forever.” Leaning my head against the seat, I close my eyes, happily buzzed and in a good mood.

“I got to see the softer side of Abigail Barnes tonight. I have to say, it was intriguing.”

“Don’t get used to it, Prince. There’s still plenty of bark in me.”

He chuckles as he drives us to that glorious bed I can’t wait to crawl into.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Red.”

CHAPTER 12

Jackson

The woman next to me is so damn tempting. I may not have thought my plan through very well. Waking up next to her for the next week and not being able to touch her in all the ways my body screams for me to may be the fucking death of me. My fingers ache to run the length of her naked arm while she slumbers peacefully, but I control myself. The last thing I want is for her to wake and elbow me in my face because I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

It's nine in the morning and I know she has to wake up and get ready for her sister's luncheon, but I'm going to lie here as long as possible and let my eyes take in their fill. I can't do that while she's awake. Abigail would probably laugh in my face and call me an idiot for wanting to sit here and just look at her. She's so peaceful in sleep. Not the hellcat I usually deal with. Seeing her let loose last night shifted something inside me. God, the way she moved on the dance floor last night was temptation personified. It's a good thing no one was paying attention to me because my body reacted like I was thirteen years old and got a hold of a Victoria's Secret catalog.

Abigail stirs next to me, letting out a painful groan.

“Why is it so damn bright in here?” She grabs the pillow and flings it over her head.

Knowing this morning she would most likely wake up with a hangover due to the sheer amount of gin she ingested last night, I closed the curtains before falling asleep beside her, so it’s not that bright. My guess is any amount of light this morning is going to be torture for her.

“Did you know you snore?” I ask her with a smile, propping my face on my hand. She doesn’t, but it wouldn’t be us if I didn’t give her a little shit.

She whips the pillow off her head and turns to me with a glare in her eyes.

“I do not.”

“I could hardly get any sleep last night because you were sawing logs so loud. Have your neighbors never complained?”

She hits me with her pillow, knocking my head back on the bed and I laugh.

“You’re very violent in the morning.” That gets another glare before she bolts up, immediately clutching her head as she winces in pain.

“God, why did you let me drink so much last night?” she whines.

“Red, it will be a cold day in hell before I *let* you do anything.”

Abigail grunts at me as she rubs her face, trying to clear the cobwebs.

“I need coffee.” She runs her tongue over her teeth. “And a toothbrush.”

I swing my legs over to the side of the bed and stand. She’s peering at me from her side, and I don’t miss the look of lust in her eyes she tries to hide by immediately clamping her eyes shut. I’m in boxer briefs and nothing else. I wasn’t about to sleep in my clothes just because we’re sharing a bed. She’s lucky I kept my boxers on in the first place. Usually, I sleep in nothing at all.

Abigail shakes her head slightly to clear her thoughts, and I can’t help the smirk that spreads across my lips. She catches it and rolls her eyes, annoyed she’s been caught but completely unwilling to admit it. *Stubborn-ass woman.*

“I’m taking a shower,” she announces.

“Need help washing your back?” I ask as she heads toward the bathroom.

She shoots me a scathing look before closing the door.

“That’s a *no* then?” I call to her. I don’t hear a response, just the water turning on. “I’ll call down for coffee and breakfast. Do you want anything in particular?”

I hear the shower door open and close. It’s pure torture being on this side of the door, knowing she’s naked and wet on the other side.

“I need a greasy cheeseburger and coffee,” she hollers. “Something to soak up the alcohol.”

The temptation to open the door a crack and take a peek at her in the shower is strong, but I refrain and turn away to make a call to room service. I wonder what she would do if I did though. The way she looked at me last night at the bar says she would be fine with some help in the shower, but she was drinking, and I have a feeling Abigail isn't much of a morning person to begin with, let alone having a hangover. Nope, I'm playing the long game with her. And self-control is paramount to my end goal. She won't have any reason to run from me when we finally get between the sheets again like she's always done in the past.

After ordering room service and putting on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt so as not to give the staff anything to gawk at when they deliver the food, Abigail emerges from the bathroom. Her hair is wet and hangs down her back over the fluffy robe covering her naked curves. What I wouldn't do for a small glimpse at what's underneath. *Reel it in, Hayes.*

There's a knock at the door, and I take the opportunity to adjust myself as I walk to answer it. My poor dick is in a constant state of arousal around this girl.

The food is brought in and set up on the small dining table in our room. Abigail wastes no time rushing to get to the coffee before the room service guy is even out the door. She adds one sweetener and some creamer before taking a tentative sip from her cup.

“Ah, thank you, Jesus,” she says, closing her eyes and sighing.

“My name is Jackson, and I’m the one who is responsible for your caffeine fix this morning. Not the son of God.”

She shoots me an irritated glance as she sits at the table, ready to dig into her greasy burger.

“My dad texted me while I was in the shower to let you know that tee time is eleven thirty. My sister’s luncheon starts at eleven, so I’ll just have you drop me off at the restaurant and you can take the car.” She takes a giant bite of the burger that has her eyes rolling toward the back of her head, an indecent moan escaping her delectable lips.

Ugh. I forgot about playing golf with her dad today. I would much rather stay in this room and come up with several inventive ways that would pull more moans like that from Abigail. Probably not the train of thought I should be having before golfing with her father. After seeing the way he didn’t stand up for his daughter yesterday, I’m less inclined to try to be cordial around the man.

“Sounds good. Are you sure you don’t want to keep the car though? How will you make a hasty escape if you need to?” I don’t want her stuck there if her mom starts in on her again.

“Don’t worry about me. My mom’s usually not too bad in public. The worst I’ll probably get are some stern looks. Loretta Barnes would never dream of putting herself in an embarrassing situation in public. What would the ladies in the

rotary club think?” She gasps and pretends to clutch her imaginary pearls.

Laughing at her impersonation of her mother, I take a bite of my omelet. “Well, if there’s one thing I can say about this hotel, it’s that they make a damn good breakfast.”

Abigail looks at me devouring my eggs and shivers. “I can’t even imagine eating eggs.” She makes a gagging noise as she picks up her burger and takes a giant bite.

“Not an egg girl. Noted.” I’m enjoying all these little tidbits I’m finding out about her on our trip. And we’re only one day in. It makes me wonder what else I’ll discover about the gorgeous redhead sitting in front of me.

After we’ve both finished our food and Abigail’s had enough caffeine to power an electrical grid, she pushes away from the table and stands.

“Okay, time to put on my war paint. We have to get out of here soon.”

The woman is a vision when she’s dressed to the nines, ready to paint the town red, but with no makeup and in a simple robe? She’s breathtaking. Seeing her like this, fresh from a shower, makes her, I don’t know... softer. Not that I didn’t get that from her before in her vulnerable moments, but the fact that she allows me to see her pre-war paint is doing something to me that I wasn’t expecting. I wouldn’t mind waking up with her like this every day. *Slow your roll there, Hayes.*

“Let me take a quick shower, then you can have the bathroom and all your girly shit in there,” I tell her as I stand.

She shoos me into the bathroom, obviously trying to hurry me along.

“You didn’t offer to wash my back. I’m disappointed, Red.” Pouting as I walk to the bathroom, I see her roll her eyes in my direction.

“I think you’ll do just fine in there alone, Prince. Now hurry up. Golf and bridal luncheons wait for no man.”

Abigail is unzipping her garment bag, pulling out a selection of dresses. The color in her face has returned, but she’s still not her sparky self.

“Such a ballbuster in the morning,”

“If you don’t get your ass in that shower right now, I’ll show you a ballbuster.”

“I’d gladly allow you access to my balls. Just let me know when.” I shoot her a smirk.

The squint of her eyes and straight line of her mouth tells me she’s not happy with my taunts.

“I swear to God, Jackson, get in the damn shower this instant. I want nothing to do with your balls or any other part of you at the moment. I’m not going to waste all fucking day trying to get you to get a move on—“ I close the bathroom door midrant and turn on the shower, drowning her out. I just needed her to get out of her head. And since I already know that giving me shit is the quickest way for her to get there, I

went with it. But if I hear Abigail talk about my balls anymore, in any capacity, this shower is going to take a lot longer than either of us has time for.

After dropping Abigail off at the restaurant, I head to the club that she put into my GPS for me. I'm no stranger to these kinds of places, having spent plenty of time on a course with my dad and brother. On the way there, my mind keeps replaying when Abigail saw me come out of the bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped deliberately low around my waist. I may have purposely "forgotten" to bring a change of clothes in the bathroom with me. The heat in her eyes when she got an eyeful of my naked chest almost made me whip the towel off to see what trouble we could get into instead of the hell we have to put ourselves through for her family today.

I toss the valet the keys to our rental car and head into the opulent reception area. When I give the young girl my name at the front, she directs me into the bar where she says the rest of my party is waiting. I figured it would be her father and the groom, along with a few of the groom's friends.

I spot Abigail's dad at the bar sipping a drink.

"Jackson," he bellows across the bar. "You made it." By the volume of his voice, it sounds like what he's drinking contains some sort of alcohol. And that this isn't his first.

Walking up to Marshall, I reach out to shake his hand. “Wouldn’t miss it, sir. I love golf.” I actually hate golf, but my dad made sure we learned how to play, reminding us that some of the most lucrative business deals he and my grandfather brokered were on a golf course.

“Let me introduce you around. This is Dawson, my soon-to-be son-in-law.” A younger blond man with glassy eyes shakes my hand. I sneak a peek at my watch. It’s only eleven thirty in the morning and this entire group seems to be three sheets to the wind already.

Marshall quickly introduces me to the rest of the men that will be playing with us today. All young and all look barely old enough to have graduated college. Or maybe I’m just getting old.

As the thought percolates in my mind, a round of loud cheers fills the bar, and I turn around to see who everyone is excited to see. An older version of Dawson is walking in with a wide smile on his face, obviously relishing in the excited reception he’s receiving.

“Boys,” he hollers back, walking over to our group. “Sorry I’m late. Long night and busy morning.” He adjusts himself with a lascivious grin on his face as the group roars with laughter.

You have got to be kidding. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out this is Dawson’s brother, Abigail’s ex. I don’t know why it didn’t cross my mind that he would be here this morning. Of

course, he would be partaking in the week's wedding festivities, being the brother of the groom.

The douche is making his rounds, shaking hands and clasping backs in greeting when he reaches Marshall, and his eyes zero in on me.

“You must be Abby's new man.” No one has ever referred to Abigail as Abby that I know of, and if they have, they haven't lived to tell the tale. Kasey told me once that she absolutely hates the nickname. One of their coworkers called her Abby once, and according to Kasey, the scathing look she gave him had him quickly correcting himself and apologizing. Abigail made sure he was aware that her name was Abigail, not Abby, and went so far as to spell it for him so he wouldn't forget for future reference. No one ever called her that again. It makes sense now why she hated the nickname so much.

The man in front of me looks like some overgrown frat boy. His hair is messy and blond like his brother's, but he must not have had time to run a comb through it this morning. The polo shirt he's wearing looks to be about two sizes too small, probably to accentuate his thick arms, but also succeeding in accentuating his thick waistline as well.

“Jackson Hayes.” Taking his limp hand in a firm shake, I give him a smile that tells him I know exactly who he is and what he did to my girl.

“Alright, boys, tee time is in about ten minutes,” Marshall tells the rowdy crowd. “Jackson, I took the liberty of bringing an extra set of clubs for you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Barnes.”

We make it out to the golf carts, and wouldn't you know it, Davis and I are stuck in the same cart with Marshall and one of the groomsmen who looks at Davis like he's his long-lost hero. Davis continues to regale us with stories of his supposed exploits and lewd jokes. I can't believe Abigail's father tolerates this asshole, but it just reinforces the complete lack of solidarity he has with his oldest daughter. It astounds me that he hasn't laid this guy on his ass for what he did to his daughter or the way he lewdly talks about other women. It seems his balls are locked up tight in his wife's purse, even when she's not around.

“So, how long have you been dating Abby?” Davis asks me. I want to punch the cocky smirk off his face.

“*Abigail* and I have been together for a little while now.” I have no interest in this asshole's questions about my fake girlfriend, and I don't appreciate his use of a nickname I would bet my life on he knows she hates.

When Marshall gets out to line up his shot, Davis leans closer to me. “It's true what they say about redheads in bed.” He nudges my arm. “Am I right?” You have got to be kidding me.

“I don't know, David. What is it they say?” This asshole.

“It's Davis, bro. Lighten up a little. I'm just yanking your chain.”

“Look, *bro*, I don’t give a shit what your name is.” I know it’s Davis, but I couldn’t resist the dig. “If you think I have any intention of swapping stories with you about the girl you were dumb enough to cheat on and lose, then you’re more of an idiot than I gave you credit for.”

The guy sitting next to Davis looks between us like he can’t believe someone had the audacity *not* to kiss this guy’s ass.

“Oh, come on, man. It’s not like you haven’t sampled anything I haven’t been balls deep in. Tell me, does she still do that thing where—“

Just then, Marshall comes up behind Davis and slaps him on the back. “Your turn, son.” Davis shoots me a lecherous smirk, and it takes everything in me not to punch him square in the jaw. He thinks he has the upper hand because I won’t do anything to embarrass Abigail around her father. He might be right about that, but he has no idea that Abigail has come into her own the last few years away from him and her image-obsessed family. If he tries this shit around her, he’ll be in for a world of hurt. I, for one, can’t wait to sit back and enjoy the show.

CHAPTER 13

Abigail

I regret not having the car with me so I could make a hasty escape about three point five seconds after walking into the restaurant. My mother is dressing down one of the staff for not having the right shade of white for the place settings. According to my mother, any idiot can tell the difference between linen white and dove white and she just can't fathom how the staff setting up the event could possibly get it wrong. Ugh, this woman is in a class all to herself.

After sending the woman away to contemplate why the hell she's in this job to begin with, my mother turns to me and plasters on her fake public smile.

"Abigail. So glad you could make it." The way she says it has the hairs on the back of my neck rising, like I would have bailed on my sister. We came to town early, specifically for this luncheon, after yet another guilt trip from my mother about family obligations.

"I wouldn't have missed it, Mother." I return her fake-as-hell smile with one of my own.

“Well, I thought after the outburst you had at the house yesterday, you would have skipped it since you’re still holding Raelynn in such low esteem.” Umm, what?

“Why would Raelynn have anything to do with whether or not I came today?” As the words spill from my mouth, I’m hit with a realization. “Cesily invited her?”

“Of course, honey. She was married to her future brother-in-law for some time, and they became close. And we’re still close with her parents. It would have been in bad taste not to.” *Bad taste?* You have got to be kidding me. “She hasn’t made it in yet, but I’m sure she’ll be here. Poor thing has been through so much since the divorce.” My mother whispers the last word like it’s a secret Davis was a cheating asshole to begin with.

I scoff. “Yes, it was so tragic and completely unexpected.” My mother shoots me a withering glare, but before I can say anything further, a couple of the ladies from my mother’s country club come up to compliment her on the beautiful event.

“Oh, thank you. I have been working so hard on making sure everything is perfect for my little girl’s day. Can you believe they tried to lay out dove-white napkins?” She shakes her head like it’s the dumbest mistake anyone could have ever made. No, that would have been me thinking my family would have considered how awkward it would be to sit here and play nice with the girl who played tonsil hockey with my boyfriend’s dick. Jesus, what is wrong with these people?

I grab a drink from the passing waiter and take a sip of the bubbly. I have a feeling I'll be asking that question a lot more on this trip. Maybe I should make a drinking game out of it. Oh man, would Julia get a kick out of that one. I'd be drunk in twenty minutes flat.

I wander away from the social climbing pariahs my mother calls friends to find my sister. We haven't been close since the incident with Davis. It makes me sad that we don't talk anymore except for when I'm guilted into making an appearance during the holidays, but she chose her side, and it wasn't mine.

Cesily is holding court at a table fit for the queen my mother is making sure she is today. I walk over to her to say my hellos. When she sees me coming, she halts her conversation with one of the girls sitting next to her and a wide, saccharine smile stretches across her face. The crowd turns to look at me. Several of them have a look on their face like they just bit into a sour lemon. This isn't going to be awkward at all.

"Abigail, thank you so much for coming." She comes over to greet me with air kisses on both sides. I wonder for the millionth time how we got here. She used to squeal with excitement every time I came home from college, and now she's treating me like a stranger she had to invite because our mother insisted.

"Hey, Cesily. You look beautiful."

And she really does. My sister has always had a waifish, ethereal look to her, with her light-blonde hair and big blue

eyes. While my body is all curves, she has the body of a ballerina, tall and willowy.

She introduces me to the group of girls, all her bridesmaids apparently, and their sharp perusal of my appearance tells me I've been found lacking. I thought the emerald-green maxi dress paired with strappy gold sandals that I picked out was a win, but these girls don't seem to share my sense of style. It could be the plunging neckline that throws them off, but Jackson certainly appreciated it this morning if the heated look in his gaze when I emerged from the bathroom wearing it was any indication. I'm not about to don a pastel floral sundress like half of the other women here are wearing.

“So, I hear you're dating Jackson Hayes.” My sister is trying to make conversation to cut the tension. “When Mama told me who the Hayes family was, of course I had to go online and do a little stalking since you never mentioned him to me.”

Considering we've only talked a handful of times over the last five years, I have no idea when I would have told her about him.

“He is absolutely delicious, Abigail. I can see why you were keeping him to yourself.” Cesily giggles and the girls surrounding her follow suit. I can't tell if it's a veiled reference to the demise of my former relationship, or if she's trying to sweep the whole “we never talk anymore because you chose my asshole ex over your sister” thing under the rug. Knowing her, it's a little bit of both.

“He’s definitely something,” I say, taking a hearty sip of my champagne.

“I saw online that he has quite the reputation as a ladies’ man. There are so many pictures of him with a different woman in each one. I certainly hope you aren’t setting yourself up for a repeat of your last relationship.” She has got to be kidding me right now. Who says that? I want to slap the faux sad smile off her too-sweet face.

“Oh, don’t worry about me, dear sister. My eyes are wide open. To so many things these days.” I clink my glass to hers as my mother claps her hands and announces that lunch is going to be served, so we should find our seats. It looks as though I’m not the only one who’s changed in the last five years. My sister has grown into her claws like the society bitch my mother would have loved for me to be.

I’m seated with seven other women I don’t know. Must be the ones my mother doesn’t deem important enough to include in her social circle, so anything that comes out of her “problem child’s” mouth won’t hurt her. All I can think as I sit here and listen to the latest gossip about people I’ve known my whole life but haven’t bothered to stay in touch with for one reason or another, is what the hell am I doing here? I keep questioning why I’m putting Jackson and myself through this. My family couldn’t care less about me being here, other than it would look bad in front of all their fake friends if I didn’t show. I don’t know why I bother continuing to put on a charade in front of everyone. I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about any of these people.

Unfortunately for me, I was raised to have manners and walking out in the middle of this luncheon isn't something I can in good conscience bring myself to do. No matter how justified it would be. If biting my tongue and getting out alive is the best I can hope for, so be it. I'll keep my head down and say my goodbyes after an appropriate amount of time has passed.

We're halfway through the second course when the door to the restaurant opens, and a tall brunette with too much makeup, in a dress that she would never have been caught dead in in high school, walks in.

Raelynn.

I haven't seen her since I caught her with Davis, and it would have been preferable if I never saw her again. She rushes to my mother and bends to speak in her ear. Probably apologizing for being late. My mother smiles at her and pats her hand. If I ever showed up late to an event like this, all I'd get would be a tight smile and told to take my seat so as not to draw attention to my tardiness. She walks over to my sister next, who has a wide smile on her face and stands to hug her. That stings. It's certainly different from the not-so-warm reception I received.

Raelynn takes her seat next to her mother, and I try to stomach the Waldorf salad on the bed of arugula. The creaminess of the dish is making my stomach roll post-hangover, or it might be seeing the woman I thought of as a friend for so many years.

My head is hazy, the events of that Fourth of July barbeque replaying over and over. There's a whooshing sound in my ears and I feel sweat gathering at my hairline as a result of the anger coursing through me right now.

“Excuse me, ladies. I'll be right back.” Splashing some water on my face and doing some of those deep breathing exercises Lindsey raves about seems like a good plan. Never let them see you sweat. It's the Southern way.

Thank God the restroom is in the opposite direction of Raelynn's table. I don't know if I would have been able to walk past her without “accidentally” knocking her plate onto her lap. That thought has me almost smiling as I open the bathroom door and head to the sink.

When I look up, the strong woman who doesn't let anyone fuck with her happiness is staring back at me. I can do this. No one gets to have that kind of power over me. If everyone in the room wants to show her pity because of the scandal that rocked my family's little social circle, then so be it. It's not like I live here anymore. After the wedding, I'll be on my way back to my real life, where the people that actually care about me are. Not this fake, air-kiss bullshit.

Taking a damp towel, I dab it over my face and behind my neck. There, much better. I can go out there and be a fake bitch with the best of them. I don't need to look at her or talk to her, and after lunch, I can sneak out and no one will be the wiser. With a firm nod of my head and a plan set, I give myself one more confident glance in the mirror and turn to go back to my

table. The door opens in front of me, halting my exit, and there stands Raelynn with a nervous smile on her face.

“Hi Abigail,” she says softly.

“Raelynn.” I nod my head and try to pass her, but she doesn’t move from the doorway.

“I was hoping we could talk for a moment.” Her soft voice is pleading, and I look up to the ceiling, taking a deep breath. *Why, God, why are you doing this to me right now?*

I take a step back to allow her entrance, but I don’t smile or encourage her to talk. Leaning against the sink, I cross my arms in front of my chest with a clenched jaw and impatiently stare at her as she links her fingers, squeezing them together. It’s a nervous habit she’s had since we were kids. Regardless of what she has to say, I have no intention of making it easier on her.

Finally, mustering the courage to speak, she looks up from her hands. “I am so sorry for what Davis and I did. For what I did to you. I should have never believed anything he told me. It was so stupid.”

I never allowed her to try to explain her side of what happened that day. As far as I was concerned, she was a home-wrecking bitch who didn’t deserve my time. I really don’t want to hear her out now, but I figure in for a penny, in for a pound.

“What did he tell you?” Do I really want to know this?

“He told me that you two were as good as over. He just hadn’t wanted to break it off before the party because his parents would throw a fit. He said he knew you felt the same because you never wanted to spend time with him, and when he would try to come see you during the last semester of school, you would turn him down, claiming you were busy with your studies.” She crosses her arms in front of her and begins rubbing them as though to comfort herself. “He told me that he always had a thing for me, but his parents were always pressuring him to date you in high school, so he did. When his brother started dating your sister, and both of your guys’ parents started talking about how wonderful it would be if you and Davis and Cesily and Dawson got married and started families together, he said he realized he couldn’t be stuck in that life.”

I don’t know if Davis really felt that way. After finding out about the extracurriculars he and his frat brothers participated in, I highly doubt he was telling the truth. But it’s evident that Raelynn believed him. For being a beautiful and smart girl, she’s always had shitty self-esteem, especially when we were younger. I never understood it, but I loved her like a sister and always thought she was amazing. That’s what was so painful. Not the Davis part, because fuck him, but the betrayal from her.

“Honestly, Raelynn, what you did was the worst part of the whole thing. You were one of my best friends and you betrayed me in the worst possible way. Then you went and married him. I don’t know what you hope to accomplish with

your apology, but I don't know if forgiveness is in the cards for me."

She looks down again with a teary sheen covering her eyes.

"I screwed up. There was so much pressure from my mom about finding the 'right husband.'" She clears her throat, and a tear escapes. "I was pregnant. That's why we got married. There was no way either of our families would have tolerated having a baby out of wedlock. So, we threw together a wedding and planned to announce the pregnancy a month later, hoping no one would do the math." She lets out a pained laugh. "Turns out it wasn't necessary because I miscarried a couple weeks after the wedding."

Wow. I was not expecting that. Nor was I expecting the urge to hug her to overpower any ill will I have toward her. Taking her in my arms, I give her a tight squeeze. No matter how many times I cried over what she did to me or how much I hated her for it, I'll never be the kind of woman who isn't sympathetic to something so devastating happening to someone.

We break apart, and I grab a paper towel, run it under cool water and hand it to her.

"I'm sorry you went through that." And I truly mean it.

"Thanks." She wipes under her eyes and gives me a small smile. "We tried again afterward, but it never happened. Not too long after that, he started going to strip clubs and doing God knows what else. When I tried to talk to my mother about it, she just told me it's a cross we have to bear when we marry

rich men.” Raelynn rolls her eyes and throws the paper towel in the trash. “I knew you wouldn’t want to talk to me again, and I tried to talk to Julia, but she turned the hose on me the second I walked up her front steps.” I shouldn’t chuckle at that, but I can’t help one from escaping. That doesn’t surprise me in the least.

“Sounds about right,” I tell her.

Raelynn shrugs her shoulders with a sad smile. “I deserved it. What I did was horrible. There’s no excuse. I don’t expect a friendship or anything, I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am.”

She turns to leave the bathroom and I call after her. When she turns back around, there’s cautious hope in her gaze.

“Thank you. It took a lot of courage to talk to me, and I appreciate it.” I’m not going to tell her we’re going to be friends again, even though I can tell that’s what she was hoping for. But I can offer her forgiveness.

She nods her head and leaves.

After a moment of processing what just took place, I return to my table. Holy shit, I can’t believe I stayed so calm and collected. I’m far from being able to completely forgive her, who knows if that’ll ever happen, but letting go isn’t as far-fetched as I thought. It’s time to cue the Disney songs, I guess.

CHAPTER 14

Jackson

I hate golf. It's a waste of time and energy. Being in the unseasonably warm sun all day has exhausted me. Not to mention the three Lynchburg lemonades I drank to try to get through the experience without punching Abigail's asshole ex in the face. Or telling her dad to put the fucker in his place every time he made some disparaging remark about any and every woman we saw on the green. I swear to Christ, if I have to be around that guy for any length of time ever again, I won't stop myself from clobbering him after the first rude comment, regardless of who's around.

After a couple more drinks and a late lunch at the club, I decided taking a cab back to the hotel was the right call. I paid one of the valets to follow me in my car and cab it back to the country club so I would have my car here. I want to take Abigail out for dinner later since she probably needs to unwind after enduring her sister's bridal luncheon. From what I understand, we're expected to attend some sort of joint bachelor/bachelorette night out the day after tomorrow, so we can relax tonight and have all day tomorrow to ourselves.

When I get back to our room, Abigail is lying on our bed, napping. Not wanting to disturb her, but not being able to resist being close to her, I quietly toe my shoes off and gingerly lie down next to her. Even with the easy movements, she stirs and turns her sleepy smile in my direction.

“Hey,” she whispers softly. “Have fun?”

I return her smile. “No, but I’m happy to be back here with you. Go back to sleep.” My hand gently moves a tendril of hair away from her face. Abigail closes her eyes and falls back asleep, the smile remaining on her face.

Lying here watching her sleep is the highlight of this afternoon. Who knew I was such a sap. Abigail lets out a very unladylike snore before burrowing herself farther into her pillow. A quiet chuckle escapes me as I remember her staunch denial that she snores. The soft hum of the fan and the peacefulness of lying next to her has my eyelids growing heavy, and soon sleep overtakes me as well.

Feeling a weight across my chest, I slowly make my way back to consciousness. Looking down, I see a long mane of red hair covering it. I smile to myself and tilt my head, taking in the sweet smell of Abigail’s hair. Coconut. This morning in the shower, when I saw the bottle of shampoo she used, I may have taken a deep inhale from the bottle. The coconut scent will be forever linked to Abigail in my mind and this moment when she found comfort in my embrace. She’s asleep, of

course, which is probably the only reason she's this close to me. She was kidding last night about the pillow wall, but still stayed rooted to her side of the bed. My hand finds its way to her hair, and I brush it away from her face, running my fingers through the soft strands. Abigail's hand grazes against my stomach and I have to bite back a moan. She lifts her head, and her sweet smile greets me.

"Hi," I say with a smile on my face.

"Hey." Her voice is rough from sleep, and the sound isn't making the situation below my waist any easier to handle. Or not handle, as the case may be. She looks at me with soft eyes for a moment before she realizes the position she's in. Her eyes shutter as she clears her throat and rolls away from me onto her back. I think I liked sleepy Abigail better.

Without mentioning the position we woke up in, I sit up and discreetly adjust my thickening length.

"I made dinner reservations for us tonight if you're up for it," I tell her as she swings her legs over the side of the bed.

"Sounds great. Where are we going?"

I asked the bartender at the club for a restaurant that was romantic but didn't scream *trying to get laid*. "Maison Blanche. Our reservations are in an hour. I don't know anything about it other than it's French, so I'm assuming they'll have a decent wine list." They do, I already checked.

"I love that place. Let me freshen up a bit then we can head over. It's not too far from here." She gets up and walks to the

bathroom. I scrub a hand down my face, willing this fucking hard-on to stand down.

When Abigail emerges from the bathroom, I'm dressed in a white button-down with a gray jacket and a pair of formfitting slacks. The weather during the day is warm, but once the sun goes down, it gets a bit chilly in the evenings.

"I thought we could walk if it's close enough," I suggest.

"Sure, let me just grab a jacket." She slides on a light blazer-type jacket over her hot-as-hell green dress. It's the same one she wore this afternoon, and the plunging neckline makes her gorgeous tits look downright delectable. And there goes my dick again.

Clearing my throat, I grab my wallet and head to the door, opening it for her.

"Shall we?" I ask, and she smiles as we head out the door.

We're immediately seated when we arrive at the restaurant, and I select a red wine that I know Abigail loves. The same one, in fact, that she swiped from my apartment when she stormed out all those months ago. *God, that feels like a lifetime ago.*

"So, how was golf?" she asks, pretending to choke on the word. Her feelings toward the sport apparently mirror mine.

I roll my eyes. “Exciting as ever,” I reply flatly. “That ex of yours sure is a fucking tool though. What the hell did you ever see in him? I can’t imagine he was much better when you guys were younger.” That’s what confused me the most after meeting Davis. He definitely isn’t the type I could see Abigail tolerating, let alone dating.

She chuckles as she brings the glass of wine to her lips and takes a sip. “He hides that side of himself very well.” She sets her glass down, but her fingers stay clutched around the stem. “I found out later all the shit he used to get up to. None of it like the perfect doting boyfriend he pretended to be in front of our families and me.”

I stroke my finger along the ones she’s holding tightly onto the glass with, and she relaxes them. I take the opportunity to pry her grip away and link our fingers together, resting them on the table.

“Hey, that says everything about him and nothing about you. He’s an asshole, but at least you found out before you married him.”

“Yeah, thank God for small miracles, huh?” One side of her lips turns up in a half smile as she releases her hand from mine and takes another sip of the delicious red.

“I ran into Raelynn at the luncheon,” she tells me with a quirk of her brow.

My eyes go wide with surprise. Why, I’m not sure. Of course her mom and sister invited her. It’s not as though they would be concerned with how it would make Abigail feel.

“Does she still have all her teeth?” I’m only half joking.

Abigail giggles and shakes her head. “Yes. I save my violent tendencies for special occasions.”

“Like plane rides?”

She scrunches her nose and smiles at me. God, she’s adorable. “Something like that. We actually had a decent talk.” Abigail tells me the sad story of her former friend’s marriage and how it came about.

“I honestly felt bad she doesn’t have anyone to turn to. I get she did a lot of that to herself, but when I left Charleston, I met Kasey and Lindsey. I’ve never been alone like that, y’know?”

This is a far cry from the woman who explained to me what happened before we came. Then, I could feel the anger at what they did rolling off her in waves. Now, she seems almost sad for her onetime friend.

“I’m not saying we’re going to be the best of friends, or friends at all again for that matter, but hearing what she went through, I don’t know, she fell for his bullshit too. I might not forgive her yet, but I’m on my way there.” Abigail shrugs her shoulders while letting out a sigh.

“Years of anger and hurt don’t just disappear after one conversation,” I tell her. “But hey, if you can forgive me for being a raging douchebag, then you can forgive Raelynn at some point, right?” My lips tip up in a grin.

Abigail rolls her eyes at me. “Who says I have?” She raises an eyebrow in challenge, but the glint in her eye tells me she

knows good and well that she has.

We enjoy the French cuisine and wine, the relaxing dinner having the intended effect, and Abigail is in better spirits after her time with her mom and sister. She gave me a rundown of her and Cesily's conversation. I'd hoped maybe her sister would be somewhat in her corner after all this time, but it seems she's gone the way of their mom, image over family loyalty.

After dinner, Abigail and I decide to wander around the city. The slow stroll through the streets of downtown is a far cry from walking in Philadelphia. The air here is sweeter. I asked the cabby on my way back to the hotel this afternoon what that sweet, fruity fragrance was, and he told me they were the Tea Olive trees that bloom from fall through winter. It's intoxicating. The streets are lined with old Southern buildings ranging from the colonial era to Art Deco. The eclectic style somehow works here and gives the city character. Never something I would have noticed had I not been a fan of evening walks myself.

Looking over at Abigail, it strikes me how at home she seems. It's a huge difference from when we arrived yesterday. Her red locks are in loose waves down her back and the worry lines that ran across her face and mouth yesterday have smoothed. As she walks next to me, a small smile brightens her face.

"I forgot how much I love this area." She takes a deep breath of the fragrant air as she grasps my hand in hers. This is

new. Abigail never struck me as a hand-holder, nor has she ever initiated this kind of innocent physical contact with me before. What's even more surprising is how much I like walking down the street with her holding her hand.

"You seem calmer today," I observe.

"There's something about being here again after a few years away. Yeah, the family stuff still sucks, but I've missed the city. There's a kind of magic here." She smiles and squeezes my hand. "The company isn't half bad either."

"That's half a compliment, but I'll take it." I look into her smiling green eyes, and I'm overcome with the urge to feel her lips against mine. Not for it to lead anywhere else, but just to feel her soft lips pressed to mine in a place that makes her happy.

Abigail starts laughing under her breath as a group of what I presume are tourists walk past us, led by some sort of guide.

"I always thought those tours were so cheesy," she tells me, watching the people with their cameras out, ready to snap pictures.

"What are they doing?"

"It's a ghost tour. The city's filled with them. They walk around graveyards and supposedly haunted houses to scare the vacationers." She rolls her eyes, but I'm intrigued.

"Let's tag along. I've never done one before."

"You can't be serious. You don't believe in that stuff, do you?" Skepticism and mirth dance in her eyes.

“Maybe, maybe not, but when in Rome.” Clutching her hand in mine, I pull her to the back of the group and act like we’ve been here the whole time. The tour guide drones on about the house in front of us, apparently well known for its ghost sightings of a Civil War widow. The crowd stops to take pictures as the guide catches us freeloading on his tour. I leave Abigail and approach the guide, pulling a wad of twenties from my wallet.

“Mind if we follow? I’ve never been on a ghost tour.” I hold out the cash to him, which is probably more than what he charges, but it’s worth it to me. This isn’t remotely anything I would think to do on a date, but seeing Abigail laugh at my silly excitement has me rethinking my typical strategy with this woman.

“We’re more than halfway done but suit yourself.” He takes the money, and I go back to Abigail as he resumes the walk.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be heading to the Unitarian Cemetery for our final destination. The cemetery is believed to be home to the ghost of Annabel Lee, the lost love of Edgar Allan Poe. It’s believed that she appears to visitors next to her unmarked grave.” The guide goes further into the tragic tale of young Annabel and her death.

The overgrown foliage of the cemetery lends to the creepy factor enough so that nervous anticipation at what we might encounter runs through my body. Not that I would admit that out loud.

Abigail must see the apprehension on my face. “Are you scared of ghosts, Jackson?” Her incredulous tone doesn’t go unnoticed, and I narrow my eyes in her direction.

The guide continues with his speech about the lady in white, thought to be the ghost of Lavinia Fisher, the first female serial killer.

“Oh, come on,” I begin. “I know you have brass balls and all, but this doesn’t creep you out in the slightest? I don’t know about you, but I can go my whole life without meeting the ghost of a serial killer.”

Abigail laughs at me and links her arm through mine, pulling me tightly to her side. “Don’t worry, honey, I’ll protect you.” She shakes her head, and we continue following the small group until we make it out of the cemetery and the tour guide lets us know we’ve reached the end. We hear a couple people grumble that they didn’t get to see anything. Personally, I’m not disappointed in that fact.

We part ways with the guide and make our way back to the hotel. Abigail’s lips are pressed tightly together like she’s holding back her laughter, and she keeps glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Out with it,” I tell her.

Laughter bursts from her, and she stops on the sidewalk for a moment, putting her hand to her chest as she tries to catch her breath.

“Sorry,” she exclaims, waving her hand in front of me. “It’s just that it was your idea, and I swear to God, at one point, I thought I was going to have to hold you upright if you fainted,” she wheezes out, laughing some more at my expense, but quickly composes herself. At least she tries to. “If you’re afraid of ghosts, why did you suggest we go on a ghost tour?” For this right here. To make her smile and laugh. I don’t care that it’s at my expense, just seeing her happy is why I’ve been doing a lot of things on this trip.

I shrug my shoulders. “It sounded like a good idea at the time.” I grab her hand as we continue our walk back to the hotel. “And for your information, I was only holding on to you so tightly so that you wouldn’t trip in your heels. There was never a chance of me fainting.”

Another laugh escapes her. “Keep telling yourself that. I’m sure you’ll somehow figure out a way to regain your manhood.” More laughter falls from her lips as we make our way into the hotel lobby toward the elevator.

Stepping inside, I’m overcome with the need to taste her laughter. I might get shut down, but she did just insult my manhood. If I don’t try, I’ll never gain any footing with her.

When the doors close to the elevator, I grab her hand and pull her in front of me, spinning us so her back is against the wall. Her hands go to my chest and mine cup her cheeks.

“What are you doing?” she whispers as I bring my face just an inch from hers. Her eyes are hooded and darkened with lust.

“Proving my manhood.” I crash my lips to hers, and to my surprise, she doesn’t fight her desire like she has so many times before. Her hand travels up my chest and loops around my neck, pulling me tighter into her kiss. Running my hands down her back and over her ass, I pull her harder into my thickening erection. Abigail moans at the feeling and lifts her thigh around my hip, rubbing herself over the bulge in my pants.

I break the kiss to trail my mouth down the smooth skin of her neck as we grind against each other.

“That’s it, baby. Do you want me to get you off just like this, with you rubbing yourself all over me?” Her answering moan has the rest of the blood in my head running south, making me almost light-headed with a desperate need to be inside her. It’s been too long, and her lips are too damn delicious to think about anything other than the feel of her body writhing against mine.

The elevator doors open on our floor, and I’m momentarily worried that the interruption will bring Abigail back to her senses and all the reasons she’s so determined to not sleep with me again. She pushes me back, and I think this is the moment she tells me it won’t go any further.

Turning to me with a wicked glint in her eye, she holds the elevator door open. “You coming?”

I tip my lip up in a half smile. “Lead the way, Red.”

CHAPTER 15

Abigail

I make long strides toward the door, Jackson following close behind. When we reach the hotel room, I dig through my purse for the key as he swipes my hair to the side, running his nose along the column of my neck, breathing me in.

“Fuck, Abigail. You smell delicious. I’m going to taste every inch of your skin just as soon as you get that damn door open.” His voice is gravelly and delicious, sending shocks from my neck to my core.

I laugh a little at his impatient growl as I search for the room key.

“Dammit, woman, hurry up.” He nips my earlobe while one of his hands slips inside my dress, caressing the underside of my breast. God, that feels so good I almost lose track of what I’m doing. When he plucks a sensitive nipple with his long finger, I’m shot back to reality.

“You’re distracting me,” I complain weakly.

“I would say I’m sorry, but we both know it would be a lie,” he whispers in my ear.

His other hand slides from my hip to right under my belly button and he presses me harder back into him, letting me feel the evidence of his arousal.

“Hurry the fuck up, or I’m lifting this dress and burying my cock inside you for anyone walking down the hall to see.” He rubs himself harder into my ass to punctuate his point.

My fingers finally brush the card, and I pull it out of my purse with a triumphant exhale.

Waving it over the reader, the door unlocks, and we practically fall into the room. Jackson slams the door behind us with a kick, his hands never once leaving my body, almost as if he’s afraid if they do, I’ll disappear. *Not a chance*. I’m so damn tired of fighting this. This man has shown me time and time again on this trip and even before, if I’m being honest with myself, that he has my back. He may have hoped to get me in bed on this trip, but I was adamant it wouldn’t happen. But he still came. He still showed up when I needed him. I can’t say that about many people in my life. I’ve realized the trust issues I’ve had toward him are just that, mine. He’s done nothing but show me that he isn’t going anywhere. Maybe I should finally stop expecting the worst from him. With the way I feel when his lips are on my body, I simply can’t think of a reason not to.

Spinning me in his arms to face him, he pulls my hair into a low ponytail and yanks my head back so I’m looking him in the eye.

“I want you so fucking bad, Abigail. Being so close to you and not being able to touch you has been torture. Tell me you’re ready to put us both out of our misery.” He nips my lip as I slip off his jacket. His hand drops from my hair so I can finish taking his jacket off and I throw it on the small sofa.

“This clear enough for you?” I smile up at him as I begin to unbutton his white shirt, exposing the bronze skin of his chest down to the happy trail disappearing in his pants.

He wastes no time unclasping the dress from around my neck and slowly bringing the zipper down, trailing his finger along my exposed skin.

The dress pools at my feet and I’m left in front of him in nothing but my strapless bra and sheer panties.

“You’re a dream. Fuck, if I had known this is what you had on underneath, I don’t think we would have made it to dinner.” His eyes drink me in as I step out of the dress. Bending at the waist to undo the clasps of my shoes, he stops me.

“Not so fast.” He grabs me by the waist and lifts me. My legs wrap around his hips as he attacks my mouth with his, our tongues dueling in wet, desperate kisses. Holding me up under my ass, he carries us to the bed and sets me gently on the edge, kneeling before me. His hands grasp the thin material on each side of my hip as he slowly pulls my panties down my legs, exposing my wet center.

Grabbing my ankles, he throws them over his shoulders with my shoes still on. He’s at perfect eye level with my pussy,

but instead of looking there, he looks me straight in the eye and trails his tongue along my seam.

“You taste fucking amazing,” he growls as he buries his head between my thighs and eats at me ferociously, moaning as he sucks my clit into his mouth. The sensations are overwhelming me, and I throw myself back on the mattress, arching my back as I let out a long moan.

“Fuck, Jackson, that mouth of yours should be illegal.”

He chuckles as he enters two fingers into my sopping-wet channel, pumping in and out before turning them inside me and running them tantalizingly along my G-spot.

“Holy shit, I’m about to come,” I gasp, surprised he was able to bring me here so quickly.

He lifts his head from between my thighs but keeps pumping his fingers in and out, rubbing my favorite spot only he seems to find so easily.

“Give it to me, Red. I want to taste your pleasure.” His mouth returns to my clit as he licks it in fast circles first, then changing the motion to up and down and side to side, never letting up on the delicious assault.

The sensations are so fucking amazing I almost wish I wasn’t so close, but his talented tongue and fingers refuse to let me hold back my orgasm. I come undone, back bowing of the bed as my fingers twist in the sheets, screaming out his name. The quick, torturous licks of his tongue don’t stop until he’s wrung every last shudder from my body.

Jackson sits back on his haunches and lifts his head, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. Under normal circumstances, the look would probably annoy the hell out of me, but I can't be mad right now. He has every reason to be proud of himself after that performance.

"I could watch you come every day and never tire of the look you have on your face right now." He slowly prowls up my body, taking small nips along my fevered skin before he reaches my mouth and kisses me senseless. Tasting myself on his tongue reawakens the bundle of nerves he so thoroughly satisfied moments ago.

"I may let you," I purr into his mouth, fingers running over the smooth planes of his muscular back.

"You're so damn agreeable when you've just come. Maybe I should give you orgasms every day." He chuckles as he trails his lips to my neck, gently biting the soft flesh beneath my ear.

"Splendid idea. Let's see how much more agreeable you can make me tonight." I smile as I finish removing the shirt from his body, throwing it over his shoulder, not caring where it lands. He stands and grabs his wallet from his pocket, throwing it next to me before he removes his pants, his hard cock barely contained by his black boxer briefs. I grab it and take out the two condoms he has stashed in there.

"Please tell me you brought more than these." I look at him and raise an eyebrow, waiting for his answer.

The look on his face is sheepish as he rubs the back of his neck, suddenly seeming uncomfortable.

“I have a box in my bag. I didn’t want to presume, but I wanted to be prepared. You know, just in case.” His cautious optimism is adorable and unexpected.

“Good thing one of us was thinking ahead.” Leaning forward, I tug down the waistband of his boxer briefs to allow his cock to spring out. We have yet to become properly acquainted, this gloriously thick cock and I. Running my tongue around the head tentatively pulls a hiss from Jackson. *Oh, he likes that, does he?* I drop to my knees and slip his boxers farther down his legs so I can have access to his balls, taking one in my mouth while I fist his hard length and jack him.

“*Fuuuck,*” Jackson moans, his hands coming to my hair, loosely pulling it away from my face. “Goddamn Abigail, that feels so fucking good. Put me in your mouth.”

Pulling away from him but never letting go of his hard length, I look up at him with a quirk of my lips. “Say please.” I arch my eyebrow as he looks down at me with pleading eyes. I may be the one on my knees, but I know I hold all the power.

“Please, for the love of everything holy, wrap your gorgeous fucking mouth around my cock.” His thumbs move to the side of my face, and he strokes my cheeks. Jackson is very aware of the power I hold here as well.

Lucky for him, I’m feeling very generous after the earth-shattering orgasm he gave me.

I lean forward and run my tongue from base to tip, opening my mouth wide and taking him in, wrapping my lips around

him as I suck my way down and back up, feeling his legs shake with pleasure as he tries to hold himself steady. His manly scent surrounds me and sends a shot of lust barreling through me as I continue sucking and licking his delicious shaft. Giving head has never turned me on like this before, but it has never been Jackson in my mouth before.

“Oh shit, baby, your mouth feels so good.” Hearing his praise excites me more than I would have imagined. *Do I have a praise kink?* Leave it to Jackson to be the one to find it.

His cock hits the back of my throat, causing me to gag, but it doesn't deter me from trying again. His low hisses and soft moans of pleasure spur on my movements. I want to make him feel as good as he made me and watch him lose control like I did. When he hits the back of my throat again, instead of pulling back, I swallow around his length.

“Holy fuck. That's it. You suck me so fucking good, baby.” I look up into his eyes, which are nearly black with desire. His mouth is open slightly as he breathes heavily. With my eyes locked on his, I take him to the back of my throat again, deliberately swallowing slowly to prolong the sweet torture. He throws his head back with a loud moan and pulls himself from my mouth.

“As much as I love that mouth, I need to be inside you when I come.” If he thinks I'm going to argue that he's crazy.

Jackson effortlessly flips me onto my stomach and pulls my hips up.

“Hands on the bed,” he commands as he reaches over and grabs a condom. One second, he has the condom wrapper open and the next, he’s slamming into me. I let out a loud moan as I deliciously stretch around him. His fingers find my clit as he strums it with expert precision, bringing me to the edge fast and hard. My hands clutch the sheets as his other hand fists my hair, the slight sting on my scalp making me moan louder. He pounds into me ruthlessly, just as desperate as I am to come. My walls begin to pulse and only a moment later, an intense orgasm rips through my body as I scream out his name. That’s all it takes for him to bellow out his own release as his cock jerks in me. His hands tighten around my hair as he continues pumping through his orgasm.

As soon as he slows, his fingers massage my scalp as though he just realized how hard he was pulling. He leans over me, arms caging me in while he presses his firm, sweaty chest against my back.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks breathlessly.

“Not at all.” The only thing I feel right now is intense pleasure from my incredible orgasm.

He kisses the back of my neck as he pulls out of me, and I fall in a heap onto the bed. His hand trails down my spine, causing goose bumps to erupt on my skin before he walks away to take care of the condom. God, what this man’s simple touch does to me.

Jackson disposes of the condom in the bathroom, coming back to the bedroom to find me in the same position as I was

when he left. I hear a chuckle behind me before he flips me over and moves me up the bed. His tall body covers mine as he lazily kisses me. I return his kiss but can barely move after being fucked within an inch of my life.

“Tired, baby?” It’s odd to hear him call me that considering most of the nicknames we have for each other aren’t exactly what some would consider kind or sweet. I can’t say I hate it though.

“Mmhmm.” Forming actual words isn’t going to happen for me right now.

Jackson chuckles and rolls onto his back, pulling me over his chest.

“Let’s get some rest. We still have a whole box of condoms to go through and fucking comatose girls really isn’t my thing.”

I smack his chest. “Asshole,” I tell him, but there’s no real heat behind it. He grabs my hand, bringing it to his mouth and kisses it softly before laying it back on his hard chest.

“But I’m *your* asshole.”

Smiling at his words as sleep overtakes me, my last conscious thought is I’m okay with that.

I don’t know what god-awful time it is in the morning, but I have a strong feeling it’s too early for my phone to be buzzing

so damn loud next to me. Jackson and I put a significant dent in the box of condoms last night. I don't know if he slept at all. It seemed every time I stirred next to him, he was there showering my body with kisses, quickly sheathing himself and fucking me into oblivion over and over again. I don't think I've ever come so many times in one night. The only complaint I have this morning is the manner in which I'm being woken up. And that I'm being woken up at all.

I reach over to the bedside table without opening my eyes, blindly searching for my phone. Just as I find it, it stops vibrating. My arm drops to the side of the bed and only a second later, I feel Jackson's hand wander to my ass, gently kneading the soft flesh. This is a much preferable way to be woken. I sigh in pleasure as he rains kisses over my back, slowly moving his lips to my bare shoulder. Then that damn phone starts ringing again. Growling into my pillow as I reach for it, Julia's name flashes on the screen.

"Hey, Jules," I greet, my voice husky from lack of sleep and the number of times I screamed in pleasure last night.

"Finally," she exaggerates as though she's been calling me all morning. "Still not a morning person, I take it."

"Julia, there are many things I've learned to accept about myself. My utter distaste for mornings being one of them. What's going on?"

She chuckles into the phone. "I was hoping you guys had time to stop by the ranch at some point on your trip. I wasn't sure what all the wedding festivities would involve."

I look over at Jackson's sleepy face. This man is sexy as fuck, even as tired as he is. Staying in bed all day with him sounds amazing, but I rarely make the trip down here, and I'd like to spend more time with Julia while we're here.

"We can come today. I don't have to do any wedding stuff 'til tomorrow evening. And it'll give me a chance to tell you all about the luncheon from hell."

Jackson gives me a wicked grin as his hand moves to my breast, and he runs his palm over my nipple. I bite my lip and give him a wide-eyed look, but he pays it no mind.

"Give us an hour." Jackson shakes his head. "Make that two, Julia."

Her laughter rings in my ear as I hang up and throw my cell back on the nightstand. Jackson's mouth latches onto my nipple and I feel his rapidly growing cock at my hip.

"How is it even possible you're hard again?" I moan as I run my fingers through his sex-tousled hair.

He pops his mouth from my nipple. "You're naked, so I'm hard. It's not rocket science."

"We have to get up and get ready. And I need a coffee injection STAT." I'm not making any move to remove his mouth from my breast, so I doubt my words carry much weight.

"I was thinking a different kind of injection," he tells me, grinding his dick into my side.

A laugh bursts from my lips. “Jesus, that was cheesy as hell, even from you.”

His own body shakes with laughter. “Yeah, not my best work. Someone had me up all night begging for my dick. I’m not at the top of my game this morning.”

“Excuse you,” I exclaim. “I swear, it was like every time I moved, you were there waiting for me to turn over onto your dick.”

His laughter continues. “Again, Red, you were naked. Enough said.”

I roll away from him and his wandering fingers, stretching my arms over my head with my back to him.

“Sore?” he asks as he rubs a hand over my back. I groan at his touch, loving the feel of him rubbing out those sore knots that have accumulated over the last few days due to the stress of having to come here.

“Nothing a long shower won’t fix. How about you order up some breakfast and I’ll hop in the shower.”

Jackson rolls to the side of the bed and pulls on his boxers, heading over to the menu in the living room.

“Anything in particular?” he asks as he scans the menu.

“Surprise me.” I walk into the bathroom, not bothering to put any clothes on. After last night, he’s seen every inch of my body and licked it twice. The memories of last night come flooding in, making me smile as I turn the water on and step under the hot stream.

My eyes are closed with my back to the water, letting it do its magic with the knots when I hear the shower door open. I open my eyes to see Jackson stepping in, naked as the day he was born, with a wicked glint in his eye.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he slides his arms around my waist, moving them down to grab my ass.

He leans in to nuzzle my neck. “Surprising you.”

Oh, I think I like his surprises.

CHAPTER 16

Jackson

I can't keep my hands off Abigail. Whether it's in bed or out, that woman is temptation personified. We finished our shower that took twice as long than it should have, but again, I can't keep my hands to myself when she's around and she's given me carte blanche to touch her all the ways I've been wanting to for weeks. Well, she hasn't pushed me away yet, so same thing in my book.

Riding to the ranch is no exception. I'm driving, but I keep one hand on her knee or rub her thigh. Not in any sexual way, though it wouldn't take much to go that direction, but I love feeling her warmth under my palm. This is the first time I've seen Abigail in a pair of jeans, and the sight nearly knocked me over. The way the fabric tightens over her ass, showing off the curves I had my mouth all over last night, almost had me yanking them down her thighs and showing her how fucking hot I thought she looked in them. With my tongue. But we were already late to meet Julia, and I knew she was going to need more coffee for the drive out there.

Abigail is relaxed as we drive, her head leaning against the headrest, smiling out the window as she watches the scenery go by. She lazily turns that content smile in my direction. I like to think I had something to do with that. It could be because we're driving out to one of her favorite places, or it could be the orgasms I gave her last night and today in the shower. I'm not entirely sure, but I'm okay taking some of the credit.

When we pull through the gates, I don't know what I was expecting, but the sprawling estate laid out before me isn't it. The girl I met at the bar didn't seem like the type to live in a grand Antebellum style mansion, but there she is, sitting on the front porch with a glass of what I presume is sweet tea in her hand.

"Does Julia live here?" I ask, the contrast taking a minute to reconcile in my mind.

"Yeah. Her grandparents built the house when they lived here. This isn't some little hobby ranch. Her grandparents turned a struggling cattle ranch into what it is today, and Julia's dad has almost doubled the acreage and cattle since he took over before her and her brothers were born. Her family has been in the business for generations. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the steaks you've eaten at those fancy restaurants you like to go to have come from this ranch."

Abigail looks at me with pride for what her friend and the ranchers before her built on this very land.

"Well, color me impressed. I didn't know I was in the presence of ranching royalty the other night."

Abigail smirks at me. “Just goes to show, Prince, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

No, you certainly can’t.

She gets out of the car and shuts the door before I have a chance to come around and help her out like the gentleman I’m trying to become.

As I make my way over to the front steps, Abigail and Julia are paying me no mind as they embrace like they haven’t seen each other in ages, instead of just a couple days ago.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Julia exclaims as she rocks a laughing Abigail side to side.

“I know, it’s been too long since I’ve been out here.” Abigail unlatches herself from Julia’s embrace and has a look around the sprawling property. “But it still feels like I never left.” She smiles at Julia, then at me. The happiness she feels in one of her favorite places is written all over her face, from her wide smile to her bright eyes. It’s a good look on her.

Julia turns to me and reaches out her hand. “Jackson, glad you could get this one out of bed this morning to come for a visit.”

I chuckle as I grasp her palm. “Has she been like that in the morning her whole life?” I ask.

Julia laughs with me at Abigail’s expense. “Always.”

“I don’t appreciate you two ganging up on me,” Abigail says, pretending to be annoyed.

“Aww, come on now, Red, we’re just having some fun.” I wink at Abigail, and she rolls her eyes playfully.

Julia looks at me with wide eyes.

“You have nicknames for each other?” she says with a smile.

“Several actually. I like to call him Prince,” Abigail responds.

“I’m her Prince Charming.” I touch my chest and flutter my eyelashes as the girls chuckle.

Abigail turns to Julia. “Try Prince of Darkness,” she says dryly.

Julia shakes her head at our antics and turns to walk up the porch. “How about some tea and then a ride? Jackson, how are you with horses?” Julia asks.

“I know my way around them. It’s been a while since I’ve been on one though.”

Abigail turns to me, tilting her head to the side with her brows scrunched down. “I didn’t know you rode.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Red.” I smile at her as I follow her up the stairs into the house, my hand unconsciously moving to the small of her back as though it’s the most natural thing in the world.

The house is beautiful. My mom would have a field day in here with all the details and what I’m sure are antiques decorating the space. I wouldn’t know for sure, but they look

old and expensive, which is right up my mom's alley. It was a bit of a dick move to assume Julia came from a more humble background. Looking over at Abigail makes me realize how wrong someone could be about a person. I assumed she was a ballbusting harpy, and she assumed I was just an image-obsessed playboy. We're learning a lot of new things about each other on this trip.

We make our way into the bright yellow kitchen and spot an older woman at the stove taking out what looks like some sort of casserole from the oven, setting it next to a pie cooling on the counter. The cinnamon and nutmeg I smell from whatever pie she baked, coupled with the savory scent of the casserole, is making my stomach growl even though we just had breakfast an hour ago. When she spots Abigail, her face lights up like everyone else's has when they see her.

"Well, well. When Julia told me you were in town, I told her I wouldn't believe it until I saw you with my own eyes. I guess she wasn't pulling my leg." The woman opens her arms and Abigail walks into her embrace.

"Bernie. It's so good to see you. And still making your famous peach pie, I see."

"Well now, of course I am. Can't go letting those Georgia ladies think they corner the market on pies, now can I?"

"No, ma'am. You cannot," Abigail replies with a wide smile. When they detach from each other, the older woman looks over to me with a skeptical gaze as though she's sizing

me up to make sure I'm worthy of the woman standing next to her. I'm not. But fuck if I'm not trying to change that.

“Bernie, this is Jackson. Jackson, this is Bernie, the Beauchamp’s housekeeper. She’s been running around since I can remember trying to make sure everyone is fed and clean.” Abigail, Julia, and Bernie laugh at the introduction.

“It was a lost cause most days. The clean part, never the feeding part.” The women laugh again as I extend my hand to Bernie.

“Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Bernie.”

She widens her eyes and looks at Abigail. “Oh girl, you have a charming fella here.” She looks back at me. “The pleasure is all mine, Jackson.”

She waves us over to the table. “Sit, sit. Would you like some tea? Or how about something to eat? I can whip something up really quick for you two.”

Abigail smiles at Bernie as she makes herself busy pouring sweet tea into two glasses before we’ve had a chance to accept.

“No thanks, Bernie. We ate before we came.”

Not being able to help myself, I give Abigail a suggestive smirk, remembering what I ate in the shower this morning. She squints her eyes, knowing exactly where my thoughts went, but I see the way she’s fighting a smile and the pink blush creeping up her neck.

“Julia, I need you to take the pie and casserole to Mrs. Crawford. Her arthritis has been acting up, and she’s having a hard time getting around,” Bernie tells an annoyed Julia.

“Can’t one of the boys do it? She’ll have me doing at least twenty-seven other things for her while I’m there, and I want to spend time with Abigail.”

“I surely hope when you’re her age and need someone to help with things around your house because all your children are grown and live far away, you’ll have a sweet young girl who would be more than happy to help her elders bring you supper and do a few things to help make your life easier.” The look Bernie gives Julia leaves no room for argument. Another woman who knows how to put someone in their place. I can see where Abigail picked up at least part of her outspokenness.

“Yes, ma’am,” Julia concedes. “You remember how to get to the stables and saddle up a horse?” she asks Abigail.

Abigail just laughs. “Like I’ve been doing it my whole life, which I pretty much have.”

Julia nods her head and watches Bernie pack up the food. “Okay, why don’t you take Jackson for a ride, and I’ll meet up with you when I get back.”

“Sounds good.” Abigail turns to me. “Feel like showing me your skills on a horse, Prince?”

The challenge in her voice has me sitting up a little straighter. “I’m sure I can teach you a thing or two.”

She harrumphs in my direction as Julia and Bernie chuckle.
“We’ll see.”

Watching Abigail handle the large beast she’s sitting on is what dreams are made of. Very naughty, X-rated dreams. I’ve never watched a woman ride a horse and think I want to tear her off the animal and then tear off her pants, but damn, she’s hotter than hell riding around with her perfect ass lifting and sitting in time with the canter. Her beaming smile as we ride through the property is magic. She is just as at home on a horse, wearing tight jeans and boots as she is in designer dresses and those fuck-me heels she’s so fond of.

And let me tell you something else, riding with a hard-on is one of the most painful experiences of my life.

We come to a shaded patch of land, and Abigail asks if I want to take a rest. I don’t necessarily need one, but my dick certainly does. We tie the horses to a fallen branch and let them munch on some grass as Abigail and I stretch our limbs. The smile on my face as I watch her stretch her arms up, putting her breasts on full display, is filled with lust and promises of what I plan to do to her as soon as I can.

“What?” she asks, looking over at me.

“You’re beautiful.” The words don’t convey everything I’m feeling at the moment, but I’m not sure how to communicate them to her. I decide I’ll let my body do the talking.

I walk over to Abigail as she looks on with a curious gaze. Grabbing her face in my hands, a gasp escapes her lips as I crash my mouth to hers. I devour her moans as my tongue dances with hers and she moves her hands under my shirt, scoring her nails up and down my heated skin.

She breaks the kiss to allow both of us to catch our breath. “So, riding gets you hot. I’ll have to file that away for future use.”

“*You* get me hot. But seeing you on that horse? Damn, Red. That shit has me ready to throw us down on the ground and make you sit on my face.”

She chuckles at my confession, but when I grind my hard-on against her stomach, her laughter fades, and only pure desire is left in her eyes.

I walk her back against the tree and turn her around so she’s facing the trunk.

“Bend over and put your hands on the tree,” I command.

She has an excited glint in her eye.

“What if someone rides this way?” Biting her lip, she looks around us like she’s trying to see if anyone is coming.

“I won’t let anyone see you. Your body is for my eyes only,” I assure her. “But, woman, I need my mouth on you. Now.”

She does as I ask, and I waste no time unbuttoning the fly on her jeans and yanking them down her thighs.

Rubbing her ass with gentle circles, I ask, "Sore?"

She shakes her head while she hums in pleasure at my touch. I give her ass a smack and rub it to ease the sting. I've never been rough at all with Abigail, but I figured since we're learning new things about each other, I'd try it out. The moan she gives me says she likes it, so I quickly deliver three more slaps and then rub the spot again.

"Goddamn, baby. My handprint looks good on your ass." She pushes it out farther, a sure sign that she wants more.

I get to my knees behind her and kiss her soft, red flesh. "I don't want to get too rough since we have to ride back, but I can't wait to make this ass so red with my hand that you'll feel it for the next week every time you sit down."

Her feet are only inches apart, but it gives me just enough room to swipe my tongue through her wet folds. The contact has her moaning out in pleasure as I lick her from her clit to her tight pucker. She jerks away from my mouth.

"Have you ever let someone in here, Abigail?" My voice is thick with need as I rim that tight spot with my finger.

"No, and I don't plan on it, Hayes, so get the thought out of your head." Her mouth says one thing but the wetness practically dripping down her thighs says another.

I chuckle darkly. "We'll see about that." My fingers go to her wet pussy, and I pump them in and out of her silky channel, her moans spurring me on.

“Fuck, Jackson, make me come,” she begs, her breathy moans setting my blood on fire.

I replace my fingers with my tongue and begin rubbing her clit. It's only moments before her wetness is flooding my mouth and she's screaming out her orgasm, riding my face as she holds herself against the tree. I swipe my tongue over her a few more times as she catches her breath. Standing up, I pull her pants back up her thighs before she turns and kisses me with everything she has. Her hands go to my buckle, and she rips it open, undoing the button and pulling down my zipper.

I put my hand over her eager one. “I didn't bring a condom with me,” I tell her, cursing myself for my oversight.

With a wicked gleam in her eye, she pulls my rock-hard cock out and begins pumping. “That's okay. That's what my mouth is for.” Abigail drops to her knees in front of me and licks me from root to tip, opening her mouth around the head and pulling me into her hot mouth.

My hands instantly grab her hair as my head flies back. “Fuck, baby,” I groan out.

She bobs up and down my length, taking me deeper with each pass.

I bite my lip and look down at the erotic vision kneeling before me. Any man who thinks he's in control when a woman is on her knees giving him pleasure is completely wrong. Abigail holds all the power here and I'm the lucky son of a bitch that she deems worthy of letting in her body. I don't take that shit for granted.

She eagerly moans around me as her hand pumps where her mouth can't reach.

“You look absolutely stunning on your knees for me, baby. Are you going to let me come in that perfect mouth?” I grate out. The question earns another moan from her. “Are you going to swallow it down like a good girl?”

She pops her mouth off me and looks me in the eye, her eyes glassy with desire. “Do it. I want to taste you.”

Well, fuck me.

Abigail puts me back in her mouth, and when I reach the back of her throat, she swallows around my dick, taking me farther down. That's all it takes, and I bellow out my orgasm into the empty field. It's so intense my vision hazes around the edges and I feel myself sway a bit. Goddamn, that's never happened before. When she's pulled every last drop from me, I slide from her lips, and she covers me with my underwear.

She's still on her knees as I stroke her cheek. “I have no words, baby. That was...” My voice trails off. I can't form coherent sentences at the moment, but I'm okay with it.

Abigail stands, and I pull her against my body, kissing her thoroughly, not giving a shit that I just came in that gorgeous mouth of hers.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

She giggles as she loops her arms around my neck. “I don't think I've ever been thanked for a blow job before.”

“Well, you haven’t been with me before. Not only will I thank you if you are ever inclined to do it again, but I’ll probably come up with all kinds of new ways to show you my appreciation for your mouth.” I lean in and kiss her again while she sighs into my mouth.

“I could get used to that,” she says. Abigail looks at me timidly, like she just realized the vulnerability of her words.

“You will, Red.” I smile down at her, gazing into her deep-green eyes. *And I could get used to this.*

Abigail clears her throat, and I see the ways her eyes shutter, putting those walls back up. “We should head back to the stable. Get the horses cooled down. Hopefully Julia will be back by then.”

She’s changing the subject. Pulling back a little. That’s okay though. We’ll get to a place where she doesn’t feel the need to throw up walls around me. I can be patient. Especially for something so, so worth it.

Holding my arm out to where the horses are still munching the grass around them, I tell her, “After you, Red.”

CHAPTER 17

Abigail

When we get back to the stables, I see Julia's truck back in the driveway. We may have spent more time riding than I thought. Or maybe I lost track of time during my and Jackson's little break. I really shouldn't be using Jackson and little in the same sentence. Listen, I was no virgin when we started sleeping together, and I knew a few well-endowed men in my life, but that man knows what he's doing. And he doesn't do anything half-assed.

Jumping off his horse like a seasoned rider, Jackson comes over to give me a hand getting down. He allows me to slowly slide down his body, keeping his hands on my waist until my feet touch the ground.

"I could have gotten off myself." He quirks his brow at me. Yeah, I just realized how that sounded. "You know what I mean." I grin, smacking him in the chest.

He grabs my hand and places a soft kiss on my knuckles. "I just wanted to feel you against me." He leans in and places a soft kiss on my lips just as Julia makes her presence known.

“How was the ride?” Her eyes dart back and forth between Jackson and me, almost as if she knows just what we got up to out there.

I clear my throat and take a step away from the intoxicating man. “Good. Great.” Is my voice higher than normal? I feel like it is. Crap, she totally knows.

Julia cocks her head to the side and gives me a funny look. “Okay,” she drawls out. “Come to the house. Dad’s home and wants to say hi.”

Julia starts to walk back to the house and I turn around and look at a laughing Jackson.

“Real smooth there, Red.”

“Oh, shut up, Prince.”

On our walk up to the house, Jackson grabs my hand, holding it as we go.

I look down at our joined hands and back up at Jackson’s smiling face.

“Is this what we do now?” The simple action somehow strikes me as more intimate than what we did on our ride.

He nods confidently. “Yup.”

Well, okay then.

When we reach the porch, I spot Julia’s dad on the top of the steps with his bulky frame blocking the door, fists planted on his hips as we make our way up the steps. A wide smile stretches across his face as he opens his arms for a hug.

“Hi, Pop,” I say as he hugs me tight, almost lifting me off the ground.

“Hey girl, it has been too long.” He loosens his hold and looks me over with bright eyes. “It’s so good to see you.”

James Beauchamp was always like a second father to me. Except he actually took an interest in his kids’ lives, and I was lucky enough to be included in the rowdy brood.

“Pop, let me introduce you to my friend.” Jackson is behind me, waiting patiently. “Jackson, this is James Beauchamp. Pop, Jackson Hayes.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. This is a beautiful place you have here.” The two men shake hands as Pop gives him an assessing gaze.

“Thank you. Hayes, you said?” Pop asks, looking at me.

My head nods in confirmation.

“Your brother just won a senate seat if memory serves. And your father was a congressman?”

“Yes, sir.” Jackson smiles pleasantly.

Pop looks at him, then back at me. “Good stock, girl.” He tilts his head toward the door and waves us into the house.

Jackson gives me a questioning look when Pop goes to find Julia.

“You just got his stamp of approval,” I tell him with a small smile.

Pop's approval means more to me than my own father's. I'm not sure where this thing with Jackson and me is headed, but knowing Pop approves, at least of Jackson's family, means a lot to me.

Julia comes to the entryway with three glasses of tea. "Let's go sit on the porch. I don't want to waste the day inside when the weather is perfect today."

That's one thing I miss about the South. It's February and in the seventies. If we were in Philadelphia right now, it would be cold and probably snowing.

We settle in the old rocking chairs that have been on this porch longer than we've been alive.

"Okay, I want to hear all about the luncheon," Julia commands.

Swiping a hand through my hair, I let out a sigh. "Well, my mother was her typical self, you know, ordering the waitstaff around like slaves, and probably having a few of them contemplating dropping ex-lax in her Waldorf salad." I roll my eyes as we both laugh. "I was a bit surprised to see how much my sister's changed, though."

Remembering her cold greeting has me dropping my eyes to the glass of tea I'm holding.

"She seemed upset with me. Either that or she's turning into my mother with each year that passes. Her friends were a real treat," I say, sarcasm lacing my words.

“Oh yeah. I’ve seen her around town with those stuck-up bitches. Nice to your face, but as soon as you turn around, they waste no time snickering behind your back,” Julia tells me.

“Yeah, I definitely got that impression from them. They were pretty snarky when she mentioned me dating Jackson. They definitely gave me the impression that not only did they think I wasn’t on par with his standards, but I overheard a couple of them saying that as soon as they introduce themselves to him at the party they’ll have him questioning his choice in girlfriends.” My eyes practically roll to the back of my head at the memory.

Jackson laughs into his glass as he takes a sip of tea. “Aw, Red, you don’t have anything to worry about. You know you’re the only feisty Southern belle I have eyes for.”

“And don’t you forget it, darlin’,” I reply in a thick accent as I exaggeratedly bat my eyelashes at him.

He grabs my hand resting on the arm of the rocker and brings it to his mouth.

“Never,” he rumbles while staring me in the eyes. His blue eyes sparkle with mischief and promise. Two things I often see in them. It used to annoy the shit out of me, but now I would say the exact opposite is true.

The moment is broken when Julia begins gagging next to me.

“Jesus, you two, get a room.”

“We have one, and I think I’m about ready to take my lady back to it.”

Julia scoffs. “Lady? Where?” She looks around the porch dramatically.

Laughing at her, I smack her in the arm. “Asshole.” She begins to laugh with me. I love being here, laughing and joking around with my old friend.

We sit on the porch for a little while longer and Julia fills me in on everyone I used to know in town. I tell her about my conversation with Raelynn, but don’t go into too much detail. If she wants people to know the reason she married Davis, and why they got divorced, she can tell them herself. I just told Julia she had her reasons, and no, it still isn’t an excuse, but I understand a little more of what happened and what made her do what she did.

Julia rolls her eyes. “I don’t care what her reasons are. She’s still a thirsty bitch as far as I’m concerned.”

I quirk my brow. “I think she got the idea when you turned the hose on her when she came to attempt a conversation.”

Julia simply shrugs her shoulders, absolutely no remorse on her face. “And I’d do it again.”

It’s not my place to try to get those two to be friends again. Hell, I’m not even sure *I* want to be Raelynn’s friend again. Julia continues to update me on everyone but conveniently leaves out any mention of Grayson Abernathy. She’s always been close lipped about what they were to each other, if

anything. From what I've heard, he's back trying to buy the ranch, even going so far as to challenge the property lines. I'm not sure what the story is there, but when Julia's ready to tell it, I know she will.

The afternoon sun is waning in the sky, and I know Julia needs to get to her evening chores. Growing up, I used to help her with them. Even though her family has plenty of money and manpower to do them, her parents never let her or her brothers out of chores. They used to tell them, "If you're going to run this ranch one day, you need to get your hands dirty." Of course, growing up, there was a significant amount of grumbling, but Pop and Julia's mom wouldn't even consider doing it any other way.

After saying our goodbyes, Jackson and I head back to the hotel. We're both exhausted from our day in the sun and crash on the bed as soon as we make our way into the room.

When we wake, we're both starving and decide to eat at the hotel's restaurant.

"Are you looking forward to the party tomorrow?" Jackson asks before taking a bite of his perfectly cooked steak. I may have persuaded him to give me a taste. God love a man willing to share his food.

I tilt my head side to side a few times before answering. "No." I laugh out. "Not really. It's something I feel like we have to do though. My sister is a lot less excited to have me here than my mom made me believe." Taking a sip of wine, I roll my eyes. "Not surprising. She probably thought it would

look bad not having me here. Cesily and I have barely spoken in the last few years. I just got so damn sick of her trying to push Davis on me, then rubbing it in my face when he married Raelynn. When she called to tell me they were getting married, she made sure to point out it could have been me. I'd hoped she had matured, but I guess the ship has sailed on us being close again." I let out a deep sigh. "Honestly, I'm not sure I would even want to be at this point. It's just sad, y'know?"

Kasey has confided in me that Jackson and Donovan drifted apart during college. Donovan became the responsible one, making sure the family name wasn't smeared in the press and Jackson is, well, Jackson. He couldn't give two shits about keeping his reputation clean. That caused a rift between the brothers that's just recently started mending.

"I would say don't give up, but your sister sounds like a twat." He shrugs his shoulders like it's just a simple statement of fact.

"You've been hanging out with Aiden too much." I laugh, then sigh again, thinking about the statement. "But you're not wrong. We were never as wild as some people sitting at this table." I raise a brow and look at him. "But we used to have fun. Now she's just like every other society bitch."

"Hey, it's been a while since I've done anything scandalous, I'll have you know." He lowers his fork to his plate and rests his elbows on the table, leaning in close. My body naturally

leans toward his, drawn to him like a magnet, as I wait with anticipation for what he says next.

“In fact, I think I’m due for a little scandal. Care to be my partner in crime, Miss Barnes?”

Am I terrified of what he has in mind? I’d be an idiot not to be. But of course I’m still going to follow along.

“Let’s see what you have up your sleeve, Prince.”

“Swimming in the hotel pool is your idea of scandalous?” I ask Jackson after he tells me to put on a suit and follow him. We make it to the indoor pool that’s technically closed at this hour.

“We’re breaking and entering,” he replies.

“What’s the worst they’ll do if they catch us? Tell us to go back to our room? Ohhh, scary.” I pretend to shiver as Jackson looks on, completely unimpressed with my lack of enthusiasm.

“Okay, you want something edgier than getting caught swimming?” He slides his shorts down his legs and stands before me, bare-assed naked. “How about getting caught skinny dipping.”

My jaw drops. “You can’t be serious. We could get arrested for that,” I exclaim.

“Only if we get caught,” he tells me before diving gracefully into the cool water.

When he pops up from the water, he shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair to get the wet strands off his forehead. He's like a fucking cologne commercial or some shit, and I can't help but stare at his toned chest and light-bronze skin.

"Do you have Italian in your bloodline somewhere?" I ask absentmindedly.

"On my mom's side, I think. Why?"

I don't bother answering, too busy standing here with my jaw on the floor as I appreciate the show he's giving me, and anyone else that may walk in.

"Come on, Red. Live on the wild side with me," he dares.

Well, I did say I wanted him to show me what he had in mind. I shake my head and pull the end of the string looped around my neck and back. My top comes off and I drop it next to his shorts. Jackson's gaze grows dark when he sees my bare breasts. It's giving me the courage to take a step to the pool.

"Uh-uh," he says as he shakes his head.

"What? Was I supposed to do some sort of sexy strip tease or something?"

"Bottoms too," he says, pointing at me.

Oh shit. I guess he's taking the whole skinny dipping thing seriously. I was hoping I could get away with just being topless. Obviously not. Well, in for a penny and all that. I yank the bottoms down my legs and squeal as I jump in the pool.

“Shit. That’s colder than I thought,” I tell him when I break the surface.

He’s staring at me with a wide grin on his face as he swims over to me, wrapping his arm around my middle and pulling me close to him. My legs loop around his waist on their own accord, and I feel what the sight of me wet and naked is doing to him. Or his dick, rather.

“You’re hard,” I say, swiveling my hips a tad.

“Well, you’re naked so…” He trails off as he kisses me deeply, pulling me tighter into his chest.

When Jackson kisses me, it’s as though he pours all of himself into it, devouring me with his mouth. I guess public indecency really turns him on. Who knew? Oh wait, I did know that. I kiss him back with the same ferocity. I would’ve never guessed the thought of doing something like this that could potentially get us into a shit ton of trouble would turn me on this much, yet here we are.

Jackson pulls away from my mouth and begins trailing his tongue down my wet neck, licking and sucking the water from my skin.

“Have you ever had sex in a public place?” He moves to the other side of my neck and does the same. “Where you could get caught any second?” He hoists me up a bit so my breasts are closer to his mouth before leaning in and gently biting my nipple while holding my stare.

The sensation of his teeth scraping the sensitive bud has a loud moan escaping me. Today in the field was the closest I'd gotten, but that was nothing compared to possibly being discovered by security or another guest at the hotel.

"Shh, Abigail. You don't want to get us caught, do you?" He winks as his mouth moves to the other nipple, and goddamn, I'm so fucking turned on right now I can't remember why this is probably a bad idea. The skinny dipping, not fucking Jackson. I've given up on trying to talk myself out of that.

"Unless you have a condom shoved somewhere I can't see, we don't have any on hand." I mentally pat myself on the back for remembering protection through the dense fog of lust.

"Well, I'm not letting this opportunity of having you wet and naked in a pool pass without doing something to kick it up a notch." The grin he gives me is positively sinful as he walks us to the edge.

"Arms on the ledge," he commands.

I do as he instructs, the movement pushing my breasts out. Jackson leans in for a wet kiss before trailing his mouth down my neck and over my breasts. He unwraps my legs from around his waist and moves his hand back up to my ass and lifts my bottom half out of the water, exposing my pussy to the cool air.

"Are you really going to eat me out right here?" I don't know why I'm asking, it's obvious that's his plan. To be

honest, I'm way more turned on by the idea than I thought possible.

"I am. And you're going to love every second of it." That's the last thing he says before licking me through my center, latching his lips around my clit and sucking. My body jolts in his hold, the action causing Jackson to chuckle, and the vibrations shoot through me.

Jackson leans back for a moment, his gaze darting from my swollen clit to my eyes. "You have the most beautiful pussy I've ever seen. Always so wet for me, aren't you?" He holds my gaze as he swipes his finger through my folds, circling my entrance. "Perfection," he whispers before latching his mouth back onto me, his eyes closing on a moan while he eats me like I'm a fucking delicacy.

I don't know if it's the fear of being caught or just his magical tongue, but it's only moments before I feel myself on the edge of an earth shattering orgasm. Jackson groans as he licks and sucks my clit. When he looks at me with a half-lidded gaze, I can tell he's loving this as much as I am.

"Fuck, Jackson. I'm going to come," I say, grinding myself on his face. My moans become louder as I watch him, and he moves a hand over my mouth to stifle the otherwise ear-splitting cry that escapes me when I tip over the edge.

"Holy shit," I breathe out, my body going completely lax.

He releases me, and I slip back into the water, almost going under before he grabs me and crashes his mouth to mine.

“Thank you for dessert. Delicious as always,” he says while I float boneless in his arms.

A few more languid kisses are all I have energy for before we decide we’ve pushed our luck far enough with the whole naked trespassing adventure. After hopping out of the pool himself, Jackson helps me back onto the tile and pulls my bottoms up my legs before grabbing the top and tying the strings for me. He still has a raging hard-on, and I don’t envy him trying to disguise it in his swim trunks on the way back to our room.

As tired as I am, just the sight of him turned on has me ready to take care of his situation before going back. I slide my hand up his chest and pull him in for a kiss while my other hand travels to his hard length and rubs it a few times for good measure.

Jackson gently takes my wrist in his hand and brings it to his mouth, kissing the inside of it. “Let me get you back to our room where I can take my time with you.” He winks before giving me a quick kiss on the mouth and grabs my hand, pulling me to the exit.

“In a hurry?” I ask through a laugh.

“Hell yeah, I am.”

He may have been in a hurry to get back to the room, but once we’re there, he takes his sweet, sweet time.

All three times.

CHAPTER 18

Jackson

Fuck. What time is it? I crack my eyes open and see sunlight peeking through the curtains that I thankfully remembered to close last night. We don't need Sleeping Beauty to get woken up before she's ready. Unless... I look over to Abigail with her messy tangles of red hair fanning around her like Medusa's snakes. She's lying on her back with the sheet around her waist, completely naked breasts moving with every breath she takes. She's totally naked, I know because after round three, we both passed out, neither of us having the energy to even care about pajamas.

I contemplate my idea. This could either go really well, for both of us, or she's going to crush my skull between her thighs. I inch my way down the bed and under the sheet, and my mouth waters as I take in Abigail's delectable curves. Her legs are parted slightly so when I reach the apex of her thighs, I'm able to wedge myself between them. My tongue sweeps her center, and she doesn't move. I do it a couple more times until I hear a soft gasp as she comes back to consciousness and realizes what's happening. Abigail lifts the sheet and gazes down at me, our eyes meeting as she bites her lip.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is raspy from sleep and all the screaming she did last night before we crashed.

I lift my head from her pussy and grin. “I thought it would be obvious. Having breakfast.” I resume my ministrations while she moans softly.

“Last night I was dessert and this morning I’m breakfast. Make up your mind.” She writhes under my tongue, and I know she’s close.

Lifting my head, I ask, “Do you want me to stop?”

“Do you want to die?” she growls, and a chuckle escapes me. My feisty redhead. I don’t think my day would be complete without at least one death threat from her. I continue licking as I insert two fingers into her soft, wet channel. Her walls flutter as wetness floods around my fingers.

I lift my head one more time and witness her arch her back as she lets out a throaty moan.

“That’s it, Red. Let me taste you when you come.” I pump harder, stoking her G-spot while latching my lips around her clit, and suck it into my mouth. Fuck, this woman tastes goddamn heavenly. When she finally loses control, I lap up every last drop of her release.

Crawling my way back up her sated body, I trail my tongue from her delicious pussy up her stomach, stopping at her nipple to give those beauties some attention. I’ve never enjoyed the taste of a woman’s body the way I do Abigail’s.

When I reach her parted lips, I kiss her deeply so she can taste herself on me.

“Good morning,” I whisper when I break the kiss.

“Mmm, yes, it is.” Her sleepy smile is perfection.

Abigail reaches over to the bedside table and grabs a condom. She opens the package with her teeth, and I lift my hips so she can roll it on my straining cock. It’s like a perfectly practiced dance, probably because of the sheer amount of sex we’ve had the last couple days. The times before we came to Charleston were frenzied and hot as fuck, don’t get me wrong, but these last couple days we’ve gotten to know each other’s bodies in a way we never did before. In a way I never wanted to before her.

I enter her heat with a slow thrust, amazed like I’ve been every time before at how perfectly we fit. I’ve had plenty of different kinds of sex, but with Abigail, it’s everything rolled into one. Passionate and hard, exciting and new, soft and sweet, and oftentimes somewhere in between. I pump in and out of her in no rush to get anywhere, just relishing in the feel of her soft body under mine.

Abigail’s knees come up to my hips as her finger softly trails up and down my spine, leaving goose bumps in their wake. I love the feel of her fingertips running over my skin. I lean down to lazily taste her lips, the kiss unhurried. She sighs into my mouth, and moments later, my hips are pumping harder as she screams out her pleasure into the otherwise quiet hotel room.

The telltale signs of my orgasm begin at the base of my spine, and just seconds later, I'm following her over the edge.

"Fuck, Red. I could wake up like this every morning," I say as I slow my thrusts and come back to Earth. I cup her cheek in my hand and lean in for another soft kiss, just our lips touching. "You're beautiful," I tell her as I look her straight in the eye.

We're not the lovey-dovey sort of couple, but there's something about waking her up with orgasms and soft sex that has me almost waxing poetic to the woman.

What is she doing to me?

"I wish we could stay like this all day," she tells me as I move off her warm body to dispose of the condom.

"We could skip the party tonight. Maybe go on another ghost tour," I call from the bathroom.

Hearing her tinkling laughter brings a wide smile to my face as I wash my hands. I look in the mirror at my expression. I can't recall a time when I've had this much fun with a woman in bed or wanted to spend this much time with someone out of one.

"Trust me, if it's between wanting to spend an evening in the cemetery watching you turn gray talking about ghost sightings and serial killers, or spending an evening with my sister, the Callaway brothers and their asshole friends, the cemetery will always win. Hands down, every time."

I walk back into the bedroom and launch myself on the bed next to her, causing her to nearly bounce right off.

“I did not turn gray, She-Devil.” I grab her around the waist and growl in her ear as I tickle her side. Abigail howls with laughter, trying to push me away.

“Tell yourself whatever you need to,” she spurts out between laughs.

“It was dark. The only light was coming from the moon. Of course I looked pale.” I continue my tickle torture. “Now tell me I’m a manly man, and you know I would never be afraid of a few ghost stories, woman.”

“Fine. You win,” she gasps out. “You, Jackson Hayes, are the manliest man I know,” she exclaims.

“And I’m not afraid of ghost stories,” I prompt.

“Jackson.” She stops squirming and solemnly looks me in the eye. “You know I don’t like to lie.” Laughter erupts from her as she jumps off the bed and runs to the bathroom before my arms can grab her. Slamming the door, I hear her cackle while the water to the shower turns on. Alright, she wants to play? I can play. I walk into the bathroom just as she steps into the shower.

“You’re going to pay for that, Red,” I growl as I stalk toward her.

Abigail shrugs and looks over her shoulder at me. “We’ll see.”

Depending on your version of making my little hellcat pay, I did. Twice.

Abigail looks like a million dollars when we're ready to go to this bachelorette/bachelor party that I couldn't talk her out of. And I did try. I explained to her all the things I would do to her body, down to the last detail, if we stayed in our room the whole day. I thought I had her at one point, but she shook herself out of the haze of lust and told me we had to at least make an appearance.

"It's not that I want to go," she told me. "It's that I already said we would be there, and I don't feel like giving my mother any more ammo against me."

Why she cares what these people think is beyond me at this point. They haven't reached out since she's been in town, other than getting together at prescheduled events. When I asked her about it, she told me that's just the way it was with her family. They aren't the hang out and play catch-up types. She didn't seem sad about it. Resigned is a better way to describe her attitude toward it.

Which brings us here. Some swanky bar downtown with an exceptional scotch selection, hanging out with rather unexceptional people.

Cesily's bridesmaids are tittering in the corner, sneaking glances at me every few seconds. They can't possibly think I

haven't noticed the embarrassingly obvious looks they've been giving me. Or maybe they want me to notice, thinking I'll make my way over and throw them a bone. Not likely, especially when I have the only girl I want to bone sitting next to me. *See what I did there?*

I'm chuckling to myself when the waitress leaves with our drink order.

Abigail looks at me with squinted eyes. "What's so funny over there, Chuckles?"

"Just random thoughts," I tell her. "So do we have a code word or a supersecret signal for when either of us has had enough, and it's time to escape?"

Abigail laughs. "No, but we probably should. How about I bite my lip and blink three times?"

"Do you want me to walk out of here with a hard-on?"

"What? Why on earth would that make you hard?"

"Because all I'll be thinking is how badly I want those lips somewhere else. Namely around my dick."

Abigail laughs again, and the sound makes everyone else disappear. I never imagined a woman's laughter would have such a primal effect on me. Any other woman, and I doubt it would, but this is Abigail. Her humor is hard won, and I've worked my ass off for it.

"I swear the wind blowing would give you a hard-on." She shakes her head and playfully rolls her eyes.

“Depends.” I pretend to consider her statement. “Would this wind blow your skirt up? Because that would definitely do it.” I nod seriously, caressing her knee under the table and lean in to give her a light kiss on the mouth. Her hum of satisfaction at the contact makes me wish we were back in our hotel room. Or a dark corner somewhere secluded. I’m not picky.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight. I know after the golf outing, you weren’t thrilled to be around Davis again.” Abigail squeezes my hand in appreciation for my company. Like she needs to thank me for being there with her. I would follow her anywhere if it meant spending any amount of time in her presence, especially when I get to see this softer side of her. Her feisty side gets me hot as hell for her, but her soft side warms my heart in a way I wasn’t prepared for.

Unfortunately, the reminder of what a colossal asshole Abigail’s ex is instantly irritates me. Especially if he’s a drunk baboon like he was during golf. I do a quick scan of the room and realize he hasn’t gotten here yet.

“Maybe he won’t show. From what it sounds like, he keeps himself pretty busy.” I remember him trying to tout his exploits to anyone who would listen when we were at the country club.

“Yeah, trying to support strippers by buying lap dances with your daddy’s money is a real time suck,” she deadpans.

Laughter bursts from my lips. “That’s about the impression I got from him.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Ugh. That man was such a waste of my time. I wish I would have seen through the bullshit a lot sooner.”

I take her hand and bring it to my lips. “Boy. Not man. Men don’t do that to women.” I look her in the eye and hope she understands I know the difference and I have no problem being the right man for her.

“It wasn’t too long ago I looked at you like that.” She squeezes the hand I’m still holding hers with. “Glad you proved me wrong.”

When she leans in for a kiss, it’s all I can do not to drag her out of here and show her how happy hearing those words just made me. That’s all I’ve wanted her to realize.

When we pull apart, there’s a commotion at the door. Oh great, looks like the clowns have arrived.

Abigail leans back and rolls her eyes at the sight. “Oh yay,” she says flatly. “Davis and his adoring minions are here.”

I look over, and sure enough, a group of guys has swarmed around him, giving excited backslaps.

Cesily comes over to our table and smiles affectionately at the crowd around Davis. “It’s so nice that Davis was able to make it. Dawson loves having his older brother around. Just like old times,” she tells us.

Abigail shoots me an annoyed look. “Cesily, I don’t think I’ve introduced you to Jackson. My boyfriend.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Congratulations,” I say with a pleasant smile.

The look Cesily gives me tells me she isn’t impressed with my presence here.

“Thank you.” Her smile is fake as hell. “If y’all will excuse me.” She doesn’t go into a further explanation, just walks away as though she has better people to talk to.

“She’s a delight,” I whisper to Abigail.

“Isn’t she though?”

Abigail gives me the exact same smile I just saw on her sister and a laugh bursts from me.

“Wow. Do they teach you that smile at finishing school or wherever the hell debutantes go to learn how to be high society ladies?”

She throws her head back and laughs. “No. That smile we learned and perfected with our mother’s tutelage.”

The harried waitress bustles over to us with our cocktails before disappearing back into the crowd. I raise my glass for a toast.

“To fake bitches and real orgasms.” I tip my lips in a wicked smile as Abigail clinks her glass to mine.

“I’ll drink to that.”

The night progresses just as I expected. Davis is making a show of himself. It may be his brother’s celebration, but I don’t think the man knows how not to be the center of

attention. The bridesmaids and some of the other girls Cesily invited here are still sending me heated glances. It would be laughable if I didn't find it totally inappropriate, considering I'm here as Abigail's boyfriend. I would say fake boyfriend, but I feel like we've blown past the fake part and have something real happening here. There haven't been any discussions about where this is headed, but I'm feeling pretty confident it's toward the destination I wanted when I agreed to our ruse in the first place.

"I have to use the restroom," Abigail tells me after her third martini.

"Is that code for follow me to the bathroom?" I ask hopefully.

She shakes her head at me and giggles. "Down, boy. It means I've had three martinis, and my bladder is making it known that a fourth needs room. I'll be right back." She stands and walks around the small table to me. Her hand grazes up my thigh, dangerously close to me stirring cock and places a light kiss on my lips. "Don't run away without me."

"Never," I reply. When she turns to walk away, the sway of her hips almost has me getting up and following her anyway. God, that woman has an ass I could feast on every day and not be full.

"Hi there. I'm Everly." I look over to where Abigail was just sitting and see a short blonde with tits pushed up and almost spilling out of her tight dress, taking her seat.

“Hi, Jackson Hayes.” I hold out my hand to shake hers, which is dangling daintily in front of me. “Actually, Everly, my girlfriend will be right back. She just went to use the restroom.”

She laughs and throws her blonde locks over her shoulder. “Oh, I’ll just keep you company until she gets back then.” Her voice is so syrupy sweet, I feel like if I had to listen to it for any length of time, I would have a toothache.

“So, Jackson. You’re dating Abigail. Is it serious?”

Is she serious? Who asks someone they just met that? The gleam in her eye tells me the reason she’s asking. And it’s not because she’s friends with Abigail and hopes I have good intentions toward her.

“It is.” I nod and give her a slight smile. I don’t want to be rude, but I’m not liking the way she’s still smiling at me.

“You two can’t have known each other for long. I don’t remember Cesily telling us her sister had a boyfriend in Philadelphia.”

“We’ve known each other for some time. Her best friend is dating my brother,” I reply absently. *Come on, Abigail, hurry up.*

“Oh yes. The senator, right?” she purrs.

That right there. That’s one of the reasons I hate dating, especially women in Philly. Nine times out of ten, a girl knows who my family is and how rich and powerful they are. They think I’m going to be their ticket in. Not today, sweetheart.

“Yes, that would be the one. We’re very proud of him.”

“How long do you plan on staying in town?” she asks. The flirtatious lilt in her tone is still there and still just as fucking annoying.

“Just a couple more days. Unless my girlfriend wants to stay longer and catch up with friends.”

Take a hint already and leave me alone. But no, she just hums and keeps giving me her best come-hither gaze.

“You know,” she starts. “The reception tomorrow is going to be huge. Loads and loads of people. So easy to slip away undetected if you were so inclined.” She reaches over the table to brush my hand resting on top. I quickly jerk it back and place it on my lap.

“I’m not. And I won’t be. For God’s sake, catch a clue. My *girlfriend* is your friend’s sister.” I rise from the table as Everly shoots me a nasty, offended glare. I can’t believe she’s the one offended by me. Jesus Christ, these people are nuts down here. Does every woman in Charleston think that infidelity, when you have money and a well-known name, is acceptable?

I make my way to the restrooms to tell Abigail this is definitely a “bite your lip and blink three times” situation. When I come around the corner of the hallway, I spot Abigail leaning against the wall with Davis fucking Callaway’s hand grasping her hip.

Oh, hell no, motherfucker.

CHAPTER 19

Abigail

Thank God there isn't a line for the bathroom. I quickly handle business and reapply my lipstick. I don't want to leave Jackson out there alone while my sister's friends are circling. I'm sure the minute they saw me get up, at least one of them looked at it as their opportunity to swoop in and try to get Jackson's attention. The looks they've been giving him all night haven't gone unnoticed by me. Fucking sharks. I grab my phone from my purse as I'm opening the door to check the time. We've been here long enough to give the impression that we're just *so* excited for the happy couple and can leave without pissing my mother or sister off.

Unfortunately, I'm looking down as I walk out of the bathroom and run right into the chest of a man who is far too liberal with his body spray.

Davis.

Ugh.

"Excuse me," I say as I try to maneuver around him, but he grabs my wrist as I try to pass.

“Wait, Abigail. I wanted to talk to you.” His slurred speech and glassy eyes tell me he’s already at least five drinks deep. Dealing with a drunk Davis is not high on my list of priorities tonight. Or any night.

“I need to get back to my boyfriend,” I tell him. If I give him an inch, this man will try to take ten miles. I rip my wrist from his grasp and turn to get back to Jackson and far away from this asshole.

“Please. Just hear me out. Seeing you here tonight has me in knots. This should have been our party. Our wedding tomorrow.”

That stops me in my tracks. My spine goes ramrod straight as I spin to face him.

“Our party? Our wedding? Are you serious? Are you fucking delusional?” I seethe out. “You were caught with your overused and underwhelming dick in my best friend’s mouth. Why the hell would you think there would have been a wedding after that?”

“I know, I fucked up. It was just some harmless fun until I settled down. You know our families always wanted us together. It was a given that I was going to marry you.” Davis sways on his feet and tries to give me his best Southern boy smile. It may have worked on me for little things like being late picking me up or forgetting to make reservations before we get to a restaurant, but cheating? Yeah, hell no.

“Well, too bad for you, I had no intention of marrying a cheater. Do you think I’m some kind of idiot? Plus, I don’t

care what our families expected. They weren't the ones marrying your sorry ass."

I turn around to go back to my table when Davis takes a step in front of me, caging me against the wall.

"We were so good together, Abby. We could be again. You proved your point when you left. You made a life for yourself up north, but you can come back and build one with me now."

"Davis, my *boyfriend* is waiting for me. I'm not having this conversation with you. We've been over for years, and I have never regretted getting the hell away from you."

I make to move around his frame when he puts a hand on my hip, pinning me in place.

"That guy? Please, if you think what I did was bad, you should hear the things I've heard about him. He makes me look like a fucking saint," he sneers.

I'm under no delusions about Jackson's reputation or his past. Davis probably doesn't even know the half of it. The thing is, I don't care. I know Jackson, and I see the way he's changed. I know what it means to be the sole recipient of his attention, and it's fucking fabulous. His past doesn't have anything to do with his present, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for this overgrown frat boy in front of me.

Just as I'm about to push Davis away, I turn my head and see Jackson storming toward us. And he is furious.

"Get your hands off her, asshole." Jackson pushes Davis away from me, which causes Davis to stumble, almost losing

his balance. He rights himself at the last minute and glares at Jackson.

“We were having a private conversation, Hayes.” Watching Davis try to make himself intimidating would be laughable, but he’s drunk as shit, and Jackson is pissed as hell. This could turn bad really quick.

“You lost the right to any private conversations with my girlfriend the moment you stuck your dick in another woman,” Jackson bellows. The commotion is loud enough to get the attention of the other partygoers who come around the corner just in time to see Davis charge at Jackson. Unfortunately for him, because he’s so damn drunk, all Jackson has to do is step out of the way and Davis goes flying into his brother and a couple of his friends. I hear Cesily scream when he nearly topples her groom over with the force of his fall.

“Not before the wedding,” she screams before she tries to help Davis and Dawson right themselves.

Her vicious glare turns to me. “I should have known having you here would cause this kind of drama. You ruin everything,” she yells at me. “And you...” She turns and points at Jackson. “How dare you lay hands on my brother-in-law at my party. This is the South, where people have manners and know how to behave in public. I should have known some Yankee party boy wouldn’t know how to conduct himself.”

“Lady, you’ve got a lot of nerve talking to your sister or me like that.” It’s sweet that Jackson is trying to stick up for me against my sister, but this isn’t the time. Everyone’s been

drinking and quite frankly, I've had enough drama around the Callaways to last me a lifetime.

Stepping in front of Jackson, I lay my hand on his chest. "Now's not the time. Let's just go back to the hotel." Jaw tight with anger, he's still seething and staring daggers at my sister and Davis. I stand on my toes so I can whisper in his ear. "Hey, get me out of here and you can make good on all the things you wanted to do to me instead of coming here." That finally breaks through, and I see when he comes back to me. Jackson gives me a tight nod and grabs my hand, pulling me through the crowd.

No one speaks to us as we leave and once outside, I take a deep breath. Jackson pulls me into his chest, running his hands up and down my back.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" he asks, looking ready to go back in and do some serious damage if I answer wrong.

"No. I'm fine. Promise. It was just more of the same bullshit he tried to sell me when I broke up with him. Nothing I haven't heard before."

Jackson looking me over for any injury is probably one of the sweetest things I've ever seen him do.

"I don't know how you stand these people, Red. They're seriously a bunch of assholes."

"Why do you think I hardly ever come home?"

"The way your sister defended that dickhead instead of checking on you was absolutely ridiculous." He shakes his

head like he can't believe my sister's reaction. Unfortunately, I can.

“Welcome to my life. Ever since the breakup, she's been defending him to me any chance she gets. I thought maybe she would eventually develop some sort of sisterly solidarity when she realized I was never going back to him, but once she started dating Dawson, it's like all her loyalty began and ended with the Callaways.” I take a breath and look up at Jackson. “We were never the same after that.”

He gives me a sad smile in return. “I'm sorry, Red. For all of the issues I've had with my brother, at least I can say he always had my back. Even when he didn't want to. That's just how our parents raised us.”

“Well, you can tell from meeting mine that they don't share the same sense of family loyalty.” I shrug my shoulders because there's really nothing left to say about it. I've long ago accepted that's just the way the cookie crumbles for some people. That's why when I left, I built a family of choice, not blood.

“Listen,” Jackson begins. “I'm all for going back to the hotel and acting out every dirty thought I've had of you tonight if you want. But since we only have a few more days here, I say we go back to my new favorite bar off the highway, and you let me spin you around the dance floor a few times.”

I give him a wide smile. “I didn't know you danced.”

“Please. My mother was intent on raising gentlemen. You better believe she enrolled Donovan and me in dance classes. I

haven't had much opportunity to brush up on my skills recently, but old Mrs. Andrews insisted I was her star pupil." He puffs out his chest with exaggerated pride, and I can't help but laugh.

"I'll be the judge of that."

I grab his hand as we make our way to the car and head out to Roxy and Duke's place. When we walk in, of course, Roxy wastes no time wrapping me in a tight hug.

"Sweet girl. Julia told us you had a wedding thing to go to tonight. Can't say I'm not thrilled you're here, but why aren't you with your sister tonight?"

I shake my head and take comfort in Jackson's strong palm resting on my back. "Davis cornered me."

Roxy visibly stiffens. She never did come to like him, even when we were dating. "What did that son of a bitch do?"

"Nothing, except try to tell me once again how he was just sowing wild oats before we got engaged." I roll my eyes and look back at Jackson. "He didn't get very far before this one"—I stick out my thumb in Jackson's direction—"told him in no uncertain terms that he has no right to talk to me about anything. Then, of course drunk-as-shit Davis tried to go after Jackson, which completely backfired and caused a huge scene. So, naturally, Cesily screamed at me and blamed the whole thing on Jackson and me."

Roxy looks over at Jackson with a proud smile on her face. "Well, I'd say this boy deserves a drink for standing up for his

lady.”

He deserves more than that. I turn my head to smile at him as Roxy walks back behind the bar. Jackson leans down and sweetly kisses my forehead.

“And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

I believe him. Jackson and I have really turned a corner from hating each other, never missing an opportunity to give each other hell, to him having my back at every turn. It makes me wonder why I ever hated him in the first place.

“Now,” he says, grabbing my hand to lead me to the dance floor where a few couples are two-stepping to an old country song, “why don’t you let me show you why Mrs. Andrews was so proud of me.”

Jackson holds me close, then spins me away and pulls me back with the ease and grace of a seasoned dancer. I laugh as he begins leading me around the floor, never missing a beat. His moves are impressive indeed, and I think I start falling a little more for the playboy turned friend, turned lover, turned I don’t know what, but tonight I’m not going to think too hard on it and just enjoy it.

It’s getting late, but the wedding isn’t until tomorrow afternoon, so I’m not too concerned about getting back to the hotel anytime soon. Jackson proved Mrs. Andrews right many times over. We laughed, we danced, and I drank. Jackson only

had one since he's driving, but he never once complained about it. I've come to learn that Jackson watching me have fun is enough of a buzz for him. Even Duke came out and took me for a spin. Jackson looked on with such affection in his gaze I got choked up a little. Could be the vodka, or it could be the man sitting next to me as we drive away from Roxy's, but I can't wipe this damn smile off my face, and the butterflies in my stomach are in a tizzy with Jackson's hand rubbing my thigh while he drives.

Turning my head in Jackson's direction, I get a naughty idea.

"Care to see where we used to go as kids when we wanted some 'alone' time with our boyfriends?" I ask.

A sly grin moves across his face, and he glances at me with interest. "Point me in the right direction, Red."

I give him turn-by-turn directions out to a secluded lake we used to swim at during the day and make out next to at night.

When we pull up, the place is deserted. The days may be warm this time of year, but nights are definitely too cold for any type of outdoor fun. We park the car and look over the calm waters of the lake. The old tire swing is still up, and I have fond memories of swinging off it and into the water, trying to outdo the person that went before.

"So, this is where you would go necking," Jackson comments, taking in the scene before him.

I put my hand over my chest, pretending to be scandalized by the idea. “Not me. I was a well-bred Southern lady who would never dream of necking in a car with a boy.”

The wolfish grin he gives me nearly has my panties catching fire.

“Come on now, Miss Barnes. Just give me a little kiss. I promise not to tell anyone.” Jackson turns on the Southern charm with an accent to match as I bat my eyelashes.

“What if someone catches us?” I say with an indignant gasp.

I didn’t think it possible, but his smile turns even more devilish as he slips into the role.

“No one is around for miles. I can’t sit here and look at you over there with those tempting lips and not have a taste. Please, Abigail, put me out of my misery.”

“But I’m a good girl. I don’t normally do things like this, Mr. Hayes.” I give him a shy smile, and his eyes darken with need.

“I promise to make it worth your while,” he pleads, softly stroking my cheek. “And we’ll be quick. Honest.”

I lean over close to his ear and whisper, “It better not be quick,” before biting his earlobe.

Jackson growls and tugs on my hair. “You better come sit on my lap, woman.”

I giggle as he moves his seat back, giving me room to crawl over him, straddling him across his legs. When I settle, I feel

his hard length against my wet center.

“Have you ever kissed a boy, Miss Barnes?” Jackson asks, slipping back into character. He lightly runs his fingertips down my arm, watching my flesh pebble in their wake.

“No. My mama never let me have a boyfriend,” I reply demurely on a shaky breath.

“Have you ever given yourself an orgasm?”

I gasp. “No,” I say as I look away and bite my lip like I’m keeping a secret from him.

“Don’t be shy, Miss Barnes. You can tell me the truth.”

“I touched myself once, and I think I had an orgasm.”

“You think?” He raises an eyebrow.

“It felt really good at the end, and I was so wet. Does that mean I had one?” I bite my lip and stare at him with wide, innocent eyes.

Jackson is grasping my hip so hard with his other hand as we play our roles, I’m sure he’s going to leave bruises.

“Is that all you’ve done?” he asks through gritted teeth.

“Well, there was one time I sat on my pillow and rubbed myself on it over and over again. The same thing happened. It felt so good, and I was so wet between my legs.”

Jackson’s eyes are pure fire as I pretend to be an inexperienced virgin.

“Show me. Rub yourself over me like you did your pillow.” He unzips his pants and lowers the waist just a bit so I can see

the outline of his hard length through his boxerbriefs.

“I don’t know,” I say, feigning indecision. He pulls my mouth to his and kisses me so thoroughly I think if this were him actually trying to convince me, I would rip my panties off this very second, reputation be damned.

“It will feel so good. And I won’t put it in. I just want to feel you,” he growls, sending delicious shivers down my spine. He’s really good at this role-play thing we’ve found ourselves in.

He positions me over his straining cock, and I tentatively rub my center on him, shyly gazing at him through my lowered lashes.

“Is that how you did it?” he asks.

“No.” I shake my head and drop my voice to a whisper. “I moved faster. And harder.”

“Show me.” Both of his hands grip my hips, and he pulls me hard onto his covered dick, moving my hips back and forth, his hard, covered length creating delicious friction on my clit.

“Like that, Miss Barnes?”

“Yes,” I moan out, the pleasure already building.

“Give me your mouth,” Jackson demands as he grasps the back of my neck and crashes our lips together. I’m moving faster and harder on him while he moans in satisfaction.

“Is this better than rubbing yourself on a pillow? Are you going to let me get you off like this?” he rasps out. I’m too swept up in the moment and the pleasure to continue the act.

“Fuck, Jackson. You feel so good.” My hands clutch his shoulders, nails digging into his shirt. “I’m going to come just like this.”

“Give it to me. I want to see you come all over me.”

He lifts up the back of my skirt and slaps my ass three times in quick succession. That’s all it takes, and I lose it, screaming out my orgasm as I keep rubbing my pussy over him. He lets out a feral growl, and I feel his cock jerk under me as he throws his head against the headrest and comes only seconds after me. His eyes are tightly screwed shut, so he doesn’t see the expression on my face. I’ve never given much thought to the look on a man’s face while he orgasms, but seeing Jackson come in his underwear and the look of pure satisfaction moving across his features is beautiful. So much so, I almost wish I could take a picture. The fact that I put that look on his face makes those damn butterflies take flight in my belly again.

Jackson slowly opens his eyes and gazes into mine as a smile moves over his lips.

“Come here,” he whispers. I lean toward him, tagging my fingers in his sweat-soaked hair, and he captures my lips in a sweet kiss.

“Thank you, Miss Barnes,” he says back in character. “Now, may I take you back to our hotel room and fuck you

properly?” He nips my lip as I laugh.

“Yes, Mr. Hayes, I would very much appreciate that.”

I climb off Jackson and situate myself back in my own seat as he shakes his head. “You are something else, Abigail Barnes. Something else entirely.”

I smile as he starts the car and heads back to the highway and our room. The butterflies I felt earlier are really going crazy now, and I realize this is what excitement for the future feels like. And to top it off, it’s with a man I never had any intention of being with, but couldn’t seem to stay away from.

Shockingly, for once, I’m not scared.

CHAPTER 20

Abigail

We were a mess of laughter and kisses when we made our way back to the hotel room last night. Dry humping until Jackson came in his underwear had me giggling the entire way to our room, especially when I saw how uncomfortable he was walking to our suite.

“This is your fault, woman, the least you could do is not laugh at me,” he told me. “I can’t even remember the last time that happened.” He shook his head like he was disappointed in himself, but I knew it was an act. He had just as much fun in the car as I did.

Sitting at the little table in our suite this morning, I still can’t seem to wipe the smile from my face. Jackson looks from the eggs he’s shoveling in his mouth to the smile I’m trying to hide behind my coffee cup and quirks a brow.

“What’s so funny over there, giggles?” Like he doesn’t know.

I let out a small laugh. “Remembering your duck walk back to the room last night.”

He glowers at me. “That’s the last time I get you off like that. Next time, I’m coming inside you and you can walk around with my come dripping out of you. See how funny you think it is then.” He returns to his meal with a smirk on his face.

Heat creeps up my neck, the idea turning me on. We’ve always used protection, so it’s not something we’ve discussed, and I don’t plan on it now, but I’d be lying if I said the thought of nothing between us when he enters me isn’t extremely tempting. *Who am I right now?* I’ve never had those thoughts about anyone I’ve been with.

Shaking my head, I pull myself from those thoughts. “We need to start getting ready and get to the church.”

When Jackson looks up from his breakfast, I see the question in his gaze. “You still want to go, even after last night?”

Part of me wants to pack our shit and get out of here, but the other part knows I’ll regret it the rest of my life if I miss my little sister’s wedding. It may seem like I’m a glutton for punishment, but I’m not doing it for her. There might come a day when she turns her attitude around, and I’ll feel like shit if I didn’t watch her walk down the aisle. This is supposed to be one of the most important days in her life. Not going doesn’t sit right with me. That’s not the kind of sister I want to be, regardless of the issues between us.

I nod my head in confirmation. “Yes, I still want to go.”

Setting my coffee down, I move to stand when Jackson grabs my hand and pulls me around the table to his lap. Looping my arms around his neck, I give him a light kiss.

“I meant what I said last night. You really are something else.” Jackson sweeps my long red hair behind my shoulder, his piercing blue eyes trying to tell me something without words. If I’m reading him right, the look in his eyes and the way he’s lovingly trailing his hand up and down my back is telling me I’m more. That this is more. I want to ask what exactly he means by that, but we don’t have the time to get into a whole long discussion about it. Knowing myself, I’ll have a ton of questions and need it spelled out for me. I don’t want to emotionally invest in something if he’s not on the same page. Even as I think it through, the little voice in my head is already chiming in. *Too late*, it says. *You’re already there*.

I remove myself from Jackson’s lap. “I’m getting in the shower.”

He smiles and nods. “I’m going to finish breakfast,” he tells me.

I need a moment alone. My feelings for Jackson are getting deeper, and I’m not sure where all these newly discovered feelings leave me. I know where I want it to go and it seems like he wants the same thing, but I can’t be sure. Even though I absolutely hate it, Davis’s voice from last night rings in my ear, sowing those nasty seeds of doubt. At the time, I cared more about defending Jackson against the allegations about his

reputation, but it's not like what Davis said isn't true. And it's not like Jackson hasn't earned it.

I'm standing under the water, letting the thoughts swirl in my mind, when the bathroom door opens. Through the tinted shower glass, I see Jackson remove his boxers and walk to the shower, opening the door and climbing in with me.

"I thought you were finishing your breakfast," I say.

The look he gives me is downright sinful as he moves in front of me, my wet nipples brushing his chest.

"I am." He looks me in the eye and holds my stare as he lowers to his knees.

Goodbye, unwanted doubts, hello orgasm.

We make it to the church with plenty of time to spare. I shouldn't be, but I'm surprised to see Julia there dressed in her Sunday best. The girl cleans up well. Julia and Cesily aren't really friends, but her family is rich as shit and well known in my mother's circles. Considering this seems to be the wedding event of the year, it makes sense Julia and her family would be invited.

"Hey girl, you look fantastic," I say as I walk up to where she's sitting. She looks up and stands to give me a hug.

"I'm uncomfortable as fuck, but I knew you'd be here, and you were leaving after the wedding, so I decided not to blow it

off.”

The woman sitting behind her shoots her a scathing look, probably offended by the crass language in a church. Or maybe the fact that Julia isn't beside herself with gratitude for having received an invitation for *the* wedding of the season.

Julia simply smiles at the woman and turns back to face me. “Your mom found me and asked me to have you come to the bridal suite as soon as I saw you.”

Oh shit, she heard about last night.

Before I finish the thought, Julia is nodding her head. “Why let a little thing like a wedding get in the way of her scolding you about your ‘Yankee boyfriend’s abominable behavior,’” she says using finger quotes.

“Don’t worry, Jackson can sit with me until you get back.”

Julia smiles and moves over in the pew to make room for him.

This is the last thing I want to deal with this afternoon, especially because our day was off to such a good start. Jackson looks at me, and I give him a weak smile.

“It’ll be fine. Be back in a few minutes.” That didn’t come out convincing at all.

He doesn’t say anything for a beat, instead searching my eyes for a moment, then nods. “Okay.” Jackson leans in and kisses my cheek, giving my hand a squeeze. “If we need to make an escape, remember our secret code.”

I laugh lightly, the silly reminder having its intended effect. “I’ll be back,” I tell him, giving his hand a squeeze in return.

I make my way out of the nave and find a hallway with several doors where I’m sure my mother and sister are getting ready for the ceremony. Sure enough, I hear giggles and excited chatter from one of the rooms. I knock on the door, and my mother opens it, her grin instantly fading.

Well, hello to you too, Mom.

Instead of allowing her sour expression to get the better of me, I look past her and see my sister in her wedding gown for the first time. She hasn’t looked my way yet, so her smile is bright as she speaks with one of her bridesmaids, Everly, I think is the girl’s name. She spots me before Cesily and a dark smirk plays across her mouth. What the hell did I ever do to her? My sister notices me as our mother steps aside and grants me entry into the suite. Cesily’s smile falters for a moment before a practiced fake one takes over her features.

“You look beautiful, Cesily. Absolutely stunning,” I tell her. I can’t help the way my voice catches, the emotion tightening my throat. We may barely tolerate each other now, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s my little sister’s wedding day, and she looks like the princess she was always pretending to be on this occasion when we were growing up.

“Thank you,” she replies before taking a sip of her champagne.

“We need to have a little chat,” my mom says, grabbing me by the elbow and pulling me out the door. When the door

closes, she drops my elbow and stands to her full height, all five foot two, and attempts to instill intimidation and fear in me with her cold gaze.

“I heard about what happened last night at the party. How could you embarrass your sister and Davis like that? Really, Abigail, I know I raised you better.”

“Mom, you weren’t there—“ I begin, but she cuts me off.

“Davis was trying to apologize for his behavior. Why, I’m not even sure. The man has groveled at your feet enough times, in my opinion. You should have gotten past it years ago, but no, stubborn to the end.”

Pausing a moment to study her, I shake my head. “You really believe that, and I can’t tell you how sad that makes me.”

She looks at me with shock and anger warring for dominance in her gaze.

“He cheated on me, Mother. And you thought he had every right to do it over and over again. Why? Because his family is well-off? That gives him the right to do whatever he wants and not have to answer for it? Or is it because I ruined your plans to tie yourself to the Callaways in every way possible?”

Mrs. Callaway is the queen in my mother’s social circle, and it would have been a major feather in my mother’s cap to have both of her daughters marry into the family. I see now that’s what she cares most about in this world. Not my happiness, but her reputation and social standing. I’ve had the

thought before, but after all these years, this is still the hill she wants to die on. *Well, have at it, Mother. Your years of guilt trips and visible disapproval for me and my life no longer mean anything to me.*

“You think you can do better than Davis Callaway? Do you honestly believe Jackson Hayes is in any way, shape, or form going to give you the life *I* planned for you? The life fitting of a Barnes?”

She’s delusional. “Seriously? God, I certainly hope so. I would rather not end up like Raelynn and have to file for divorce and go to a clinic the same day to be tested for whatever nasty STI my husband brought home. Jackson is ten times the man Davis will ever be. Too bad you won’t be around to see it. I’m leaving tomorrow and I won’t be coming back. I’ve had enough of your shit, Mother. I hope you have the life you deserve.”

Turning on my heel, I briskly walk outside, needing a moment to cool off. I’ve never really had it out with her. Sure, I’ve told her what would happen if she didn’t stop trying to reconcile Davis and me after our breakup, but I have never in my life spoken to her like that, with that much venom and honesty. I take a deep breath and look at the sky. Yup, the sun is still shining, and the world is still spinning, even though I finally told Loretta Barnes where to shove her bullshit.

Imagine that.

Despite the confrontation before the wedding, I was able to enjoy the service and be happy for my sister. We don't have to see eye to eye for me to be happy that she's marrying Dawson. He's a pretty decent guy as far as I know, nothing like his brother. Speaking of Davis, he can seriously go to hell with the looks he keeps shooting Jackson. The last thing we need is a repeat of last night. So far, he hasn't tried to talk to either of us, but I'm worried about what will happen after a few drinks. Hopefully, with it being his brother's wedding and his grandmother being in attendance, he'll keep it under control.

The reception is being held in a huge ballroom at one of the most expensive hotels in the city. I swear if there's one person here, there's five hundred. My mother is in all her glory, accepting the congratulations from everyone here. My dad is sitting at the table having a scotch, or five, with the other good ol' boys, and the bride and groom are sitting at their table being fussed over by the bridesmaids. All in all, a typical Barnes affair. Julia, Jackson, and I are sitting at a table in the back with a few other couples I don't know. Not quite the kids' table, but pretty damn close. I couldn't care less right now, though. I have one of my oldest and dearest friends here with Jackson and me. I'm still unsure how to define the relationship between the two of us. To everyone else here, he's my boyfriend, and although it was a fake title at the beginning of this trip, it feels closer to the truth now.

"Hey gorgeous, what's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" Jackson whispers in my ear, the feel of his breath on my neck sending tingles along my skin.

Turning to him with a soft smile, I whisper back, “I was thinking I’d like to dance.”

Jackson smiles at me and rises from his seat, holding out his hand.

“Don’t mind me being left to sit here all by my lonesome,” Julia says. She’s laughing, so I know she isn’t really upset about it.

“One dance and then I’ll have her back. Maybe some brave young man will come over and ask you to dance when we leave. My presence tends to intimidate those of lesser mettle,” Jackson jokes.

Julia laughs and waves us away. “Go. Have fun dancing like a happy couple should at these things.”

The happy couple remark strikes a chord with me. We really are a happy couple. And the idea doesn’t have me wanting to run away.

Jackson gives Julia a wide smile and leads me to the dance floor. He’s spinning me around and doing all the fancy moves a trained dancer would be adept at. Having him lead is so natural to me, and I’m able to fall in step with him at every turn. When I glance back to our table, I see Davis trying to engage Julia in conversation. What a dick. I’m about to suggest to Jackson that we head over to give Julia some backup when she stands, spits some words in his visibly angry red face, then turns around to stomp off. Good for her. No one should have to listen to anything that asshole has to say. Unfortunately, at that moment, Davis catches me looking on

and throws a nasty smirk in my direction. I roll my eyes and look up to meet Jackson's gaze. Ah, much better.

We dance for a few more songs, but I'm insanely thirsty and my happy champagne buzz is wearing off, so Jackson and I go back to the table to refresh ourselves.

Julia is back with two of her brothers, and they look to be entangled in a heated conversation.

"Hey guys," I greet. "I didn't think y'all were coming."

Jackson grins at me. "Y'all? I think I like this accent coming out in full force, Ms. Barnes," he whispers, nuzzling his face in my neck.

A very girlish giggle escapes me, and the Beauchamp brothers look at Jackson with the type of older brother overprotectiveness I haven't had the displeasure of dealing with for several years.

"Hank, Colton, this is Jackson Hayes. Jackson, these are Julia's older brothers."

Jackson shakes their hands and offers kind hellos to each, but the cold stare they level him with has my blood beginning to boil. For the love of God, I'm a grown-ass woman. My need for this big brother act died a long time ago.

"Jesus, boys. Stop with the death glares. Jackson here is good people, even if he is a Yankee." Julia smiles mischievously behind her champagne flute, and I shoot her daggers. She just had to point that out. Especially considering the trouble they've been having with one Yankee in particular.

When Greyson Abernathy left South Carolina for New York, he left behind all things “Southern,” including his best friend, Colton, and his maybe girlfriend, Julia. She still hasn’t given me the whole story there.

Jackson tries to alleviate some of the tension. “Don’t blame me for being born in the wrong state. Believe me, I’m finding all kinds of things I like about the South.” He turns to me with a smile dancing in his gaze.

The boys let out matching grunts, not necessarily agreeing with his statement, but at least they aren’t openly hostile toward him any longer.

“Dad said you came out to the ranch a couple days ago. Hear you took Abigail out for a ride,” Hank says.

I blush at the memory of what all the ride entailed, and Jackson squeezes my thigh under the table.

“Abigail is quite the horsewoman,” he responds. “Your property is beautiful. I enjoyed the opportunity to explore it.” Jackson smiles and winks at me, letting me know his mind went to the same place mine did.

We settle into a comfortable conversation with Julia and her brothers, the guys sharing stories from their childhood and the shit they used to get up to, as boys do.

“My dad was so pissed that I fucked up the dock. He refused to get another motorboat, and if I wanted to go out on the lake, I would have to row my damn self there and back,” Jackson tells Hank and Colton, finishing his story of getting

wasted with his buddies at the cabin his parents let him use unsupervised for the first, and last, time.

“Shit, man, that’s nothing. Hank, you remember the time after homecoming at the field party we had involving a mud pit, tractor, and the homecoming queen’s crown that Dad found attached to one of the calves,” Colton says to Hank as he laughs at the memory.

“What’s so funny?” Easton asks as he swaggers over with a tray of shots.

“And just where have you been, brother dearest?” Julia asks, eyeing the liquid in the glasses. “That better not be tequila.”

“God, no,” Easton says. “No one wants a repeat of the last time Colton got drunk on that shit and decided swinging on a boom crane in his underwear à la Miley Cyrus was a good idea. It’s vodka.”

Everyone laughs as Easton hands out the shots. Jackson partakes in the first round, but when Easton hands us all another, he slides the shot to me.

“I’d rather not mix my scotch with vodka, or I might come up with some scandalous drunken ideas of my own and get us kicked out of your sister’s wedding reception,” he whispers in my ear. “I did see a sign for a pool.” He lightly nips the tender skin of my neck and I giggle.

“That was a one-time deal, Prince. My skinny dipping adventures began and ended the other night.”

He tucks my hair behind my ear and shots me a mischievous wink. “We’ll see, Red.”

I shake my head and laugh. Yeah, he definitely needs to stick to scotch. When he gives me those looks, all rational thought tends to fly out the window.

While the guys continue drinking and trading stories of their misspent youth, Julia and I decide it’s time to dance. Leaning over to Jackson, I give him a peck on the cheek and let him know I’ll be back.

He looks at me with glazed eyes and a lazy smile. “Have fun, sweetheart,” he slurs.

“Might want to slow down on the scotch, Prince. I have plans for you after we get out of here.” The smile I give him is full of dirty promises.

“Oh, don’t you worry, Red. I’ve only had a couple. Not enough to hinder any ideas you have for later.” He tries to wink but closes both eyes instead. All I can do is laugh. With the state he’s in already, it’ll be a miracle if I can get him to our room. It doesn’t bother me though. He’s having fun with some of my favorite people in what could very well have been an awkward situation. But Jackson and the Beauchamp brothers have hit it off better than I could’ve hoped for. It’s crazy how the one person I resisted for so long is now the one person who somehow fits perfectly in my life.

CHAPTER 21

Abigail

Dancing and having the best night, despite being at my sister's uptight wedding, has me realizing I've spent way too much time away from the people I grew up with and love like family because of one person. I let the idea of running into Davis or hearing about how I let the best thing get away from me keep me away.

Seeing Jackson get along with Julia and her brothers has me thinking visiting Charleston doesn't need to have anything to do with my family either. That's quite the revelation for me. We don't have to see my family. The truth is I've been letting my blood family keep me away from the family I made when I was a kid and started taking riding lessons, meeting a precocious little girl and her wild brothers. That's when I learned that mothers aren't only concerned with how you make them look in public, and fathers don't always hide in their office after a day at work, only coming out for dinner and a generic rundown of your day. I learned that siblings have your back through everything, and family comes first.

I'm lucky enough to be considered part of the Beauchamp family when my own barely speak to me, unless they need me for a photo op. I'm lucky to have Kasey and Lindsey as my surrogate sisters, when my own can't be bothered to show me any kindness.

Looking over to where Jackson and the Beauchamp brothers are still talking at the table, I see him get up and stumble toward the restroom. When he almost knocks into a server, I get a little concerned that I'm going to need one of Julia's brothers to carry him out of here. Damn, I was really hoping for some fun with him later, but by the looks of it, he won't be up for much, other than passing the hell out.

Julia and I head back to the table, and I give her brothers the stink eye.

"You three just had to get my date drunk, didn't you?" I shake my head and chuckle. Leave it to these guys to let him get out of hand.

Colton looks at me innocently, but I don't buy it. "He's only had one since we came over here." He laughs and smacks Hank on the shoulder. "Figures the Yankee can't hold his booze."

Hank smiles. "Swear, Abigail. We haven't been feeding him any alcohol but the round of shots Easton brought over earlier. But your boyfriend is wasted. Want me to go check on him?"

How could he have gotten so tanked in the last thirty minutes? "No, I'm sure he's fine. Jackson isn't the type to get trashed and make an ass of himself."

I think about that statement for a moment. Jackson has, in fact, done just that on several occasions, but Donovan usually cleaned up his messes for him and made sure nothing got out to the press or their parents. But that was the old Jackson. He hasn't acted that way in months. Not since Lindsey was kidnapped by his stalker, and he realized his cavalier ways can have a profound impact on the people around him.

Several minutes pass, and Julia and I have another glass of champagne, but Jackson still hasn't returned from the restroom.

"I'm going to go find him, make sure everything is okay," I tell the table.

"Want me to go with you?" Colton asks.

"Nah, I'm sure everything's fine. He's probably just on a phone call or something," I reply. Jackson hasn't talked to anyone at his club that I know of since we got here. He handles a lot of the business side of running the club. Lube doesn't stock itself, after all.

I excuse myself and go on the hunt for my wayward boyfriend. The alcohol must be really hitting me because I just called him my boyfriend. The thought makes my steps falter a moment. I can't remember the last time I had an actual boyfriend or wanted one for that matter. But the title fits. While pretending to be in a relationship to keep my family off my back about Davis, Jackson and I started a real relationship. The idea doesn't freak me out as much as I thought it would. Imagine that. He went from irritating playboy to kinda friend

(with benefits) to boyfriend in the span of a few weeks. Though I never thought I would look at him as anyone I could possibly be willing to let into my heart, he's there. Damn. I guess I finally fell for that Hayes charm.

When I get to the men's room, there are a couple guys headed out. Hoping no one else is in there, I peek my head in.

"Jackson?" I call out. No response. Great, I'm going to have to look for him now. Should have known it wouldn't be that easy. I walk to the end of the hall toward the exit and open the door leading out to the gardens, which we aren't using for the reception.

"Jackson?" I call out again. Nothing.

I see one of the waitstaff on a smoke break as he quickly disposes of his cigarette, obviously busted for not being where he should be by a guest.

"Don't worry, I won't rat you out to my mother." I laugh, and he nervously smiles in relief. Poor kid, if I had to deal with her as a server, I would probably be lighting up too. The woman is a pain in the ass on her best day, and this wedding shit has turned her up to eleven on the bitch scale.

"Have you seen a guy out here, tall dirty-blond hair, probably a little drunker than he should be?" I laugh at my own joke seeing as I think I'm a bit drunker than I should be at the moment.

The young man shakes his head. "No, ma'am. I was the only one out here."

“Thanks.”

I close the door and realize I’m probably going to have to enlist Beauchamps help in finding him. If he did go out into the gardens when the kid wasn’t around, Lord only knows how far he could have wandered off in his state.

When I turn around to grab the guys, Davis is making his way down the hall with a look on his face I can’t quite read, but I wouldn’t call it kind by any means.

“Hey Abby, missing something?” he says with a rude chuckle.

I roll my eyes and hold my head high, looking past him. And that’s when I hear it.

The voices are coming from the supply closet on the other side of the men’s room.

“God, you’re so hot. Let me get you out of these and we can have some real fun,” I hear a woman’s high-pitched, breathy voice.

“Mmm. Keep doing that. Fuck, that feels good,” I hear a distinctly male voice slur.

I recognize that voice. I’ve heard that voice several times over the last few days and nights murmur those same words to me.

Davis is standing in front of the door with a smarmy smile stretching across his lips. I push him out of the way and wrench the door open. What greets me is a sight I wish like hell I would never have to see again. Jackson, with his jacket

hanging off his shoulders, shirt halfway undone. Champagne and vodka swirl violently in my gut as I try to comprehend the scene unfolding in front of me. The girl I recognize as one of Cesily's bridesmaids, Everly. The same one I saw trying to hit on Jackson the other night at the bachelor/bachelorette party. Looks like gentlemen really do prefer blondes from the way he has his hands all over her fucking body.

She sees me and gasps, but it's completely fake. She was hoping me, or someone that knows me, would walk in and see them together so I would find out. Jackson doesn't even register he's been caught. He's so fucking drunk I'm surprised he can stand at this point with the way he's swaying. I look down with disgust at Everly's hand on his dick that's still in his pants. He's not even hard. Good, I hope the bastard has a raging case of whiskey dick.

Jackson finally looks at me with a dopey grin on his face, but I can tell he still doesn't grasp what's going on. Fucking bastard. This is just like when I caught him with the coat check girl after hitting on me. He was wasted then, too. It seems this is Jackson's MO when he's had too much to drink. Just find the closest available girl to fuck in a dark corner.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" I screech at the top of my lungs.

I spin around and run into Davis's wide chest.

"I told you he was nothing but a playboy. Tigers don't change their stripes."

“Well, you would know, wouldn’t you?” I look up to give him a pointed glare and see the look of satisfaction on his face.

“Are you happy to prove me right, Davis? Do you get some sick pleasure from knowing my boyfriend cheated on me like you did?” I curse my bad luck that I have to deal with two piece of shit cheaters on the same night. How is this my life right now?

Davis attempts to look contrite. “No, Abby. But this guy obviously hasn’t grown up. I have. I know what I lost, and I guarantee I wouldn’t make that mistake again.”

“Losing me or getting caught, Davis? Because from what I understand, you haven’t changed all these years later. You’re the same asshole who sticks his dick in any woman who bats her lashes at you. Only difference is, you pay for it now.”

I don’t bother to hear his reply, pushing him out of my damn way before I storm down the hallway back to my table. Julia takes one look at my face and sees the horror I’m sure is splashed across my features. I grab the glass she’s holding out of her hand and swallow the entirety of the contents. If I had to guess, it’s a vodka tonic, but I drink it so fast I don’t actually taste it.

“What the hell happened?” she asks as I continue to gulp.

“Oh, nothing much.” I slam the glass back on the table. “I just caught Jackson in the supply closet with one of my sister’s slutmaids.”

Julia's eyes go wide as saucers as she darts her gaze to the hallway and back to me.

"I will fucking kick his Yankee ass back to Philadelphia myself. And if I can't do it, we'll round up Hank and Colton. He fucked with the wrong girl."

I have no doubt Julia and her brothers could give him the beating of a lifetime. It was hard enough keeping them away from Davis when they found out he cheated on me. The only thing that saved Davis's ass at the time was the fact that I asked them not to do anything. Truthfully, I wasn't in love with Davis, so the betrayal, though painful, didn't ruin me. Bruised my ego, sure, but I knew I would get over it. It was my mother and sister taking his side that fucked with my head the most.

This is completely different, though. I really thought Jackson had changed. I thought we had something real, or at the very least, we were on our way there.

"Can we please just leave? I don't want to cause a scene at my sister's wedding." Actually, I do want to cause a scene, which is why we should leave before I see Jackson's drunk, cheating face or Davis's cat-that-ate-the-canary expression again.

"Sure, honey. I'll just text my brothers and let them know."

I grab my purse and head out the door with Julia typing away on her phone.

"Where to?" she asks.

“I need to get my shit from the hotel. I’m not going to be there if he stumbles in. Can we go to your house?”

“Of course.”

The ride to the hotel isn’t far and I throw everything in my bags as quickly as possible. I don’t want to be here if he comes back. On our way out to the ranch, I look on my phone for flights that leave tomorrow. Thank God there is one seat left on an eight a.m. flight back to Philly. The sooner I leave Charleston and Jackson behind, the better.

Jackson

Opening my eyes takes so much effort I’m exhausted by the very act alone. *Fuck*. I didn’t think I drank that much last night, but my memories get fuzzy after the second, maybe third, drink I consumed. Just trying to remember the events from last night has my brain feeling ready to explode out of my head. I close my eyes again, not ready to deal with the pain throbbing behind them. This is unbelievable. I don’t think I’ve ever had a hangover this painful.

Blindly reaching over to feel for Abigail in my hazy hangover state, I come up with nothing except cold sheets. It can’t be that late, considering I feel as though I just fell asleep. Although I don’t know when that would have happened, considering I don’t even remember leaving the wedding reception.

A loud snore sounds from the little living room of the suite. My hellcat snores like a lumberjack after a night of drinking, even though she'll never admit it, but the one I hear is decidedly masculine. My eyes open again, squinting from the minimal light coming through the blinds. God, I feel like I got hit by a car, a bus, and a train consecutively.

Sitting up, a wave of nausea rolls through me from the movement. Faster than I would think possible in my state, I make a mad dash for the bathroom and empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet. What the hell is going on? Did I eat some bad shrimp or something? I haven't felt this awful after a night of drinking since I was a teenager and my brother and I raided my father's scotch.

Barely able to stand on shaky legs, I rinse my mouth out with water and attempt to brush my teeth. It's slow going getting the toothpaste on the brush, but I finally manage.

I walk back into the room and look at the couch where Colton is sleeping, his large body barely fitting on the small sofa. What the hell?

"Colton," I say loudly to wake him, my voice practically splitting my head in two.

He jolts up and looks at my disheveled state. "Good, you're alive." He runs a hand over his scruffy jaw and shoots me a glare. "I don't know what the hell happened with you and Abigail last night, but you seriously cockblocked me when I had to come find your drunk ass and get you out of the building before anyone saw."

Again, *what the hell?*

I have no idea what could have possibly happened with Abigail last night, considering I can't remember a *fucking* thing.

My legs feel as though they're going to give out under me, and I have to sit on the chair opposite Colton before I collapse.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, thoroughly confused.

"I don't know, man. I got a text from Julia saying she was leaving with Abigail and you were an asshole. I went to find you and saw you in the hallway, practically drooling on yourself with your shirt half-open. I hauled you out the back and got you to your hotel and into bed."

That explains why my pants were still on from last night. At least Colton didn't decide to undress me. I like the guy and all, but I prefer a certain redhead undressing me at the end of the night.

"Where's Abigail?" I ask. That's the moment I look around the room and notice all her shoes and girly things aren't scattered throughout the suite like they were yesterday.

"Julia said they were headed back to our house. When we got back here, all her things were gone." Colton looks at me with hesitant sympathy. His loyalties lie with Abigail, and I appreciate that. I just wish I had any memory of what I could have possibly done.

"Do you have any idea why she was so angry with you that she left in the middle of her sister's wedding reception?"

Colton asks.

I try to concentrate on the events from last night, at least as much as my pounding head will allow, but come up with nothing. Zip, zilch, nada. The last thing I remember is watching Abigail and Julia on the dance floor and thinking what a lucky bastard I am to have this vivacious woman giving me, of all people, a shot. We started out as pretend. I was just helping her out of a sticky situation with having to go to her sister's wedding alone. But our trip changed things. And fuck, I was so goddamn happy about it. Then I remember feeling way drunker than I should have. I needed to use the restroom and thought it would be a good idea to make a stop for some water on my way back. The last thing I vaguely remember is walking into an empty bathroom.

"I haven't the foggiest idea. The last thing I remember is going to the bathroom." I run my hand through my hair in frustration. "Nothing after that. How the fuck did I get so drunk? And why was I alone in a hallway with my shirt half-done?" I'm more thinking out loud than hoping for an answer from Colton. Which is probably good, considering he just shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head. No help there, I guess.

"Any idea where my phone is?" I ask, looking around the living room.

"I threw it on the nightstand next to your wallet and key card."

Getting up, I find my phone where he said it was. Nothing from Abigail or any other notifications on my phone. I grab my wallet and check to make sure all my money is still in there. Seeing as I don't remember what happened, I want to make sure I wasn't robbed or something. That's when I notice the condoms I started keeping in there when things started to heat up between Abigail and I are gone. A memory hits like I just got punched in the gut. I remember a dark room and suddenly light. I remember kissing someone that I would have sworn at the time was Abigail, because why the fuck would I ever want to kiss anyone else, but I remember Abigail looking at me with disgust and pain all over her beautiful face standing in a doorway. It's just flashes, fuzzy ones at that, but I get the distinct impression it wasn't Abigail I was kissing. Shit.

What the hell did I do?

CHAPTER 22

Jackson

This isn't fucking happening. There's no way in hell I would be that stupid, no matter how drunk I was.

"Colton," I say, the panic rising in my voice. "Did you see anyone else in the hallway when you found me?"

"No." He walks over to where I'm sitting on the bed looking at my wallet, completely dumbfounded and scared shitless that I did something I can't take back.

"Are you missing something?" he asks.

"Yeah," I croak out. "Call Julia for me, please. I need to find Abigail."

I throw my phone on the bed and dial Abigail's number. I know she won't pick up if my hazy memory is correct, but I have to try. Straight to voice mail. Shit. I send her a text to have her call me as soon as she gets it, but since her phone is off, I doubt she will anytime soon.

"Julia said she left. She took an early flight back to Philly." Colton looks at me warily. "Julia also told me the reason she

left. She caught you with a bridesmaid in a fucking supply closet.”

I can tell Colton doesn't know what's really going on. I remember sitting at the table talking with him and Hank, getting along, sharing stories of misspent youth. But right now, he's wavering between helping me figure out how to get home the quickest way imaginable, so I can fix whatever this is with Abigail and punching me in the face. Honestly, if what he said is true, then I'll let him beat the ever-loving shit out of me. Then let Hank get some shots in.

“I swear to you, man, I have no idea what happened. But there's no way I would have cheated on Abigail, at least not in my right mind. Honestly, Colton, I don't remember shit after I went to the bathroom.” Except the brief, terrifying flashes I had. I don't tell Colton about those or the missing condoms. I need his help more than an ass beating right now.

“I have to get to the airport. I have to get home and try to figure out what the hell happened.” I begin throwing everything I can find in my bag.

“You need to take a shower first. You smell like a distillery.” Colton scrunches his nose. “I'll pack up your shit and see when the next flight leaves.”

My mind is racing with horrendous possibilities from last night. Colton said he found me with my shirt half-undone, but he didn't say anything about my pants. I'm sure he would have mentioned if my dick was hanging out. Plus, I couldn't have

been gone for that long before Abigail found me. Fuck. I keep seeing the stricken look in her beautiful green eyes.

I quickly get out of the shower and dress in the clothes I brought in with me. When I get back into the room, all my things have been packed, and Colton is on his phone looking at flights.

“The next one leaves in two hours. Plenty of time to get you to the airport and get a ticket.”

“Thanks, man, I really appreciate it.” I grab my sunglasses because the light is still tearing through my skull and grab a couple painkillers, chugging them down with water. My stomach is still in knots, but I’m not sure if that’s the hangover or the fact I still have no clue what happened last night.

Colton drives me to the airport, and thankfully, I can still get a ticket. I try calling Abigail several more times, but it goes straight to voice mail every time. Either she hasn’t touched down yet, or she’s keeping her phone off.

I’m sitting in the first-class lounge waiting for my flight to be called and decide to bite the bullet and call the one person who Abigail may have spoken to.

Kasey answers on the second ring. “Jackson, is everything okay?”

I don’t make it a habit to call my brother’s girlfriend, but she seems like the most likely candidate to have spoken with Abigail at some point between last night and this morning.

“Hey, have you heard from Abigail?” I ask.

“We texted while she was getting ready for her sister’s wedding, but not since then. Why, what’s going on?”

So much, but I’m not going to rehash everything while I feel like shit and still haven’t been able to find my girl.

“We had a misunderstanding, and she took off. Her friend said she got on a plane this morning, but I haven’t been able to get a hold of her. I was hoping she would’ve checked in with you or something.”

My head drops to my hand, and I rub my temples. While the pain relievers are helping my headache, the stress is not.

“Must have been a pretty big misunderstanding for her to fly home by herself.” Her tone is suspicious, and I know she wants more answers, but I don’t have any to give her. We all know how much Abigail hates flying, at least the takeoffs and landings. Goddammit, she really had to have felt the need to get the hell out of town if she’s braving the flight solo.

“Listen, if she calls or texts you, please tell her I’m trying to get a hold of her, and I’m on my way home? Her phone’s been off all morning.” I’m not above begging Kasey if it means Abigail will call me back.

“I will. But Jackson, I want you to know one thing. Abigail is my friend first. I’m sorry if that comes off harsh, but I’ll have her back over anyone else’s. Understand?”

“Loud and clear, Kasey. Just please know she has it all wrong. Whatever’s going on in that gorgeous head of hers, she

has to give me a chance to explain.” Or at least figure out what the hell I did last night.

Kasey takes in a deep breath. “Sounds like I have a lot to catch up on with her.”

“Yeah, you can say that again.” I hear my flight being called. “I have to go. We’re starting to board. I’ll be home soon.”

“Okay, Jackson. Safe travels.” Kasey hangs up, and I gather my things, anxious to get the fuck out of Charleston.

The flight is nowhere near as fun as the one we took here. First off, there’s no Abigail to talk to and tease. Second, I was really hoping to be inducted into the mile-high club on the way back on a private jet, but that’s obviously not happening without Abigail. Sex wasn’t the only thing I loved about spending time with her, even though it was off-the-charts, steamy, fucking hot. Talking to her, even when she gave me shit, was the most fun I’ve ever had in the company of another woman, and I’ve spent plenty of time with other women. That’s probably the reason it’s so easy for Abigail to believe the worst about what she saw. I’m still not a hundred-percent sure about what that was, but if the flashes I have of the devastation on her face are any indication, I know it’s not good. I refuse to believe I had sex with another woman, though. I don’t know what happened, but I know it wasn’t that.

When we land, I try Abigail again. I know she's made it back by now, so hopefully she's turned her phone back on. It rings, thank fuck, and goes to voice mail. Shit. I call back again like a fucking stalker, and she sends me to voice mail. Well, that answers that question. Abigail refuses to talk to me.

I send her a text asking her to call me back, but she doesn't respond. I send another one saying I have no idea what's going on. Nothing. I slam my head back on the seat of the cab, and the temptation to punch the roof is strong, but I don't want to scare the poor driver by making him think he picked up a crazy person.

When I walk back into my apartment, it hits me once again how cold and lifeless it is. Nothing like the last few days spent in a hotel room with one of the liveliest people I've ever known. I collapse onto my couch, and to add insult to injury, I look through some of the pictures I took on our trip. I don't think I've ever seen Abigail look more beautiful than in the picture of us on the bed, just having roused from sleep after a long night of having the best sex of my life. But that was the way with Abigail. Every night topped the one before. She looks sleepy and sated with me kissing her on the cheek. I took it on a whim, thinking if this was all we had, I wanted something to remember it by. It was a passing thought that I quickly forgot about because there was no way I was not going to have this woman in my life and in my bed. It stopped being just a fantasy and was quickly turning into our reality.

The phone rings in my hand and Donovan's name moves across the screen.

“Hello, brother,” I answer tiredly into the phone.

“Jackson, what the hell is going on? Kasey told me you called her looking for Abigail.”

The last thing I feel like dealing with is a lecture from my brother about how I should have kept my dick in my pants. If he only knew the half of it.

“Yeah. She flew home without me.”

“Care to explain why?” he says sternly into the phone.

“Not really.” The only thing I want to do is crawl into bed and go to sleep. Hopefully then I can wake up and find this whole day was just one long nightmare.

“Too bad. I’m coming over. Be there in twenty.” He hangs up, and I blow out an annoyed breath. He’s known about Abigail and me since our trip to the cabin. As far as I could tell, he didn’t tell Kasey, seeing as I asked him not to, but he did issue me a very stern warning about fucking around with someone his girlfriend views as a sister. Kasey made sure to make that fact clear this morning when I spoke with her before my flight. It didn’t frustrate me coming from her like it does from Donovan. Abigail is lucky to have Kasey in her corner, unlike her own sister, who basically disowned her because of that cheating asshole. Fuck, am I the cheating asshole now?

Donovan gets to my apartment with a tall cup of coffee and a scowl on his face.

“Thanks,” I tell him while reaching for the cup.

“This isn’t for you, asshole. What the fuck did you do to Abigail, because my woman is pissed and worried that she can’t get a hold of her friend.”

I wave him inside and sink back into the couch while Donovan takes a seat in the chair across from me.

Rubbing my hand over my face, I take a deep breath and begin my explanation. “Everything was great. We were getting along and having a great time. I thought when we got back, it would be a chance to start something real, you know? Her family was a trip. Some of the biggest assholes I’ve ever met. Her mom only cared about her standing in her social circles, and her dad was totally checked out from reality. Nice enough guy but completely oblivious.”

Donovan rolls his eyes at my accurate and unflattering description of her parents. My brother abhors social climbing pariahs.

Anger begins heating my face remembering the way her mother dismissed Abigail so flippantly that first day. “And the sister was a spoiled princess. Didn’t give two shits that Abigail came to celebrate with her.” I shake my head at the memory of her reaction to the argument between Abigail, Davis, and me at the bar. “But being with Abigail was nothing like I thought it would be. It was so much better. Maybe it was because she only had me to lean on, or maybe it was being away from our day-to-day lives and playing the happy couple, but we really connected.”

I tell him about waking up in the hotel this morning and what I was able to piece together through my hazy memories. It's not much, to say the least.

Donovan looks at me skeptically while sipping the coffee he brought for himself. Asshole.

“I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't just about the sex, brother. And she felt it too. No matter what we were doing or where we were, there was this magnetic pull toward each other. Almost like my body knew where she was every second, and I needed to touch her or be next to her. And when I'm not around her, my skin doesn't feel like it fits right. I've never felt anything like it before.”

Donovan is looking at me with a small, cocky smile and a knowing glint in his eye.

“What's that look for?” I ask. His discerning gaze is making my knee bounce with anxious energy as I wait for him to say something. Anything is better than him staring at me like I should have a clue what he's thinking.

“You really are a stupid asshole sometimes.” He chuckles at his very unfunny comment.

“If you're going to sit here and insult me, then what the hell are you even doing here? We could have done this shit over the phone.” I lay my head back on the cushion and close my eyes. I'm still exhausted and not in the mood to deal with my brother's holier-than-thou attitude.

Now Donovan laughs out loud as though I just said the funniest thing ever.

“Brother, you’re in love with her,” he tells me with laughter lacing his words. “That’s exactly how I feel about Kasey. I’m honestly surprised you didn’t see the signs, considering you spent those weeks in my apartment with me after the shooting and got to witness firsthand what a mess I was without her.”

“Donovan, you can’t be serious. I’ve never been in love, but I don’t think this is that.” Even as I say the words, there’s a whisper in the back of my mind that’s agreeing with him. But I always imagined love making you happy, and I’m anything but at the moment.

“You said it yourself. You’ve never felt this before, so how would you know?” He smugly raises a brow, and I have the urge to smack the look off his face.

He’s not wrong though, which pisses me off even more. I did spend weeks watching him mope over losing Kasey after she and Lindsey were kidnapped. What else could bring that kind of pain over the thought of not being with someone if it wasn’t love? I can’t think of another reason I would be sitting here feeling this hole in my chest where the excitement of being with Abigail once resided.

I hang my head and let out a long breath. “You’re right. Fuck. You’re right.” I squeeze my eyes shut, not caring that my brother sees the pain I’m sure is etched across my face. I was so stupid to think that’s not what this was. All the fighting we’ve been doing for months, then the incredible turn we

made in Charleston. Anyone would be a complete idiot not to fall for that fierce woman. She let me behind her carefully constructed walls, and I fell for her. I respect her hardness and her determination. But I fell in love with the softness she doesn't show the world. The reason she doesn't show it is because she's been hurt by the people who were supposed to love her the most and protect her heart. And now, in her eyes, I'm lumped in with that group of assholes.

“What do I do? I love her, and she thinks I cheated on her like her piece-of-shit ex.” I couldn't be any more screwed.

“You're going to have to prove to her that you didn't cheat. I'm not sure how, seeing as from what you told me, she caught you doing something. Too bad you can't remember what. I've known you to get blackout drunk when we were kids and didn't know any better, but really Jackson. At this age, it's just embarrassing.” Donovan shakes his head at me in disappointment.

“You don't have to tell me. That's the thing though, I don't remember having more than a couple drinks. I've never been drugged, but that's what this feels like.”

Donovan looks at me questioningly. “Is it possible that's what happened?”

“I don't think so. We were at a table with her friends. Why would any of them have done that?” My mind goes back to Helen, my stalker. When she held Lindsey captive for a week, Helen kept her drugged up. Then Kasey, too. Could this be the work of another stalker? No. I won't let my mind go there. I

just can't think of a reason someone would want to hurt me and Abigail so much that they would stoop to such a low that they could have potentially killed me.

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Regardless of how it happened, she won't speak to me."

My brother scoffs. "Are you seriously going to let this go without a fight? Maybe I was wrong, and you don't really love her."

I'm instantly enraged. "Fuck that, and fuck you for assuming that shit. I may not know what I'm going to do right now, but I'll be damned if I let this go."

Donovan smiles and nods his head. "Alright then. That's what I wanted to hear." He leans over and smacks my knee. "You can have today to get your shit together and take another shower because, quite frankly, you smell like shit. Tomorrow we'll come up with a plan."

Donovan stands and makes his way to the door.

"Wait, you're going to help me?" I call out to him as he opens the door. "I thought for sure you would wait to talk to Kasey about it to see how bad I really messed up after she talks to Abigail."

He smiles. "Let me worry about Kasey. I have ways of making her see things my way." With that, he walks through the door and shuts it behind him. I don't know how on earth he plans to get Kasey on my side... ugh, actually his smile gave it away. I would tell him not to get involved for the sake of his

relationship, but I'm a selfish asshole. Abigail was right about that one, at least.

CHAPTER 23

Abigail

*F*uck this day to fucking hell.

After having to endure a delayed, bumpy-as-hell flight back to Philly, I finally get to my apartment and sweet, sweet silence. Flying commercial is definitely the pits, but I guess I've been spoiled by my last two flights. I don't want to think about those right now. It just reminds me of who I was flying with and what a spectacular asshole that person turned out to be.

The two hours I spent on the plane before freaking out over the takeoff were spent replaying the look on Jackson's face when I caught him in the closet with Everly. His disoriented gaze haunts me. First, I can't believe he got so drunk. Second, that he got so drunk he decided sleeping with another woman was acceptable. Who the fuck does that? It seemed awfully coincidental that Davis was there when I caught Jackson and that bitch, Everly, in the supply closet. Considering he had been lurking around during the entire reception, I didn't think too much about it at the time. He must have seen them go in

and wanted to make sure I found out. That has to be it. Good timing on his part, bad timing for Jackson.

Seeing Davis's smug-as-fuck cheating face, then Jackson's drunken smile brought back all the emotions of the barbeque, when I caught Davis cheating. I had to get out of there. My heart was shattering, and I wasn't about to let either of them see me break.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. There sure as shit won't be a third time. For anyone. The way he was so disgusted with Davis's behavior and the way he kept saying he was a complete idiot for letting me go made me think there was no way in hell he would do something like that to me. I should have known better. Oh wait, I did know better. This was the exact reason I thought Jackson was a complete prick in the first place. He did this to me already. Stupid me for believing him twice.

Not bothering to turn my phone on when I get off the plane, I head to my apartment. I'm sure there are plenty of calls from Jackson. He was blowing the damn thing up while I was at the airport. I already let Kasey know I was coming home early but didn't want to talk about it right then. I'm not ready to admit I was a complete idiot to my best friend. I should probably let Julia know I made it home safe, though, since I was a couple hours late getting here.

Walking into my apartment, it looks like nothing has changed. Everything is still where I left it, including the coffee cup in the sink from the morning I left. What's changed,

though, is I feel like more of a fool than I ever did before. That morning my biggest concern was keeping Jackson out of my bed. Now, it's how to evict him from my heart. That man sure did a number on me. The exact thing I was trying to avoid before I left. The champagne/vodka/wine hangover is one thing to deal with, but this empty feeling in the middle of my chest is something else entirely. No amount of sleep or greasy cheeseburgers will heal this particular ache. I never would have thought I would be stupid enough to give him a shot and have it blow up so spectacularly in such a short amount of time. Days—no, hours—were all it took for him to break my heart. I chuckle at myself as I pick up that damn coffee cup. *Stupid, stupid girl.*

All of a sudden, the coffee cup is the most offensive thing in my presence, so I do what any sane person would do and throw it against the wall, watching it fly into a million pieces. Huh. I would have thought it was made of stronger stuff than that and not be able to break apart into tiny little pieces. Kind of like me.

I shake my head in disappointment, the shattered glass reminding me that, once again, I'm letting heartbreak steer my decisions. That is simply unacceptable. I am not going to let Jackson Hayes be the reason I start destroying my apartment. At least not anything else. Nope, he can go to hell. I refuse to give him, or any man, more space in my head. It may be easier said than done, but it's not impossible.

I turn my phone on so I can text Julia and let her know I made it home safe and sound. As soon as I do, I see the five

voice mails and seven texts from Jackson. Of course there are. It must suck for him to know he lost his Philly booty call, seeing as that's all I must be to him if he could so easily sleep with someone else.

There are also two texts from Kasey and one from Lindsey. Kasey let me know Jackson called her looking for me, and she wants to make sure I'm okay after my abrupt return to Philly.

I'm not, but I will be.

First things first, I decide to call Julia.

She picks up right away. "Has that piece-of-shit Yankee tried calling, or is he too busy playing hide the sausage still with that bitch Everly?"

Well, that's quite the greeting.

"He has. And he's texted. I'm not inclined to give him the time of day, though." I let out a long sigh. "I just wanted to let you know I'm home and to thank you again for helping me escape last night." I choke back my tears, refusing to let another one fall because of that man.

"That's what best friends are for. You know the ranch is always your safe place, honey." Julia's tone has changed from vengeful to sweet and supportive, like she knows exactly what I need to hear. "Just a heads-up, my brother stayed with him last night because he was beyond fucked up when they found him. I didn't get a chance to really talk to him, but I thought you should know."

I squeeze my eyes shut, again reliving the memory of finding him in that damn closet.

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know. At least I know the bastard didn’t choke on his vomit or something. I like his brother, and it would be a shame if he had to mourn the Son of Satan.”

Julia chuckles at my nickname for Jackson. “I won’t keep you since I know you didn’t get much sleep.” Julia and I stayed up late sharing a bottle of wine and cursing the male population in general. “But just know I love you to pieces and can’t wait for you to come back and visit. Let’s not let it be years between visits this time, yeah?”

A pang of guilt hits me even though I know she doesn’t mean anything malicious by her comment. I let way too much time pass between visits after Davis and I broke up because I didn’t want to face my family or possibly run into him. I was a shitty friend to someone who always had my back.

“I’m already planning my next trip. Although I’ll probably wait ’til *after* summer. I’m good with staying away from those Southern summers.”

Julia laughs. “Girl, I don’t blame you. Hopefully, all this Abernathy business is handled by then, too.” Ah yes, Grayson Abernathy. Another reason for our wine-infused “Men Are Scumbags And Only Good For Orgasms” party last night. Julia let a little slip about her and Grayson last night, hence why she has decided he’s only good for that one thing, no matter how long ago it was.

“Me too, babe,” I tell her. “Okay, I’m beat. I’m going to take a shower and a nap. Not necessarily in that order.”

Julia groans. “That sounds amazing. Alright, we’ll talk soon.”

We hang up, and I toss my phone on the couch next to me where I collapsed when I called Julia. I’m exhausted and want nothing more than to crawl in bed and sleep for the next three days, but I know Kasey is worried, so I decide to call her and put her mind at ease.

“Hey Abigail,” she answers the phone after the first ring.

“Were you sitting on your phone?” I ask. She answered it damn quick.

“Maybe,” she says with a giggle. “I don’t know what happened between you and Jackson, but I can be there within the hour with Lindsey and copious amounts of wine.”

That’s a good friend right there.

“Give me two?” I ask.

“You got it. See you soon.”

She disconnects the call. Why I was ever worried that Kasey would take Jackson’s side over mine is a mystery to me at this moment. Donovan may be Jackson’s brother, but I should have known she would be here with wine and a shoulder to cry on at the drop of a hat, no questions asked. That’s what true sisters do.

When I get out of the shower, I have two more missed calls from Jackson, *Yeah, not happening, pal*, and a call from Gus, my editor. I'm not supposed to be back until tomorrow, but Gus isn't one to waste time remembering the little details about his reporters' lives.

Deciding it's time to suck it up and get back to work, I call him back.

"Hey Gus," I say when he answers his line.

"Abigail. Are you back from your sister's wedding?"

I sigh into the phone. "I am. What's up?"

"I need someone to cover the charity event the day after tomorrow. I had Annie ready to do it, but her eighty-seven-year-old grandma broke her hip so she's going to upstate New York to take care of her."

There's a lot I love about my job as a life and style reporter and getting dressed up for galas is at the top of that list.

"Sure. Email me the details, and I'll be there."

Gus lets out a relieved breath. "Okay, kid, thanks." He hangs up without saying goodbye. That's Gus for you. To the point, then on to the next.

Just after I fall asleep, there's a knock on my door. I look at the time and realize I've actually been out for an hour. Wow, I was more exhausted than I thought. I take a look in the mirror

and holy shit, I look a mess. My long red hair looks like a nest of angry squirrels made a home in it. That's what I get for not drying it after my shower. Oh well, nothing I can do about it now. I trudge to my door and peek through the peephole. All I see is my favorite bottle of red held up to the little hole.

Swinging the door open, I grab the bottle and caress it. "Ah, my precious," I say lovingly to the cabernet. Snickers sound from Kasey and Lindsey as they come in for a group hug.

"I'm so happy to see your face," Kasey says into my tangled hair on one side and on the other, I hear Lindsey tell me she loves me. It's quite the feat for her to be in my apartment. She's come a long way in terms of being able to leave her apartment, especially without Aiden. Her being here warms my heart more than I could possibly put into words.

We walk to the kitchen, where I promptly open my bottle of cab and take a healthy swig as Kasey turns around from the cabinet with three wineglasses in her hand.

"So, no need for glasses tonight. Oh man, this is gonna be good," she says as she opens another bottle for her and Lindsey and pours them a glass.

"Y'all might want to sit down for this one," I tell my girls.

We make ourselves comfortable in my living room. Kasey and I stretched out on the couch and Lindsey on the oversized chair with her legs dangling over the arm.

"Okay, sister. Spill," Lindsey tells me.

I take another deep breath and a long pull from my bottle. “So, I haven’t been totally forthcoming about the extent of Jackson’s and my relationship,” I begin. Their eyes are wide as I tell them everything, starting with the night Aiden punched Jackson in the face all the way through to yesterday. When I finish, it feels as though a weight has been lifted from my chest. The shocked expression on Kasey’s face brings me back to the moment. Lindsey doesn’t look surprised, just sad about the spectacular dumpster fire that has become my life.

“You aren’t mad at me, are you?” I nervously ask them both. “I know I should have told you, especially since he’s your future brother-in-law, but I didn’t know how, and honestly, I was worried you guys would think I’m an idiot for getting involved with him knowing what he did when we first met and the fact that, you know, he’s Jackson, playboy extraordinaire. Plus, if we ever imploded like we did, I didn’t want you to feel like you had to choose. He’s going to be family sooner rather than later.”

“It’s a lot to digest. I’ll definitely say that. But honey, why on earth would you think that my relationship with Donovan, and subsequently his brother, has anything to do with you?” Kasey looks genuinely hurt by my reason for not telling her and Lindsey sooner. “You’re my sister, regardless of blood. I would never, *ever* choose Jackson over you. And if *anyone* were to have a problem with it, they can kiss my ass.”

Her statement brings tears to my eyes. Again, I’m struck by the fact that I should have known better. The Albright sisters have welcomed me into their fold as an honorary sister. Since

my own sister never took my side, I suppose I never expected it from anyone else. It feels good to be proven wrong.

“Abs, we have your back no matter what,” Lindsey confirms. “I love Jackson, but I just can’t wrap my head around this. What the hell was he thinking?”

“I can’t tell you what he was thinking, but whatever it was, it wasn’t with his brain,” I flatly tell them.

Kasey lets out a snort of laughter and I take that as my cue to take a long drink of wine. It’s a little drinking game I’ve been playing with myself. Whenever Kasey snorts with laughter or anyone makes an inappropriate joke, or looks at me with sympathy, I’m drinking. So far, it’s working splendidly.

There’s a knock at the door and we give each other a questioning look, none of us having any idea who would be here.

“Abigail, open up. I know you’re in there,” I hear Jackson call through the door.

Kasey looks at me with concern in her eyes. I take another drink.

“Do you want me to get rid of him for you?” she asks. She has the fierce don’t-fuck-with-my-cubs look on her face, and I love her all the more for it.

“No, he’s my mess. I’ll clean it up,” I groan out.

Stumbling to the door, my drinking game really kicking my ass, I swing it open, looking around and past Jackson like I’m expecting someone else.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure if Everly caught a flight back with you and you two decided to rub it in my face that you prefer blondes with fake tits and loose morals.”

I shoot him a withering glare as he hangs his head.

“I deserved that,” he tells me. “But I swear to you, I never had sex with her. I don’t know what happened, Abigail, but I don’t remember anything after going to the bathroom.”

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that? This isn’t the first time I’ve caught you with your tongue down another girl’s throat.” I’m so fucking mad at his stupid face I could spit nails at him. My words will have to be sharp enough to cut, I suppose, since there are no nails to be had.

“I trusted you, and you threw it in my face like I meant nothing to you,” I seethe. “Even after knowing what my bastard ex did to me. I don’t know what’s worse, the fact that you cheated or the fact that it was at my own fucking sister’s wedding, you ginormous piece of shit.” The hiccup I let out after my very loud tirade would have embarrassed me at any other time, but not today. No, today I’m so beyond angry at seeing him, nothing is going to lessen the rage flowing through me.

“Abigail, I don’t know what happened, but I’m going to find out and I’m going to prove to you that I’m not the man you think I am.” The determined set of his jaw and the ferocity of his words means nothing to me.

“Jackson, I don’t give a shit what you think you can prove. I saw it with my own eyes. It’s not something I will ever forget

or forgive you for.”

With that, I slam the door in his face and turn around to two of my best friends with tears in my eyes and a tightness in my chest I don't know will ever lessen. Damn that man for squeezing his way between the fractured cracks of my heart.

The sound of my phone wakes me up at the ungodly hour of nine in the morning. Okay, so maybe it isn't particularly early, but dammit, I had a long ass day yesterday, then went to bed drunk as a skunk. The girls caught a ride home with their significant others after several hours and several bottles of wine. I'm not jealous, at least I keep telling myself that. I'm thrilled for them that they found men who would do anything in their power to make them happy and keep them safe. I just wish I could find the same. I thought I had, but once again, it turns out my man picker is broken.

Reaching over to my nightstand, I blearily squint at the screen and see my sister's name. I close my eyes for a moment, wondering if this is a call I want to answer before coffee. The phone stops ringing before I can make up my mind and I let out a small sigh of relief, letting it drop to my chest. Then it starts ringing again, nearly scaring me half to death. Again, I spy my sister's name.

Well, shit.

“Hello,” I croak out.

“Hey, Abigail. How are you?” Cesily sounds a little nervous, like she doesn’t know how to start a conversation with me. Probably because it’s been years since she’s tried.

“Good, good. Just waking up. I thought you and Dawson would have been on your way to Bora Bora by now.” My sister’s new in-laws spared no expense for their romantic getaway.

“We leave next week. Listen, I wanted to call and apologize for the way I treated you at my shower and at the bar. I was just so stressed with the wedding and everything. I was a total bitch to you. Forgive me?”

I rub my hand over my face, not sure if this is a dream or not. My sister has never been one to apologize, especially for something like this. My finger pinches my thigh, and sure enough, I felt it. So, not a dream, but still weird.

“It’s okay, Cesily. I know it’s a stressful time. Glad everything worked out. The wedding was beautiful.”

She sighs. “It was, wasn’t it? Davis told Dawson what happened with you and Jackson. It’s just awful that he ended up living up to his reputation,” she tsks into the phone.

The mention of Davis has anger prickling down my spine.

“Yeah, well, he was all too happy for me to see it,” I reply dryly.

“He told Dawson he felt awful that you were subjected to that. Especially in front of everyone.”

Great, everyone must have been talking about it after I left. Fucking hell.

“I’m sure he did,” I scoff. “Honestly, Cesily, I don’t want to talk about Davis or Jackson right now.”

“Fair enough. It must be awful to have been so publicly embarrassed like that.” *Um, ouch.* “Anyhoo,” she singsongs. “Now that you’re back in Philadelphia early, what are your plans for the rest of the week?”

We’ve never been the type of sisters who indulge in chitchat like this. It’s a little unsettling, but if she’s willing to apologize and try to have some sort of relationship, I suppose I should at least meet her halfway.

“Nothing much today. I need to do some research on the charity event I’m covering tomorrow night at The Ben. The nonprofit holding it is spotlighting a couple animal shelters in the area and throwing a huge event to raise money for them.”

“Oh, that sounds fancy. It must be nice to get all dressed up and be paid to cover these things. The life of a reporter sounds fun,” she says cheerily into the phone.

It’s not a bad gig for sure, but there’s a little more to it than that. I’m not exactly in the frame of mind to educate my sister on everything that goes into my job, so I just hum in agreement.

“Well, listen, Abigail. I have to get going. I still have some packing to do.”

“Okay. Have a great time on your trip and thank you for calling.”

“Of course. That’s what sisters do.” She says it as though I would be crazy to think otherwise.

We hang up, and I close my eyes. That was weird, right? Cesily has never called me to apologize for anything she did or said in regard to Davis, so I’m confused about why she did it now. These are questions for another time. After I’ve had a vat of coffee and showered away this hangover.

CHAPTER 24

Jackson

I've resisted the gnawing urge to call Abigail all day. She made it clear last night that she wants nothing to do with me. This isn't the end though. It can't be. I'm still a little hazy on the events at the wedding, but I know damn well something happened that was beyond my control. There is no way in my right mind I would have ever dreamed of being with someone else. Abigail is everything I've ever wanted in a woman. I'd be the idiot of the century to throw that away.

This morning was a total waste, thinking I could throw myself into working at the club and taking care of everything I've missed since I was gone for a few days. By one o'clock, my business partner sent me home. I guess he was tired of me spacing out and having to recount the liquor inventory for the third time. It's something I could have had the bar manager do, but I was hoping it would take my mind off Abigail. Unfortunately, it didn't work, and he had to do it anyway. I wouldn't have trusted myself with doing an accurate job either.

I call my brother to have drinks and he mercifully agrees to meet me tonight. I can't fathom another night alone in my apartment, wishing a certain redhead would call and agree to hear me out.

When I get to the bar down the street from my apartment, he's there, along with Aiden. I like the guy fine now. Aiden started as just being Donovan's security specialist, and one of my annoying babysitters, but then he fell in love Lindsey, and now it seems our lives are more intertwined than I ever thought possible when he was only working for my brother. There was definitely a rocky few years there in our relationship, but I think we've moved past it. It only took him punching me in the face and then getting almost blown up for him to relax a little with me. I suppose I can't really blame him for the punch to the jaw. Honestly, if I were in his shoes with Abigail at the time, I probably would have done the same. I mean, not to him. I don't have a death wish.

"Hey fellas," I say in greeting as I sit down on the other side of my brother. "Aiden, I didn't know you would be joining us tonight." I wave to the bartender, and she gets to work on my drink. This place is down the street from me, so I may frequent it on occasion. Owning a club is great, but sometimes—okay, a lot of the time—I just want to have a peaceful drink by myself in a quiet bar.

Donovan nods at me. "We had a late meeting with some new security team members, so I invited Aiden to come along."

“Hope you don’t mind, mate. Lindsey is having dinner with her mom, so I had a little time to kill,” Aiden explains.

“Not at all. It’s been a while since I’ve been in the presence of a superhero.” I’m referring to the nickname Captain America that Abigail and I gave Aiden months ago.

And now I’m thinking about Abigail again.

“I’m British, for Christ’s sake,” he mumbles into his beer.

I chuckle as I accept my drink from the bartender and take a sip of the deliciously aged scotch. I don’t mean any harm whatsoever, but there’s something fun about ruffling Aiden’s feathers every once in a while. Some things will never change.

“I heard you showed up at Abigail’s place yesterday. And it didn’t go so well,” Donovan says.

I let out a deep sigh. “Yeah. She doesn’t believe me. Not that I can really blame her. It’s not looking too good for me at the moment.”

Fuck, I wish I could think of a way to prove to her that I had no idea what was going on. My mind goes back to what Donovan suggested the other day. Maybe I had been drugged. But by who?

“Aiden, would you happen to know how long after you’ve been roofied it can still be detected with a drug test?”

He raises his eyebrows in my direction. “Rohypnol is in your system for about sixty hours, give or take. Where’s this idea coming from?”

Obviously, my brother hasn't filled him in on my last night in Charleston.

I take another sip of my drink, prepping myself to rehash one of the worst nights of my life.

“At Abigail's sister's wedding, I think I was drugged. It's the only explanation I can come up with. There's no way I would have done what Abigail saw in any other state. And the fact that I don't remember anything. It's the only reasonable explanation.” Saying the words makes me feel a kind of vulnerability I've never felt before. It's amazing how easy it is to do something like that to someone, and potentially get away with it.

“Brother, if you say you wouldn't have done anything like that on your own accord, and from what you've told me, it sounds like it wasn't, I believe you.”

My eyes go wide at Donovan voicing his faith in me. That hasn't always been the case, at least not for many, many years.

Aiden looks over at Donovan, surprised by his declaration as well. “If Donovan trusts what you're saying, I do as well, then. You may be a twat most of the time, but I believe you weren't out to hurt Abigail.” He shoots me a wry grin and I roll my eyes.

“Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence there,” I deadpan.

He simply shrugs his shoulders and takes a sip of his beer, completely unaffected by my tone. “It's not as though you would be brave enough to fuck her over. I've been trained how

to kill a man silently twenty-three different ways, but I would still think long and hard about crossing that woman.” A slight shiver runs over him. “Also, I know a place you can get drug tested. They’ll keep it quiet.”

I quirk a brow at Aiden. “Do I even want to know why you would need those services?”

“In another life, I needed them for a client. Thankfully, I haven’t had to use them in several years, but I’ll make a call for you.”

I tip my drink to him. “Thanks, I would appreciate that.”

“What are you going to do if their drug test comes back negative?” Donovan asks.

Rubbing my hand over my face, I shake my head and look him in the eye. “Whatever I have to do to fix this. Is it weird to hope I was drugged, though?”

Both men look at me thoughtfully.

“No.” Aiden is the first to answer and my brother nods in agreement. “But you have to do more than just prove you were drugged. There’s a lot of baggage she carries between her ex and now you. This isn’t the first time she’s caught you in a compromising position. You have to figure out a way to prove to her you’re more than just a pretty face,” Aiden finishes.

“So... you think I’m pretty.” I bat my eyelashes and blow him a kiss. Aiden shakes his head and mumbles something about me being insufferable.

“Kasey and I are attending a charity event tomorrow night. Black tie and all the fancy shit that entails. It’s to support a few animal shelters around the city. I have it on good authority our favorite life and style reporter will be covering the event for the paper,” Donovan tells me.

My pulse is already racing with the idea of seeing Abigail. I’m not sure if going to an event she’s working is the best plan ever, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and I’ve never felt more so. Hopefully I’ll be vindicated with a positive drug test by then.

What a weird thing to wish for.

“I fucking knew it,” I whisper to myself the next day when the nurse at the clinic Aiden set up for me gives me the results of the drug screen. Positive for Rohypnol. Son of a bitch. Now I need to figure out who had it in for me so bad they would have drugged me. I was only in Charleston for a couple of days, for fuck’s sake.

On my way back to my apartment to get ready for the event, I call Donovan.

“Hey, brother. What did the test say?” he asks when he answers my call.

“Positive. Someone fucking drugged me.” I feel vindicated and so damn angry at the same time.

Donovan whistles out a breath. “Shit. What are you going to do?”

That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? I could call Abigail right now and tell her, but I don’t know if she’ll believe me without seeing the proof, and right now, she won’t let me anywhere near her.

“I’ll be coming tonight with the test results. Hopefully if she sees them, she’ll at least let me talk to her and maybe hear me out instead of shutting me out.”

“Okay then. And if that doesn’t work?”

“I will do whatever it takes to make her see that I’m not the man she thinks I am. I’ve spent my entire adult life not caring about people’s opinions, not wanting to get involved with a woman and be beholden to her, but I’ll be damned if I let her slip away. She’s it, and I’m going to prove to her that she’s worth the fight. I love her. It’s as simple and complicated as that.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. I have your back, brother.” Donovan sounds proud of my answer. I don’t fault him for wanting to make sure I have every intention of not giving up on Abigail. His woman is her best friend, and I know Kasey is fiercely protective of those she loves. He’s not about to go to bat for me if he isn’t one-hundred-percent sure my feelings for Abigail are the real deal.

“I’ll see you tonight.” Donovan hangs up when I’m almost back at my apartment.

Nervous energy is coursing through me as I put on my tux. I have to redo the tie three times before I have it right, and even then I feel as though I'm going into this thing naked and completely unprepared. Abigail could very well take one look at me and decide too much has happened and not give me a chance to show her the proof that I was drugged. Regardless of the why or how I ended up in the closet with that bridesmaid, the fact remains it happened. I'm not sure if she'll be able to see past that. Sure, she may not hate me anymore, but that's still a far cry from her wanting to be with me for real and not some fake bullshit that was never really fake to get her family off her back.

When I enter the ballroom where the charity event is being held, I spot my brother and Kasey right away, talking to the mayor. Looking around for Abigail, I don't see her, so I decide to say hello to Donovan. The mayor shakes my hand in greeting and excuses himself.

"Thank goodness. I was getting tired of him trying to talk my ear off about all the things I should be doing for my hometown now that I'm in office. As if I didn't know." Donovan rolls his eyes and takes a sip of champagne.

"Oh, poor Senator Hayes." Kasey giggles next to him. "And you thought shaking hands and kissing babies was over."

Donovan leans into her ear and growls something just loud enough for her to hear. Kasey instantly blushes and lightly smacks him in the chest.

"Behave," she tells him.

He smiles and winks at her before turning to me. “Have you seen Abigail yet?”

I shake my head no and look around the ballroom again, trying to spot her.

“Jackson, Donovan told me what happened. I’m so sorry someone did that to you. Do you have any idea who it was?”

“Not yet. Honestly, I’ve been thinking about how to get Abigail to talk to me more than trying to figure out who the asshole was that roofied me,” I tell her.

Just then, I see a flash of red hair in a stunning floor-length green dress. My breath hitches in my throat as Abigail and I lock eyes. Hers are wide in shock at seeing me here, then they quickly glance behind me. Anger washes over her features as she starts to walk over. *Here goes.* I take a steadying breath and reach for the paper in my pocket, ready to show her the proof of what happened that night, but she breezes past me. Turning around, I see the person she’s gunning for.

Davis fucking Callaway.

When she reaches him, her jaw is tight and her posture stiff as she barks something at him. I’m too far away to hear what she said but decide to quickly remedy the situation.

Without giving my brother or Kasey another glance, I casually walk up to Davis and Abigail, getting there just in time to hear Abigail tell him she doesn’t want to hear anything he has to say.

“Well, this is a surprise,” I start, glaring fire at Davis as he stands with his hands in his pockets, imploring Abigail with his eyes to hear him out. “I think you’re a ways from home, Callaway.” As soon as he sees me, his posture goes rigid.

“Hayes. This is a private conversation, so...” He tries to shoo me away with the flick of his hand. The fucking balls on this guy. I cross my arms and stay firmly planted where I stand.

“Seriously, Davis, what the hell are you doing here?” Abigail hisses out.

“Abby, I needed to see you. I hate the way we left things in Charleston. I made so many mistakes. The biggest was not marrying you.” He reaches for her hand, and she jerks it away from him.

“How did you even know I was here tonight?” she asks.

“Cesily told me you were going to be here. I want you to see how serious I am about getting back together, babe.”

Abigail scoffs, a disgusted shiver running over her. “Don’t call me *babe*.”

“Look, Davis, Abigail doesn’t want anything to do with you. You need to move on. She has. This was a wasted trip,” I tell him in a low, dangerous voice.

Davis looks at me with contempt in his expression. “Oh, you think she’ll forgive you? You got wasted at her sister’s wedding and almost slept with a bridesmaid. I thought you would just make an ass out of yourself in front of her family

when I slipped a little something in your drink.” He chuckles darkly. “But you really took it a step further by nearly fucking Everly.”

The lascivious smile on Davis’s face tells me he’s actually proud of drugging me.

What. The. Fuck.

Abigail looks at him with a disbelieving expression on her face. “You didn’t,” she whispers, covering her mouth with her hand. “You drugged my boyfriend?” she yells incredulously, her milky skin turning crimson with anger.

Davis looks around the room at all the people now taking a keen interest in the scene unfolding in front of them.

“Abby, it was a harmless prank.” He tries reaching for her again, but she takes a step back from him. “It was only half a dose, anyway. Can you really blame me, though? You have to know you don’t belong with him.”

Through gritted teeth, she says, “And you think I belong with you? The cheating ex who drugged the fucking competition?” she says, pointing to me, still glaring at Davis. “You’re delusional, Davis. Stay the fuck away from my family and me.” Abigail’s voice drops dangerously low as she stares Davis down through slitted eyes. “If I ever see you again, trust me when I tell you I will make sure everyone on the Eastern Seaboard knows what a colossal and complete piece of shit you are if I have to rent every billboard space between here and Florida. Go back to Charleston and crawl back in the hole you came from.” She holds his fearful gaze for another beat

before she turns on her heels and marches away. Davis makes a move to go after her—this man obviously has no sense of self-preservation—until I catch him by the bicep.

“Not so fast, motherfucker.” I pull him in close, still holding him by the arm. “You had better tell me the truth right now. Did I have sex with that woman?”

When he replaces the scared look in his eyes with a haughty smirk, I think he’s going to tell me to go fuck myself, but he decides to try to insult my manhood instead. “Nah, man, you were so fucked up, I don’t think you would have been able to stand much longer, let alone get hard.” He snickers. Davis reaches over with the other arm I’m not still holding and pats my chest. “Thanks for the condoms, by the way. Ribbed for her pleasure. Everly appreciated it.”

What a goddamn sleazeball. Red clouds my vision. All I can envision is the pain in Abigail’s eyes when she found me in that closet with Everly. And this is the man responsible. Then when I was passed out in the hallway, instead of getting me help, he decides to steal the fucking condoms from my wallet.

My fist rears back, and for the first time in my life, I punch someone in the fucking face. *Damn, that shit hurts*, I think to myself, shaking out my hand. Blood is pouring from Davis’s nose as I loom over him, and a woman behind him screams. It’s only moments before security swarms us. Good thing, because I honestly don’t know if I would have stopped at one punch.

They help Davis off the floor, and he immediately starts screaming about assault and pressing charges. I laugh incredulously because this guy just admitted to drugging me, and now he wants to press charges against me. The team of security guards look at each other questioningly, apprehensive about calling the police because they know who I am. I feel like a complete fool thinking that, but it's true. My family is well known and well liked in Philadelphia.

My brother rushes to me as security escorts me from the ballroom.

“What the hell happened, Jackson?” Donovan is trying to keep the anger from his face as camera flashes go off around us.

“Abigail's ex is the one who drugged me. So, I punched him, and now he wants to press charges.” It's a simplified version but accurate.

Two uniformed officers walk in and come over to check in with Donovan. After talking with them for a few moments, Donovan comes back to me where I'm leaning against the wall with security on either side of me. I'm still seething mad at Davis, not only for what he did to try to destroy my relationship, but for what he put my woman through.

“They want to take you to the station. You're not being arrested, but they don't want it to look like the rich and powerful get away with anything in their city.” He shakes his head. “I guess I should have been nicer to the mayor.”

I chuckle at the guilt playing across his face. “It’s fine, brother. We’ll handle it.”

I’m taken to the station in an unmarked police car and brought in through the back door to avoid cameras. A Hayes being arrested would surely be front-page news. Come to think of it, this will make the papers regardless. Just wait until my mom sees it. *Shit.*

An officer leads me into a small room with what I assume is a two-way mirror. Thankfully, I wasn’t cuffed so I don’t feel like a complete degenerate. Moments later, the police chief walks through the door. Chief Evans shakes his head, a wry smile playing on his lips.

“Really, Jackson? I was enjoying a nice Saturday night home with my wife and get called in for this?”

John Evans and his wife, Anne, have been friends with my parents since I was in diapers.

“Sorry, John. How’s Anne?”

“Fine, fine. Look, the mayor isn’t a fan of looking soft on his wealthy constituents. He wants to keep you here for a few hours to make it look like we’re looking into what happened, but Donovan already told me. We’ll talk to the Callaway boy and make sure he understands you have every right to press charges as well, including proof and witnesses to him admitting to drugging you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want it getting out, John. If everything comes out about the events of the night he drugged

me, it would be embarrassing for Donovan and my family.”

John winces. “That bad?”

“Yeah,” I reply on an exhale.

He nods his head and taps his knuckles on the table. “Alright, son. But I’m going to threaten him with it and make it very clear he should be grateful for your leniency in the matter and leave it at that. How’s the hand?”

I flex my fingers several times, testing them to make sure they don’t feel broken. Not that I would know, seeing as I’ve never punched someone. “Fine, I think.”

“Okay, we’ll have you out of here soon.”

John gets up and leaves. Moments later, my brother comes in.

“Jeez, they let anyone in here, huh?” I quip with a grin sliding across my mouth.

“Hey, I can leave you here for the next few hours with nothing to do. I’d much rather be at home with Kasey than here keeping you company in the clink.” He pauses at the door as though he’s considering leaving.

I laugh and pointedly look around the small room. “This is hardly a prison cell, but I would appreciate the company, brother.”

“Good,” he says, pulling out a deck of cards. “I figured you could freshen up on your card games, you know, just in case you get sent to the big house.”

Rolling my eyes, I take the deck from him and begin shuffling. “I’m not getting arrested. Me being here is so the mayor doesn’t look too lenient.”

“I know. Honestly, I’m surprised this is the first time I’m visiting you at a police station.” He chuckles at his very unfunny joke.

“I thought you were here to keep me company, not give me a hard time,” I say while I deal cards for a game of gin rummy.

He nods. “I am. You’ve lost your sense of humor. Jail has already changed you.” He laughs again.

I narrow my eyes and bite back my smile. Even though Donovan’s comedic timing leaves a lot to be desired, I’m grateful he’s here. It wasn’t so long ago he would have been here with a lecture instead of a deck of cards.

“Shut up and play, senator.”

CHAPTER 25

Abigail

After getting back to my apartment, I go straight to my room, take off my dress and fall face-first onto my bed and bury my face in my pillow to let out a long, muffled scream. What the hell is going on in my life? I feel like I'm living in some sort of bad soap opera with all the drama that entails.

Cheating ex out to win me back—check.

Catching my current—whatever Jackson was—cheating on me—check.

Learning that Jackson was drugged by my ex and doesn't remember cheating—check.

Running out of a gala during a confrontation between said ex and Jackson—check.

It's a regular tele-fucking-novela around here.

I'm no wilting wallflower by any stretch of the imagination, but this is too much drama for anyone to wrap their head around.

Maybe I should have stayed and talked to Jackson, but at the time I was thoroughly embarrassed this was happening at all. I was supposed to be covering the event, not making headlines myself with the senator's brother and my sleezy ex-boyfriend. Sometimes situations can only be made worse by sticking around. And honestly, I was ready to sucker punch Davis in his fucking face. He drugged my boyfriend, thinking that would somehow win me back. Fucking moron.

After the long cleansing scream fest I had with my pillow, a bath seems in order. Maybe I can wash this night off me and relax enough to figure out what to do about Jackson. This certainly changes things, but I'm not so sure I can do this anymore.

I like no drama. I like having my friends and good wine. I do *not* like worrying about where my boyfriend sticks his dick when he's not with me. Jackson was proven innocent, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to open myself up to being hurt again. It doesn't mean I'm ready to go all in, trusting he won't break my heart. That wound is still fresh. I know it wasn't his fault, but that doesn't mean the last few days, and the image of him with another woman is suddenly erased from my mind. It may not seem fair to him, but it's the truth, nonetheless. I need to figure out a way to reconcile all this in my head.

The bath is a good starting point. And the wine, we can't forget about that. I pour myself a full glass before dipping into the hot water and lean my head against a folded towel, sighing out at the relief the hot water and wine give my tense muscles.

My phone rings next to me, and honestly, I have no desire to look at the screen. I don't want to hear from Jackson yet. I'll get around to talking to him, but I'm just not in a place where I can have a rational conversation. This was too much, too fast. We didn't even have a solid foundation, or any foundation at all. Aside from great sex and fun banter, I can't think of anything that tethers us to one another.

The phone stops ringing, and a text notification dings. Dammit. I'll never get any relaxation if my phone keeps going off. I check the screen and see Julia's name.

Julia: Hey girl! Just checking in with you and making sure everything is ok. Call me when you have a chance.

Now I feel like an asshole. Instead of texting her, I dial her number.

"Hey, I didn't mean you had to call right away," she says in greeting.

"I know, I just felt like an ass because I was avoiding Jackson, so I didn't look at my screen. Plus, we haven't talked in a couple days."

The one good thing about my trip to Charleston was reconnecting with Julia on a level we haven't been on in a long while. Through the years, our relationship has dwindled to occasional texts or comments on social media posts, but nothing like it was growing up. Of course, spending time with her in Charleston, was like no time had passed, and we fell back into the kind of friendship we always had. I'll never take

that, or her, for granted again. Those kinds of people are few and far between.

“Doesn’t sound like anything has improved on the Jackson front,” she says.

“It’s a mess. Turns out he was drugged, *fucking* drugged, at Cesily’s wedding. Then Cesily called me to supposedly apologize, but really it was to get my schedule so Davis could ambush me in another ridiculous attempt to win me back.“ This bath is quickly becoming the opposite of relaxing. “Then the prick shows up at the charity event I was covering and admitted to Jackson and me that he was the one who drugged him. Julia, it was a shit show.” Nope, doesn’t sound any less preposterous when I say it out loud.

“*Nooo*,” she drawls out.

“Yup,” I reply, popping the *p* for emphasis.

“Well shit, girl, what did you do?”

“Told Davis to go fuck himself, then got the hell out of Dodge. It was a work event, for God’s sake. I can’t take much more of the drama. I just got back from vacation, and I feel like I need another one. How is this my life?” I groan out.

“My door is always open to you if you need some time to decompress. It’s been a crazy couple weeks for you,” Julia offers.

I hum in agreement, and the idea quickly takes root in my brain. I don’t have anything holding me here except the paper, and I have a ton of vacation time saved up. Considering I’ve

barely taken any in the last five years except to go to the cabin over the holidays and my sister's wedding, Gus can't balk too much if I take off for a bit. This might be the answer to my problems. I get away for a while, turn my phone off and decide what to do about this whole Jackson situation. And I get to spend some more time with Julia. Sounds like a win-win to me.

"You know what, I think I will come down. But just don't tell anyone I'm coming. I would rather not have to explain to anyone why I'm not staying with my parents." Shit, at this point, I don't think my mother would exactly welcome me with open arms after our last conversation. And I sure as shit don't want Cesily to know. She'll probably blab it to Davis.

"That's great," Julia exclaims. "When do you want to come?"

I groan into the phone. "Is tomorrow too soon?" I say, half joking.

"Perfect. I'll have the guest room ready. Text me your flight info and I'll pick you up."

I want to cry in relief. I'm not a runner. Fighting is like my default setting or something, but it can get exhausting sometimes. This is too much all at once for anyone to handle. Even the strongest person needs a break every now and then, and fuck, I've been strong for so damn long. I'm exhausted.

"I love you, Julia. Thank you for being my friend." It may be the wine or the onslaught of emotions I've had to deal with

the last couple days, but I am feeling all kinds of sappy and grateful right now.

“You got it. See you tomorrow.”

We say our goodbyes, and I immediately use my phone to book a ticket back to Charleston. An early morning flight is available. Perfect. Less of a chance of Jackson tracking me down.

Ticket booked, I dial Kasey’s number to tell her about my sudden but much needed escape from all this craziness.

“Abigail, oh my gosh, are you okay? I didn’t see you leave after Jackson punched Davis.”

What. The. Hell.

“Jackson punched someone? Is he okay? Not Davis,” I clarify. “I don’t give a shit about him, but is Jackson okay?” It sounds like the situation got a lot more serious after I left.

“I think he’s fine. Donovan went to the police station,” Kasey answers.

“The police station?” I exclaim, quickly sitting up and sloshing water over the side. “Was he arrested?”

“No, no. The mayor just didn’t want to look like he was playing favorites, but the chief is an old family friend, so as far as I know, he made sure no charges were pressed. Donovan said Jackson has proof he was drugged, and your ex admitted to it in front of everyone. Good thing everyone at these events likes to eavesdrop on everyone else.” She chuckles, but I can’t

find the humor in it just yet. This night just keeps getting better and better.

“I still can’t believe that happened. Why the fuck would someone do that and think it was no big deal? Or that I would *ever* forgive that?”

“Some people are completely delusional, hon, and it sounds like your ex is one of them. But Jackson will be home in a few hours, so don’t worry.”

“Yeah, but I won’t be. I’m going to Julia’s ranch. I need some time away from everything. The last few days have seriously messed with my head.” I sigh and close my eyes. “I still see him with her, y’know? I need to wrap my head around the fact that he wasn’t cheating and the fact that I have feelings for him. I never thought those words would come out of my mouth, that’s for damn sure.”

“Oh honey, I wish I could help you through this, but I know all too well that you have to figure out what you’re going to do in your own time. How long do you plan on being gone?”

“I’m not sure. I have a ton of vacation time, so I can be gone for a while,” I tell her.

“Don’t worry about Gus. If he gets too grumpy about it, I’ll cover for you.”

That brings a smile to my face. She would too, maybe grumbling the whole time, but I know she would step up if he needed someone, rather than have me come home early.

“Thanks, honey bunch. You know I love you, right?”

Kasey laughs. “Of course I do. I love you too. Have a good trip, babe.”

When I disconnect the call, I’m a little less excited about my trip. The thought of Jackson being detained because of anything having to do with my ex has me wondering if I’ll even need to figure out what to do about him and our relationship. Shit, he may decide I’m too much trouble for him. Maybe finding out he was drugged by my asshole ex and being forced to be detained at the police station after a confrontation is going to prove too much for him to handle. Not that I could blame him. If it’s overwhelming for me, I can only imagine how he feels. I think time away is a good call.

For both of us.

My flight lands in Charleston the next day and I’m greeted at baggage claim with a giant welcome home sign complete with glitter paint and streamers. Julia’s smiling face pops out from behind the sign with a wide smile on her face. I shake my head with a laugh as I walk up and hug her.

“You’re too much,” I tell her.

“Thought you could use a smile. And who doesn’t love glitter paint?” she replies.

“Um, you hate glitter paint,” I point out.

“True, but I know you don’t. So, how many bags did you bring?” She eyes me skeptically.

“Too many, probably. But you know me...”

“I never know what I’m going to need,” she finishes in a high-pitched imitation of me.

I roll my eyes playfully and nudge her with my hip. “Bitch.”

“Hey, I remember all too well our spring break trips together. Believe me, I am well aware of your packing habits.” She puts her arm around me as we stand at the baggage carousel, waiting to see my luggage come around.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says as she leans her head on mine.

“Me too, sister.”

The drive to the ranch is quiet, but there’s a peacefulness I haven’t felt in my hometown for a long time. Maybe it’s because I have no commitments to my parents this trip, or maybe there’s a certain comfort in being with one of your oldest friends who knows you better than almost anyone else. We don’t need to fill the silence with chitchat. I’m grateful to Julia for having me here, giving me the chance to get my head on straight. Get back to the girl who’s headstrong, almost to a fault, and doesn’t entertain any bullshit.

When we pull up, Julia helps me lug my numerous bags into the guest room she set up for me.

“Wow, Julia, you outdid yourself here,” I say, looking around at the white walls and white bedding with a vase of sweet-smelling wildflowers sitting on the tall dresser in the corner. The room reminds me of a fluffy cloud, and I can’t

wait to curl up in the giant four-poster bed, complete with the most comfortable-looking pillows. I've never stayed in another room in this house other than Julia's room which was always cluttered with cowgirl boots and T-shirts strewn about. This is definitely an upgrade.

“It's nothing. I wanted a room for you to be able to relax in and maybe feel a little pampered. I heard white was good for that.” She shrugs like it's no big deal, but it's been so long since anyone has taken care of me, I nearly cry.

Julia sees my watery eyes. “None of that now. We're not doing the weepy crap today. How about you go to the store to get some wine, because I know shit all about it, and we can get weepy when we're drunk.”

I smile in her direction and will the tears back. “Deal.”

Julia gives me the keys to her truck to go to the store. I feel like I'm in another life, driving away from the ranch with the windows down, blaring some country music. Damn, this feels good.

When I pull up to the store and grab a basket—okay, a cart—I'm on a mission to find all the wine. As soon as I spot the aisle I need to be in, I'm so focused on getting in and out that I accidentally run into another cart.

“Oh, sorry...” I begin. Then I see who I ran into.

Cesily.

She looks surprised to see me, which makes sense considering when she called me a couple days ago to track

down my whereabouts, I was still in Philadelphia.

Standing still for a moment, cursing my bad luck, the anger fills my chest, making it tight and uncomfortable. I was hoping to avoid seeing her for the next two days before she leaves on her honeymoon, but no, that would mean the universe was on my side for once. *Yeah right.*

“Abigail. What are you doing in town again?” she asks, her eyes uncomfortably darting to the side. Oh, we’re going to play that game.

“Seriously? No, ‘hi sister, sorry I sent your asshole ex-boyfriend after you at a work event.’ Just what am I doing here?” I shake my head in disappointment. I don’t know why I would have expected an apology from her for basically putting my job at risk and throwing my life into turmoil, but her nonchalance at seeing me is really pissing me the hell off.

Cesily straightens her spine. “None of that would have happened if you had just heard Davis out. Is it unfortunate that it turned into what it did? Of course, but Jackson was the one who caused the scene. Not Davis.”

She’s honest to God defending the jackass. Apparently, my ex isn’t the only delusional one in this scenario.

“No, Cesily.” Exasperation laces my tone. “It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t pretended to want to know about my life and gotten information about my schedule so you could send him after me.”

“Abigail, you know how Davis can be. Dawson was just trying to do right by his brother and help get him what he wanted. He told me about Davis’s plan to come up there and asked if I wouldn’t mind getting some information to help him out. You should be happy someone in Davis’s position still wants a relationship with you. You certainly haven’t made it easy,” she sneers. My sister actually has the audacity to chastise me for not wanting to be with a serial cheater. *Wow*.

“It’s nice to know that Dawson’s relationship with his brother is more important than your relationship with me.” I scoff. “And as for Jackson causing the scene, it was only after Davis admitted to *drugging* him to get him to make a fool of himself at your wedding. I think getting off with a busted nose is way less than Davis deserved.” She can’t possibly excuse that behavior.

“Abigail, you have to understand Dawson is my *husband* now,” she says, holding up her left hand and showing me her ring. Well, apparently, I was wrong. Being her brother-in-law is all the excuse he needs.

“And I’m your sister, Cesily. A little loyalty to me wouldn’t have killed you all those years ago when our relationship went down the shitter, and it wouldn’t have killed you now.” My hands grip tightly to the handle of the shopping cart. “I’m done with excuses for why everyone feels the need to put their nose in my relationships. I’ve never been good enough for any of you on my own and I am *so* done caring. The truth is I have a family of my own making that loves me no matter what and accepts me for who I am. I am enough to those people, and

I'm done spending my time caring about people who never will." I'm winded and invigorated at the same time after my kiss-off speech to my sister.

She stands in the middle of the grocery store with her mouth hanging open, looking around to see who heard us. Heaven forbid a fucking country clubber is here, and this gets back to those stuck-up bitches.

"I wish you well, sister, but I'm done here." I hold up my hand and begin to walk away and get the much-needed wine I came here for.

"What will Mom and Dad think about you just blowing off your family, Abigail? Don't you think about anyone other than yourself and what you want?" she hisses at me.

That is so fucking rich coming from her.

I turn and stare her dead in the eye. "Well, frankly, my dear, I don't give a fuck," I reply in my haughtiest Southern accent.

Without sparing her another glance, I make my way to the wine and blindly grab several bottles. I need to calm the hell down and pay attention to what I'm doing. This breakdown of Cesily's and my relationship sure as hell isn't worth buying crap wine.

I never thought me and my sister would be where we are today. I could tell myself I'm surprised, but I'm not. It doesn't mean I'm not disappointed. But if I've learned one thing in the last few weeks, it's to spend my energy and love on the people that deserve it, blood or not.

When I get back to the ranch, Julia is waiting for me in the kitchen, having already made a pan of brownies and various other desserts for our girls' wine day. Fuck the wine night. I need a whole day. Don't judge me.

"You will never believe the run-in I had," I tell her, setting the bags on the counter from my trip.

"What happened?" Julia asks, cutting an edge piece from the brownie pan because obviously that's the best part.

"First, don't even dream of eating all the edges." I point at the pan for emphasis. "Second, I ran into Cesily."

Julia's eyes go wide as she shoves the piece into her mouth.

"Let's just say she wasn't at all sorry about telling Davis about where I was. And she completely tried to blame the whole wedding debacle on Jackson."

I go about opening our first bottle while Julia grabs the glasses and brownies and heads to the living room.

"I don't know, Julia. Maybe I shouldn't have come down." I'm suddenly concerned I brought a load of trouble to my friend's doorstep. "Now, my mother and everyone else are going to know where I am. I don't want anyone showing up here and you guys having to deal with it," I say as I follow her and have a seat next to her with the brownies between us.

"Knock that shit off right now. You don't need to worry about anything. I have a hose and I'm not afraid to use it."

I snort out a laugh, remembering the story of when she turned said hose on Raelynn after she was caught cheating

with Davis.

“Well, I’m turning my phone off.” I grab it from my pocket and power it down. “There. At least it’ll make it harder for them to track me down if they can’t get a hold of me.” I toss the phone on the coffee table and pour our wine. “I didn’t tell Cesily where I was staying, so even if they wanted to find me, they would have to brave your wrath if they decided to come here.”

Julia barks out a laugh. “Let them try.”

I give Julia a rueful smile and raise my glass for a toast. “To wine, brownies, and friends who aren’t afraid of waterboarding trespassers. What more could I ask for?”

Damn, I’m a lucky girl.

CHAPTER 26

Jackson

My mind is racing with worst-case scenarios as I dial Abigail's number for what seems like the hundredth time. Waking up from a few hours of sleep, I'm so ready to finally put this whole mess behind us and do whatever's needed to get Abigail to hear me out and hopefully realize I'm serious about being with her. That I love her. The more I say it, the more desperate I am to hear her voice and tell her how I feel. I want the chance to prove to her on a daily basis that I'm not going anywhere, and I sure as hell would never treat her like that dipshit Davis did. I know what I have, and I plan on showing her every day for the rest of our lives how fucking amazing she is. If only she would answer her phone, but it keeps going straight to voice mail.

The idea that Davis has somehow gotten to her keeps running through my mind. Though most people wouldn't think twice about a douchebag party boy, I'm not most people. I've experienced the darker side of someone's obsession. And Davis has already proven the scary as fuck lengths he's willing to go to get Abigail back.

Sitting on my couch, I keep staring at my test results that prove I'd been roofied. I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around that one. And the fact he admitted it so casually. What a piece of shit. Thank God nothing else happened, and thank God he told me the truth about me not sleeping with the bridesmaid. At least I have that in my favor when I finally talk to Abigail.

Wiping a hand over my face, I lean back into the couch and let out a frustrated breath. I need answers. I know who I can call for them, but she's made it clear in no uncertain terms whose side she's on.

Straightening my spine, I stretch my neck, tilting it side to side like a boxer would entering a match. If I have to fight for Abigail, then that's what I'm going to do. Nothing is stopping me from getting my girl.

I dial Kasey's number with solid determination to find out where Abigail is.

"Hi, Jackson," she answers after the second ring.

"Hey, Kasey. I've been trying to get a hold of Abigail, and she isn't picking up. Do you know where she is?"

"I do." After waiting for her to elaborate, I'm met with more silence.

"Are you going to tell me?" I ask, drawing out the words.

"Nope."

Fuck. Not the answer I was hoping for.

“Okay... listen, I just want to make sure she’s safe. Davis doesn’t strike me as someone in their right mind. Will you at least tell me that?” I plead. I’m disappointed at her response, but I need to make sure she’s been in contact with someone, even if it isn’t me.

“She’s fine. As far as I know, Davis hasn’t tried contacting her again. Listen, she just needs some time to figure things out. Honestly, I think it would do you both some good to reflect on things. She took off for a couple days, but she checked in with me this morning. I promise, I would tell you if she wasn’t okay.”

“No offense, but I don’t need to think about anything. I’m in love with her.” There is no doubt in my mind about what I want and what I’m willing to do to get it.

Kasey takes a sharp breath in. “Jackson, you have no idea how much I love hearing you say that.” She pauses, and I think I have her for a moment. “But you have to understand, I’m not going to break her confidence. She’s my best friend, and if she tells me she needs time away from everything, then I’m going to respect that. If I hear from her, I’ll tell her you’re trying to reach her. That’s the best I can do.”

Damn.

“I appreciate you being a good friend to her. She needs people she can trust. Just please don’t tell her how I feel. I need to have that conversation with her myself.”

“That’s fair. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I hang up the phone feeling slightly better because I know she’s safe. But goddammit, I can’t sit around and do nothing.

Where would she have gone? I’ve never heard her talk about any spas or resorts that she likes or family or close friends outside of Kasey and Lindsey, except... it could be a huge long shot, but my gut is telling me where she went. And if she hates me as much as she did last time we were in Charleston together, there’s a very good chance a tall blonde holding a double-barrel to my tires is in my future.

Nerves knot my stomach as I turn onto the driveway leading to the Beauchamp ranch. The rain is pummeling my windshield, so visibility is shit, but thankfully I remember exactly where the turnoff is. I don’t know if Abigail is here or not, but it’s a starting point. Memories assail me from the last time I was here and the ride Abigail and I went on. A small smile plays on my lips. That was one of the best afternoons of my life. It’s hard to believe that was just a week ago. Everything has changed in that time, and not for the better.

Parking the car, I take a deep breath, fortifying myself for the unfriendly welcome I’m sure to receive.

The front door opens, and Julia steps onto the front porch sans shotgun. Thank God for small mercies.

I step out of my rental car and open the umbrella I grabbed at the store on my way here from the airport, standing tall to project the confidence I'm not entirely feeling at the moment. Walking to the bottom of the steps, I look up at the formidable woman in front of me with her arms crossed and her brow quirked as she waits for me to speak.

"Is Abigail here?"

She rolls her lips between her teeth as she stares at me, taking my measure. Julia nods once. "She is."

Okay, one step closer. "May I speak with her, please?"

Just then, Abigail opens the screen door, and the sight of the soft red mane of hair cascading over her shoulders and bright-green eyes is a balm for my soul.

"Jackson, what are you doing here?" she asks, confused by my sudden appearance.

She doesn't sound mad. That's a good sign.

"I came to find you," I tell her, drinking in her soft skin and full lips. The lips I want nothing more than to kiss the small frown from.

"How did you know I was here?" she asks, looking between Julia and me.

Julia holds up her hands. "I didn't tell him."

"I had a hunch when Kasey told me you left town. I followed it and found you. Can we talk?"

Abigail turns to Julia, a silent conversation happening between them.

“I’ll go in the house and give you two some privacy,” Julia says, nodding at me. “Come up here and out of the rain, Yank. Wouldn’t want you to catch a cold.”

That’s as much of a green light as I’m going to get from her.

Abigail pulls her sweater tighter as thunder booms in the distance, making her jump a bit.

“Not a fan of thunderstorms?” I ask.

“Not especially,” she murmurs.

Abigail walks to the far side of the covered porch to give us some semblance of privacy and turns to face me. “Now answer my question. What do you want?”

“You ran from me, Red,” I begin as I shake out my umbrella, setting it against the railing. “Did you think I wouldn’t try to find you?”

She looks at me with a defiant glint in her eye. “Honestly, yes. I thought you would have given up on the idea. You aren’t exactly known for your commitment when things become difficult.”

My hellcat wants a fight. Good thing that’s our favorite form of foreplay.

“And you aren’t known to bail when things get tough. Yet here we are.”

“It’s called self-preservation. Look it up,” she snaps back.

“Look, I get that you’re tired and overwhelmed, but dammit, Abigail, this isn’t who we are. We. Don’t. Run.”

“*We* don’t do anything. I do what I think is best for me because no one else will.” She lifts her chin defiantly.

She’s talking about her family and her ex.

“I’m not those other assholes, Abigail. Don’t lump me in with them.”

Her eyes are brimming with anger as she looks at me. “I’ve had plenty of experience with men like you, Prince.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Red. Because I’ve never felt this way about a woman before, and you have yet to be treated like the fucking queen you are.”

The anger drains from her features as she closes her eyes and lets out a long breath. “Look, I am so sorry my past caught up with you. The fact that you were drugged is beyond anything I thought even Davis would lower himself to. But the memory of seeing you with another woman is fresh in my mind. All the memories of catching Davis with Raelynn, then seeing you with the coat check girl last year, it’s just a lot to deal with right now.”

She sounds so defeated, and I hate it. Abigail is a ballbuster, not someone who runs away from a fight.

“Red, I couldn’t care less what Davis did to me. I handled it.” I flex my hand, still tender from the blow to his nose I landed. “What I care about is what this is doing to you. He’s a piece of shit, and what he put you through is horrible, but you

have to know I'm not him. Was I an idiot for most of my life up until a year ago? One thousand percent, but I have never cheated on a girlfriend. Shit, until you, I never really had a girlfriend."

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. "We were pretending for the sake of keeping my family off my back. It wasn't real."

"If you think that, then you haven't been paying attention. I didn't offer to be your fake boyfriend out of some altruistic side I don't have. I did it to get closer to you, hoping if I showed you what being with me could look like, you would give me a shot." I lower my voice and take a step closer to her. "All I've ever wanted from you was a chance to prove to you I'm not the same person I was last year and that we have more than just great chemistry. That all men aren't like Davis. And somewhere in the middle of that, I fell in love with you."

Abigail's eyes go wide as saucers. "What?" she asks softly.

I smile and finally work up the courage to reach for her hand without fear of her pulling it away and smacking me.

"I love you, Abigail. I love your fire and the way you go to bat for your family. Not the family you were born with, because honestly, they really suck." She lets out a small chuckle. "But the one you've made. You're magnetic. People are drawn to you because they see the fierceness of your heart." I touch my hand to her chest. "All I want to do is protect that fierce heart."

Tears stream down her cheeks like the rain pouring down around us. I bring my hand to her face and wipe my thumb

under her eye. “Don’t cry, Red. Just let me love you.”

Abigail chokes out a sob, and the sound breaks my fucking heart.

“God, Jackson, I love you. I tried so hard not to. I fought so hard to protect myself from ever being hurt again, but I’m tired.” She leans her body into mine and looks up at me with watery eyes. “I need someone who protects me for once. I wanted so badly to believe that was going to be you.” The pain in her voice caused by what she saw at her sister’s wedding is gutting me.

I hold both sides of her face in the palms of my hands, looking her in the eye. “I swear to you I will protect and fucking cherish the heart you share with me. Just like you protect everyone else. I don’t expect you to jump in without reservation, I know you too well for that.” I give her a small smile. “But please, give me a chance to prove it to you. Make me work for it. Do whatever you have to do but know whatever challenge you throw or how hard you push me away because you’re scared of being vulnerable, I’m not going anywhere. I don’t care how many ranches you run away to.”

Abigail groans out a laugh. The thunder booms again, and she moves in closer to me. I take it as an invitation to wrap my arms around her and hold her to me. The days of not having Abigail in my arms every day are over.

“I’m ready to give this a shot, Jackson,” she starts, looking up at me. “For real this time.”

“Red, it was *never* not real, at least for me. And we shared some very real moments. One of my favorites was on this ranch actually,” I say, giving her a wicked wink.

“You would bring up a blow job when we’re in the middle of a heart-to-heart,” she says, smacking me in the chest.

“Who said I was talking about that? I was talking about when you said you loved me back,” I say, pretending to be offended by her assumption.

She raises a brow and purses her lips. “Really?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“No, not really. That was hot as fuck, Red.”

Her laugh this time is open and light, causing the knot that’s been tied tight in my chest to finally loosen and fall away.

“Can I please kiss you now? I’ve been dying to since I saw you walk onto this porch.” I don’t care that I’m begging at this point. I need to feel this woman’s soft lips on mine.

Without missing a beat, she crashes her lips to mine, and it’s everything desperate and messy and passionate that we are. I grab her by the back of her thighs and wrap them around my hips as another crack of lightning illuminates the sky. She moans into my mouth so loudly it almost drowns out the thunder booming around us.

Tearing my mouth from hers, I start moving my lips down the sweet skin of her neck.

“I don’t want to be rude to Julia, but if I don’t get inside you as soon as humanly possible, we’re going to have an

embarrassing situation on our hands,” I say, rubbing my stiff cock between her legs that are still wrapped around me.

Abigail laughs at the predicament I’m in and climbs down. Not what I meant for her to do, but before I say anything, she grabs my hand and starts toward the stairs.

“Well, let’s make use of the back seat of that fancy car you rented,” she says, leading me toward the Mercedes.

“Shouldn’t you let her know we’re leaving?” I ask, nodding my head toward the front door.

“Good point.”

Abigail opens the front door and leans her head in. “Julia,” she calls out. “Jackson and I are going for a drive.”

I hear Julia’s laughter from somewhere in the house. “See you tomorrow, lovebirds.”

Abigail shuts the door, grabs my hand and pulls me down the steps, running through the rain before she jumps in the car.

I hop in as fast as I can, but not fast enough to stop myself from getting drenched. I turn to Abigail, pulling her lips to mine again, kissing the rain from them.

“Where to?” she asks breathlessly against my mouth.

Pulling away, I start the car and give her a slight smile. “I have an idea.”

About twenty minutes later, we pull up to the same hotel we stayed at for her sister’s wedding. What can I say? This hotel holds some of the best memories of our time together.

“Gosh, I hope they have a room available for us, considering last time we stayed here, they only had the one room with the one bed.”

My head whips around to Abigail, who has a Cheshire cat grin stretched across her face.

“Did I ever tell you that an old friend from high school manages this hotel?”

I open my mouth to tell her that I lied about there not being any available rooms when we stayed last time.

“Yeah, she wasn’t here when we checked in, but I saw her the next day when I got back from the bridal luncheon.”

The smile on her face tells me I was busted from the start.

“You knew I was lying.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I may have by the second night.”

I bark out a laugh. “You little minx.”

“What can I say?” She shrugs her slim shoulder. “You give good cuddle. I was willing to overlook the little white lie.”

“Get over here.” I pull Abigail toward me over the center console and kiss her smart-ass mouth.

“I think I give more than good cuddles. Let’s get the hell out of this car so I can show you,” I say, pulling away and opening my door.

We run through the rain into the hotel lobby, looking like drowned rats by the time we make it through the doors.

Registration is a breeze because, apparently, Abigail's friend from high school is the one who checks us in. Abigail can't keep the smile off her face through the entire process. Whether she's laughing at the way I'm impatiently trying to keep it together, or because this is the woman who unknowingly let the cat out of the bag about my tiny little fib, is anyone's guess. What I do know is her hands running circles on my lower back and slipping down to my ass when no one is looking is making me fucking light-headed, considering all the blood in my body is currently rushing to my dick.

When the registration process mercifully ends, I lead Abigail to the elevator. Once inside, I push her against the wall and press my lips harshly against hers for a searing kiss.

"You're going to pay for that little stunt, Red," I groan into her mouth

She lets out a throaty groan filled with heat and lust. "You talk a big game, Prince. Let's see if you can keep up tonight."

"Oh, She-Devil, you fucking asked for it. Just remember, there's no backing out now."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Hayes. Ever."

Epilogue

Abigail

It's been just over a month since we returned from Charleston. I would love to say it's been smooth sailing for Jackson and me, but come on, this is us. He still finds ways to get under my skin, then wipes my irritation away with a couple orgasms. I'm no dummy. I know seeing me riled up gets him hot. I would even go so far as to say it's one of his kinks that he enjoys exploring with me. And honestly, I can't say I hate it.

Our friends were more than thrilled to see us finally happy with each other, even if they don't understand the ins and outs of our hate/love relationship. But that's just Jackson and me. It works for us.

Lindsey and Kasey have had several wine nights, even calling Julia a couple times to join us via video chat. I can't wait for her to fly up here next week and actually meet my other best friends in person.

My girls made it perfectly clear in no uncertain terms they have my back, and no matter what happens, they will always

be family. Not that I have any lingering doubts when it comes to Jackson and me, but it was reassuring to hear them tell me.

Jackson has been working a couple late nights at his club recently, trying to make up for all the time he took off last month for the wedding and then to come find me and enjoy us getting reacquainted, shall we say. We ended up staying in Charleston and reconnecting with the Beauchamps over drinks and shrimp and grits with Roxy and Duke. Roxy pulled me aside one night when the drinks were flowing, and Jackson was in an intense game of quarters with the Beauchamp brothers.

“Honey, seeing you with Jackson fills me with so much happiness for you I could just burst. That other boy and that family of yours tried for years to dim your light. Jackson, on the other hand, he lights the match for your fire. Don’t let that one go, sweetheart.”

She would know. Duke has never once tried to smother her flame, and neither will Jackson. Getting her stamp of approval meant more to me than I could say, so I gave her a wide, watery smile and one of those long, tight hugs she’s famous for.

Jackson is at the club tonight, shaking hands and making sure all his members are happy and satisfied. Not too hard when it comes to a sex club, but he wants to make sure the place is run how he wants and takes an active role in making sure it is. Our schedules keep us busy with him at the club and me covering various events and charity galas. Thankfully no

crazy exes have shown up to crash any, so I decide to meet him at the club for a drink before he calls it a night. Sans pineapple earrings of course.

Walking into the club sends a thrill up my spine every time. The work Jackson and his partners have put into this place to make it sensual and alluring instead of gaudy and generic really shows in all the detail and overall feel of the space. I never thought I would have a boyfriend that owns a sex club, or that I would be proud of him for it, but here we are. The playboy I thought he was has been replaced by the responsible businessman that he is. Who knew?

Jackson is chatting with a man in a very expensive gray suit beside the bar. It would look like any regular conversation except for the topless woman at the man's feet with her eyes closed and a look of rapture relaxing her features while he pets her hair.

Jackson shakes the man's hand, then turns to go back to his office. Until he spots me sipping a glass of red wine at the bar several seats down. A slow smile stretches across his lips as he saunters toward me.

"Red, you look absolutely delicious tonight," he says as his gaze peruses my strappy deep-green dress. He takes in the back of my dress, or rather the lack of one, and trails his finger down my exposed spine. Leaning in, he whispers, "Good enough to take a bite of," before gently biting my ear, eliciting a low groan from me.

“I have some paperwork to finish in my office, but I’m hard pressed to leave a beautiful woman drinking alone.”

“I’ll come with you,” I tell him with a coy smile on my face.

“Yes, you will.”

Well, okay then.

I follow Jackson into his office and walk behind his desk, taking a seat in his leather club chair before propping my heeled feet on the desk. The leather is cool on my back, but the look Jackson gives me when he locks the door is making my body temperature rapidly rise.

He prowls toward me and sits on the edge of his desk before running his hands up my calf to my thigh and back down again. The hunger in his gaze as I shiver from his touch makes my nipples pucker under the silky material of my dress.

“This was quite the surprise tonight,” Jackson says as he uncrosses my ankles and moves between my legs, spreading me open, causing my dress to move up my thighs, giving him an indecent view of my wet pussy.

“And no panties. You know what that does to me, She-Devil.”

“That was the plan, Prince.” I glance at my clutch sitting on the edge of his desk. “Check my bag.”

Jackson tilts his head curiously and opens the clutch, pulling out a little bullet vibrator. I wasn’t kidding when I said I made several online purchases after finding out how much he likes to play with toys.

“Did you come here with a plan, Red?”

“Maybe,” I reply softly.

“This isn’t the time to be shy. Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to be a good assistant and make me come.”
Since that night in the car at the lake, a little spicy role play has become one of our favorite games.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replies, dropping to his knees in front of me.

Jackson takes one long lick through my folds and briefly sucks my clit into his mouth.

The deep moan of satisfaction that escapes him sends sparks flying throughout my body.

“Fuck, Ms. Barnes. You taste divine.”

I hear the bullet turn on, and he presses it to my pussy, circling it around my clit but never making direct contact.

“Fuck, Jackson, I said to make me come, not tease me to death.”

“Now what would be the fun in that?” He chuckles darkly and places a hot open-mouthed kiss on the heated flesh of my inner thigh.

This man enjoys the buildup just as much as the finale. Usually I love it, but we haven’t had as much time to spend together as either of us would like, and I’m feeling needy as hell tonight.

“Patience, Ms. Barnes, I’m shooting for a raise here.”

Jackson fills me with two fingers as he continues to circle the vibe around my clit. The buildup is slow but intense, and soon I'm crying out in pleasure as he pumps his fingers in and out of me, putting the bullet directly on my clit as I erupt in a wave of pure bliss, crying out his name.

He tosses the bullet on his desk and laps at my pussy, following me down from my peak.

"Goddamn, Abigail. I fucking love the way you taste." He raises his head from between my thighs and sticks his fingers in his mouth, sucking the juices from them. "So goddamn sweet."

I sit up abruptly and crash my mouth to his, tearing at his shirt. I want to run my hands over his naked flesh, feeling the touch of his warm skin against my palms.

Jackson slides the flimsy straps holding my dress up down my shoulders, baring me to him.

"Goddamn Red, I'll never get tired of your amazing body." He dips his head and bites down on my nipple, then laves it with his tongue to soothe the sting. He plumps the other as he continues to lick and suck before showing it the same attention.

With a growl, he grabs me at the hips to lift me from the chair and sets me on his desk with my legs wrapped around his waist.

His hands cup my cheeks as he looks into my eyes. "I love you, Abigail."

Jackson has taken to telling me how he feels every day. He's never said those words to another woman before, never felt this way before. He looks so amazed every time I say it back, like he can't believe he has this kind of love.

"I love you, too," I reply with a small smile on my face. "Now fuck me."

"Yes, ma'am," he replies, freeing himself from his pants and slamming his hard cock into me. We both cry out at the feeling of him filling me.

He captures my mouth in a kiss filled with passion and determination to make me come again. Not that he has to worry about that, he's not the type to fall down on the job in that department.

"Abigail, you feel so good wrapped around me. Fuck, I don't ever want to stop."

"Don't you dare, Prince. I'm so close."

I score my nails up his neck and tunnel my fingers into his hair, pulling his mouth to mine while his finger finds my clit, and he begins rubbing, trying desperately to get me there again before him.

His pace quickens, and he hits that spot that makes me see stars every damn time.

I rip my mouth away and press our foreheads together. "Right there, Jackson. Don't stop."

Our heavy pants fill the office, and within moments, my walls clamp down on his cock as the orgasm washes over me

just as intensely as the first.

I feel his steel cock jerk inside me as he roars out his own climax with sweat dripping down his temple. He stares lovingly into my eyes as he slows our movements before slipping out and grabbing a handful of tissues to clean me.

I drink in his lean form with his shirt unbuttoned and notice the scratches across his chest and neck from my desperate touches.

“Sorry about that,” I say, wincing slightly as I point to the marks.

He looks down, and a proud smile covers his face. “I’m not,” he says, walking back over to me. “I’ll never be upset about being claimed by a beautiful.” Kiss. “Fiery.” Kiss. “Stubborn-as-hell redhead.” Kiss.

I roll my eyes at the last comment. “You had to add that last part in, didn’t you?”

He simply looks at me with that damn smirk of his. “I love you, She-Devil.”

“I love you, too, Prince.”

The End

Thank you so much for going on this wild ride Abigail and Jackson. I absolutely loved writing my fiery redhead and dirty-mouthed reformed playboy. If you loved this book, I would be eternally grateful if you left a review. Reviews are so important to help indie authors spread the word about their stories. I can't wait to share what else I have up my sleeve for you amazing readers! To keep up to date on all my goings on, follow me on my socials and sign up for my newsletter here or by visiting my website at www.katerandallauthor.com. I'm working on a project for my subscribers that you won't want to miss!

Facebook

Instagram

TikTok

Goodreads

BookBub

Happy Reading!

XOXO,

Kate

P.S. Wanna know what kind of mischief Abigail and Jackson got up to at the cabin over Christmas? Grab a copy of **Our First Christmas** here, releasing 11/8/22. Their story, *The Christmas One*, along with nine other amazing stories from some of my favorite authors are sure to warm up a cold winter's night!

Also By Kate

The Ones Series

The Good One

The Fragile One

The Other One

Our First Christmas (Holiday Anthology containing *The Christmas One*)

About Kate



Kate is a lover of all things books. It doesn't matter what genre, as long as there's a HEA, she's in. She started reading romance in high school and would hide novels in textbooks to read during class. Becoming an author was always a dream she had and finally decided to put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) and write what she loves. She grew up in the beautiful upper peninsula of Michigan then became a West Coast girl where she lives with her amazing husband and hilarious son. She would love to hear from readers so check out all her socials and sign up for her newsletter so she can

keep you up to date on her books and whatever other ramblings come to mind.

Acknowledgments

Where to start?? Of course, thank YOU for reading my words! The time and energy you take to read my stories means the absolute world to me. You are all amazing, and I appreciate you more than I could possibly say!

Thank you Nicole for loving Jackson and Abigail as much as I do. You keep me on track and make my stories shine. I absolutely love working with you, and I'm so thankful that you're always willing share your amazing talent with lil ol' me!

Molli, you are the very definition of a sister of the heart. How many times have we shared a bottle of wine (or several) and been a shoulder to lean on for each other? I wouldn't be doing this without you telling me to go for it and talking me through every freak-out along the way. I love you to pieces, sister.

To my wonderful husband and son. Thank you for the support you've given me as I wade through the waters of indie publishing. I may not know if I'm coming or going half the

time, but you both love me and support me all the same. Love you, babe and I love you, bubba.

Thank you Kiki, Megan, Colleen, Jill and Anna from The Next Step PR. You ladies freaking rock at what you do and are always there to answer a question or offer a suggestion. I can't express to you how much it means to me to have y'all in my corner!