

A man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The woman, on the left, has her hair pulled back and is wearing a reddish-brown halter top and light blue jeans. She is looking towards the man. The man, on the right, has short dark hair and a light beard, and is wearing a dark blue polo shirt. He is holding a light-colored acoustic guitar and looking back at the woman. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

SINGLE IN
SEATTLE

The Surprise

New York Times and *USA Today* Bestselling Author

KRISTEN PROBY

THE SURPRISE
A SINGLE IN SEATTLE NOVELLA



KRISTEN PROBY

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CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Newsletter Sign Up](#)

[Also by Kristen Proby:](#)

The Surprise
A Single in Seattle Novella
By
Kristen Proby

THE SURPRISE

A Single in Seattle Novella

Kristen Proby

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CHAPTER 1



~JOSIE~

God, I'm just tired all the way to my bones. I love being a nurse. I've known since I was a little girl that I wanted to work with patients, but some days, it just kicks my ass.

Or, maybe I should say *nights*. Because I work the night shift in the Seattle General emergency room, and there is never a dull moment.

Especially on nights like last night—on a full moon *and* Halloween.

There were moments I couldn't tell the difference between the fake blood and the real stuff—which can really be an obstacle to a girl's job.

“Good times,” I say on a sigh as I start the car and lean my head back on the seat for just a minute, enjoying the quiet as the sound of the radio fills my car, and my mind empties of last night's chaos.

She'll change your life.

You'll never let her go.

She'll become your wife.

Josie, you're the one, so...

I sit up straight and stare at the radio in shock.

“I *know* this song.”

Images immediately fill my head: Brax and me in the bathtub; him sitting across from me while playing his guitar and singing the song he wrote for me.

This song.

“This is the number-one-requested song this week here at KPTY Pop Radio, and I’m excited to welcome Brax Adler himself into the booth with me. Hey, man.”

“Thanks for having me.”

God, I’d recognize that voice anywhere. Smooth as silk and wrapped in sin. Brax has *the* voice of them all.

He could melt a girl’s panties off with one little whisper.

I should know. In the three years I was with him, I hardly ever had my panties *on*.

“I love that this song is getting nationwide attention, Brax. You must be thrilled.”

“It’s pretty dope, yeah, man. The guys and I are stoked.”

“You’ve been a mainstay in the Seattle music scene for a few years now, and I have to tell you, we’re all rooting for you.”

“I appreciate that, thank you.”

“Now, let’s talk about *My Girl*. Who wrote the song?”

“I wrote it a few years ago,” Brax answers.

“Is it about someone, or is it a work of fiction?”

My heart stutters as I hold my breath and chew on my bottom lip.

Me. He wrote it for me.

“Well, I wrote it for my girlfriend at the time,” Brax admits. “But, she dumped me.”

“What?” I demand, not even hearing the DJ’s response. “You little liar. You backstabbing piece of crap. That’s *not* how it happened, and you know it!”

I shut the radio off and pull out of my parking space, fuming.

After all the shit that man pulled, now he’s going to lie on the radio?

I shouldn't expect anything less, really.

I'm still pissed when I pull into the garage of the little townhouse that I share with my twin sister. When I walk into the kitchen and hear the radio playing, Brax's stupid, sexy voice flowing through the speakers, I narrow my eyes on Maddie.

"Why are you listening to this?"

"I wondered if you'd heard it," she says with a cringe and taps the screen of her phone to shut it off. "Just ignore him. He's an idiot."

"But I didn't dump him," I insist as I open the fridge and rummage around for my dinner. It may be six in the morning, but it's dinnertime for me. I pull out all the makings for a salad and baked chicken and start chopping veggies on the island.

"I'm not sure you should have a knife in your hand when you're this pissed off," Maddie says, backing away slowly while eyeing the knife.

"You know what *really* pisses me off?" I ask and point the sharp end of the blade at her. "He could have just said, '*Oh, it just didn't work out with her,*' or something just as vague. Instead, the prick lied."

"Par for the course with that guy, right?"

"No. He wasn't a liar when we were together. I don't know why he's starting a life of deception now. It's weird."

"Okay, I think you need to forget about Br—He Who Shall Not Be Named," she amends at my cold stare, "and tell me about your night. Were you busy?"

"Full moon on Halloween? Yes, we were busy."

"You see the best stuff," Maddie says as she sits on the stool and watches me get my chicken ready to go into the oven. "My job isn't that exciting."

"You're an accountant," I remind her. "If you saw blood and guts at your job, that would be a red flag."

My sister snorts and nods. “True. And, unlike *you*, blood makes me sick. Okay, I have to go into the office, but I should be home around noon since it’s Friday. I’m taking a half-day in case you want to hang out or something.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be passed out until about five. I work again tonight.”

“I’ll be quiet then,” she says with a wink. “Sleep well, and don’t let Brax get to you. He’s old news. Who cares if he’s suddenly famous? It doesn’t impact you at all.”

“Right,” I reply as I check on the chicken. “You’re right. Have a good day.”

“See you,” she says with a wave and grabs her travel mug full of coffee, then walks out to the garage.

When I finish putting my dinner together, I carry it into the living room and turn on the TV, flipping through the DVR recordings until I find the show I’ve been watching. I hit play for last night’s episode.

Maybe some Montana cowboys will keep my brain occupied.

Two hours and a tub of ice cream later, I turn off the TV and set my dirty dishes in the dishwasher, then make my way to my bedroom.

Maddie has the main bedroom with a huge closet and en suite bathroom.

I don’t care at all that my bedroom is smaller. I mostly own scrubs anyway. What do I need a big closet for? Even the smaller hall bath suits me fine.

After a quick shower, I pull the black-out blinds on the windows and burrow down into the covers, exhausted.

And then, the phone rings.

“Shit, I forgot to put it on do not disturb,” I mutter, reaching over for my cell and frowning when I see my dad’s name on the screen. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“Are you sleeping?”

“Not yet.”

“I need your help. I cut my hand pretty good, and your mother insists that I need stitches.”

I sigh and push the covers off me. “I’ll grab my stuff and be on my way in just a second. Cover it and apply pressure so you stop the bleeding.”

“Yeah, I am. It’s probably not that bad.”

“I’ll be there in a few.”

I disconnect and sigh. I’m *so* tired, but he’s my dad. I’d do anything for him.

Caleb Montgomery isn’t my biological father, but he adopted my sister and me when he married our mom and is my father in every way that matters. I love him more than just about anyone in the world.

I change into jeans and a sweatshirt, grab my kit that has all my first-aid supplies in it, and set off to Mom and Dad’s place. Because of the time of day, I make it in about twenty minutes.

“Hello?” I call out after walking into the house.

“Back here,” Mom yells back.

They’re in the kitchen, standing over the sink, and Dad has a green kitchen towel pressed to the back of his hand.

At least, I think it used to be green—it’s pretty red with blood right now.

“What happened?” I ask as I set my bag on the table and cross to him.

“I was making a table and had an incident with the saw.”

“On the *back* of your hand?”

“I’m talented,” he says with a wink.

I pull the towel away and then cover it again, jerking back a bit in surprise.

“Geez, Dad, you cut the hell out of this. I’d say you should go to the urgent care to see if they need to stitch you up.”

“Told you,” Mom says brightly. “I wanted to take him to urgent care, but he just grunted.”

Dad’s eyes narrow on my mom, and I can only shake my head.

He may try to seem intimidating—and as a former Navy SEAL, he *is* intimidating to most. But he’s a huge softie with us.

“Not going to the damn urgent care. Just fix it up, and it’ll be fine.”

I blow out a breath and then nod.

“Give me five to get my stuff together.”

“Do you want something to eat?” Mom asks.

“No, thanks, I had dinner. Okay, hold still. It might hurt a little.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s *not* fine. It’s a hell of a cut.”

“It’s *fine*,” Dad repeats and shakes his stubborn head. “Just get it done so I can go back to work.”

Patching him up takes about twenty minutes. He hardly makes a peep at all, and I know for a fact that it must hurt like a son of a bitch.

When I’m done, I kiss his cheek. “You have to clean this daily. I’ll check in on you, too.”

“I’ll be fine,” he says, but I shake my head at him.

“No, you stubborn man, you do not want this to get infected. The last time I checked, you didn’t have an *RN* after your name. Stop being bullheaded and take advantage of the fact that your favorite daughter is a nurse.”

“I don’t think I raised my kids to speak to me this way.”

I smirk and kiss him on the cheek. “I love you.”

“That’s better.”

“Are you sure you don’t want something to eat? What about a candy bar?” Mom asks.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m going home to sleep. I have to work tonight. Be careful with that hand.”

“Yeah, yeah. You sure are bossy,” Dad says.

“I learned from you.”



“YOU’RE STARING OFF INTO SPACE.”

I blink when my co-worker, Beth, nudges my shoulder.

“I got roughly three hours of sleep today,” I reply with a yawn. “But this is my Friday.”

“Lucky. It’s my Monday.”

“At least you weren’t here for the madness last night,” I reply.

“I heard it was nuts. But thanks for covering for me,” she says with a smile. “I had fun taking the kids trick-or-treating.”

“I’m glad. Okay, I just got a call from an ambulance. MVA.” That’s code for a motor vehicle accident. “Two men coming in, one from each vehicle, two ambulances. One guy is just beat up. The other has a bad head injury. Let’s get two rooms ready.”

We jump up and get to work, readying two rooms for the accident victims. I let the on-call doctor know what’s coming in, and he assigns two ER residents to take the patients.

By the time the first ambulance pulls in, we’re ready to go.

“White male,” the medic calls out as we hustle him into a room, “thirty-four. Contusions to the head and shoulders.”

We’re bustling about, getting the man transferred from the gurney to a bed, grabbing IV supplies as the doctor rapid-fires questions at the patient.

When the person on the cot answers, I stop cold.

I *know* that voice.

I turn to look him in the face, and he seems just as surprised to see me.

His brown eyes are glassy, full of shock, but when he makes eye contact, he seems to calm just a little.

“Brax?”

“Hey, Josie.”

CHAPTER 2



~BRAX~

*J*s Josie really here, or am I hallucinating from banging my head against the steering wheel?

“Follow my finger,” the doctor instructs, and I try to focus on his hand as it moves back and forth, up and down. “Not bad.”

“Josie?” I ask again, convinced that I imagined her. Suddenly, there she is, standing next to my bed and pushing a needle into my arm. “What are you doing here?”

She raises a sexy eyebrow at me. “I work here.”

“Do you remember what happened, Mr. Adler?” the doctor asks while poking around my neck. They finally took the stupid brace off, so I’m not as uncomfortable as I was.

“Dude hit me,” I say, remembering the bright lights right at me. “He was on the wrong side of the road.”

“He’s next door,” a nurse says. “You can smell the alcohol on him.”

The doctor’s expression is grim as he examines my chest where the seatbelt was.

“You’re going to have some intense bruising,” he says and turns to the nurse. “I want x-rays of the chest and shoulders to make sure there are no fractures.” He looks at me again. “Are you allergic to any medications?”

“No,” I reply.

He keeps rattling off instructions, but it's all turned to ringing and buzzing in my ears.

I'm tired.

Seriously fucking tired.

"You guys have this?" I hear Josie say. "I'll see if they need help next door."

"No." I look for her, desperate to keep her with me. "Stay."

"I'll go," another woman says and hurries away.

Josie sighs but stays and takes orders from the doctor. I just watch her as she listens and nods, asking questions in that sweet voice of hers.

God, I fucking missed her.

Everything about her.

"I'll be back when the x-rays are done," the doctor says and rushes out, leaving just me and Josie in the room.

"You're so pretty."

She sighs and spares me a glance. "You've got a good amount of pain medicine running through you right now. And you're probably in shock or something."

"I'm not in shock. And even if I was, it doesn't mean you're not pretty."

She just types on her computer, her long, thin fingers flying over the keyboard. Noise comes from the cubicle next door—loud beeps and raised voices—before I hear "Code blue" over the loudspeakers and more people hurrying into the room. Someone shouts instructions I can't follow, and not long after, all I hear is a long, high-pitched noise before the doctor says, "Call it."

Josie's head turns to the doorway, and then, with sad eyes, she turns to me.

"He didn't make it," she says softly under her breath, but I still hear her.

"Damn," I reply. "I'm sorry to hear that."

“I am, too,” she says. “Imaging will be here in just a few minutes.”

“I don’t have to go to them?”

“No, they have a portable x-ray machine. We don’t want to move you around too much in case something *is* broken. Stay still for a while.”

“Never was good at lying still.”

Her lips curve into a half smile, and I take that as a win.

“No, you weren’t,” she says. “But try. We’re going to run some labs, as well, check for inflammation and some other things. Can I call someone for you?”

“Just you,” I say simply. But she only narrows her eyes at me, and I see the edges of her temper starting to flare.

God, she’s magnificent when she’s good and pissed off.

“A family member, friend, *girlfriend*?” she says. “It’s not fun to sit in here alone.”

“I’m not alone,” I remind her. “I have you.”

“I’m *working*,” she says. “And I’m not your girlfriend anymore. Apparently, I dumped you.”

She looks damn mad as she says that. I’d wondered if she was listening this morning. Looks like she was.

“You did.”

Her cheeks flush. “I did *not*.”

“You’re the one who left, sweetheart.”

“I did *not*—” She sighs and rubs her fingers into her eyes. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I have to go see to some things. If you decide you want me to call someone, let me know.”

I watch her leave the room and close the door behind her.

I’m a little woozy. And I’m damn tired.

Something tells me I’m going to be fucking sore tomorrow.



I HEAR someone walk into the room. It's been a shitty night without much sleep. They x-rayed me, poked and prodded, then, after deciding I don't have a concussion, left me alone just long enough to fall asleep again.

"Are you awake, Mr. Adler?"

It's the doctor. I open one eye and grunt at him. "Sort of."

"The good news is, nothing is broken—no internal bleeding. You're going to be sore and have bruises for a while. I want you to be careful with the bruising. Don't rub them; no massages. And take it easy. I don't see any evidence of clots, but let's keep it that way. I can prescribe you some pain medication—"

"No, thanks," I interrupt him. "I'll be fine with over-the-counter."

He nods and makes a note. "I'll get your paperwork finished up, and you can go in just a little while."

How will I get home? My car is toast. I don't know what time it is, but I'm quite sure everyone I know is sleeping.

Then, Josie walks into the room.

Bingo.

"Thank you," I say to the doctor as he nods and walks out of the room. "Hey, Jose?"

"Yeah," she says.

"Would you be willing to give me a ride home?"

She stops typing on her computer and turns to me with surprised brown eyes. "*Me?*"

"Well, sure. You're here, and it's late. Or, you know, early."

"It's almost six in the morning," she replies.

“Holy shit, really? It doesn’t feel like I’ve been here that long.”

“You slept more than you think you did.” She sighs and snaps the computer shut. “Fine. I’m off work in fifteen minutes. I can drop you off at home.”

“Thanks. Really.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.”

She blows out a breath and walks back out of the room. She may not be thrilled with this situation, but I’m elated to get to spend some time with her outside of this damn hospital.

Before long, she’s back with my discharge papers. She takes out the IV and gets me ready to leave.

“I have to clock out and grab my stuff,” she says after making sure that I’m good to go. “You stay right here and wait for me. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I wink at her, but she only stomps away.

She makes my heart stutter, even when she’s mad.

Maybe *especially* when she’s mad. Some of the best sex we had was angry, make-up sex.

I might not be up to that today, but maybe I can talk her into it soon. She never could tell me no.

Until she did.

“Okay,” she says as she drapes her coat around her shoulders and sets some clothes on the end of my bed. “You’re wearing these hospital scrubs home. We had to cut the shirt off you.”

“It was just an old one anyway,” I say with a shrug, then wince with the movement.

The doc was right. I’m damn sore now that the morphine is wearing off.

“I’m going to walk you to the ambulance entrance and then pull around to get you. I don’t want you walking too far. Do you want me to get you a wheelchair?”

I scowl at her, completely offended. “No, I don’t need a wheelchair.”

“Suit yourself. Wait by the door, and I’ll be there in a few.”

“Whatever you want to do is fine by me.”

“Okay, we’ll take it easy.”

I’m so damn frustrated by how slow I have to walk.

“It could be worse,” Josie says when she sees the frustration on my face. “You could have broken a leg or something way, *way* worse.”

“I know. I just never considered that a few bruises could make my life a living hell.”

“Just wait until you try to lie down and sleep,” she says.

“Maybe I should have taken the drugs.”

“Wouldn’t have hurt for the first day or two,” she agrees. “I can ask the doctor to write the script real quick if you want before we leave.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Men are so damn stubborn,” she mutters and leads me to a chair just inside the ambulance bay. “Okay, sit here and wait for me. Don’t be a hero and walk out to meet me.”

“I’m no hero today, honey,” I reply with a wink, grateful to sit in the chair. “I’ll be here.”

Josie hurries off, and I try to take a deep breath, but even that hurts.

Jesus, I’m in rough shape.

But not as bad as the other guy.

“Excuse me,” a nurse says with a smile. “Are you Brax Adler? The musician?”

“Yeah.” I smile, and she nods.

“I thought so. I’m sorry that you’re hurt. I won’t ask for a selfie.”

“I might not look my best for that,” I agree, grateful that she doesn’t insist. I don’t get recognized often, but when I do, fans can be pretty pushy. “I appreciate all you guys do up here.”

“And I appreciate your work,” she says with a wink. “Heal up quickly, Brax.”

“Thanks.”

Josie rushes through the doors, a little winded. She obviously hurried.

“Okay, we’re good to go,” she says and takes my hand so she can help me up. Fucking hell, it’s hard to move around. “My whole body feels stiff.”

“It’s only going to get worse. And you’re going to be sore in places you didn’t even know you had,” she says as we shuffle out to her waiting car. “Take it easy. We’re in no hurry.”

It’s a good thing because it feels as if it takes forever to get settled in her car and belted in.

Josie hurries around to the driver’s side, hops in, puts the car in gear, and pulls away from the hospital.

“I’ll do my best to avoid the bumps,” she says with a cringe. “And I apologize in advance if I can’t.”

“Not your fault the city of Seattle doesn’t fill in their potholes the size of Kansas. I live in the same place, by the way.”

I tip my head back and close my eyes. The bumps only make me lose my breath twice.

“We’re here,” Josie says as she puts the car in park and turns off the engine. “I’ll help you in.”

“Thanks,” I say. And then we go through the whole damn thing again, moving slowly from the car to the house and then inside. The thought of climbing the stairs to my bedroom makes me want to weep. “I think I’ll just hole up in the living room for a day or two.”

“Probably a good idea,” she says and helps me to the couch. “I’m going to gather some things for you. I’ll be right back.”

“Can one of those things be a pillow?”

“I’ve got it covered,” she calls as she hurries upstairs. My house always feels better when she’s in it. Before long, she hurries back down again with some pillows and blankets, dumping those in a chair across from me before hurrying out again.

It’s like she’s in fast-forward mode.

It almost makes me dizzy.

“I’m going to set this bottle of water here. It’s the only one you have in the house.”

“I don’t like using single-use plastic,” I inform her. “Not good for the environment.”

“Okay, I get that, but you’ll have to refill this one whenever it’s empty. I’m setting you up on a pain management regimen. I’m writing it all down, so just follow the instructions.”

“I love it when you’re bossy.”

She narrows her eyes on me. “I’m only here because I’m your nurse, and I feel sorry for you.”

“Come on, that’s not the *only* reason you’re here.”

“Yes, it is.” She scribbles on the pad that I usually keep on the fridge and shows it to me. “Take these dosages at these times. Exactly. It’s important.”

“Okay.”

“Even though you’re stiff, you’ll want to get up once every hour to walk around a bit and stretch your legs. Staying down for too long could cause clots. Don’t do that.”

“Maybe you should just stay here and take care of me.”

“Not in this or any other lifetime,” she says.

“Come on, I’m needy.”

“You’re an ass,” she says calmly as if she’s discussing my medicine.

“It’s a definite possibility,” I agree. “But I could use the help.”

“Nope.”

“Come on. You owe me one.”

She stops and her cheeks redden with absolute fury.

Fuck me. She’s magnificent.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

CHAPTER 3



~JOSIE~

I might murder him. I may appear small when I stand next to him, but he's in a weakened state after that accident. It's not like I couldn't take him out.

I am my father's daughter, after all.

My hands fist at my sides, and I glare down at him as he just sits there and flashes that stupid, cocky grin at me.

“ARGH!”

I turn and storm away, moving out the front door and letting it slam behind me. Oh, my God. He makes me so *mad*.

I should just leave him to fend for himself. He's a big boy—a *very* big boy. And I'm not the only person in his life who can help if he needs it.

He has a whole *band* of people.

I sigh and kick my tire, then walk back into Brax's house and cross my arms over my chest as I scowl at him.

“I don't owe you dick, Braxton Adler, and you know it.”

“You do realize that it turns me on when you're mad, don't you?”

“Why are you the way you are?”

That damn smile slips over his stupidly handsome face. “You wouldn't want me any other way, sweetheart.”

I hate that he's right. I don't want him any other way. But for today, he's irritating the hell out of me.

“I didn’t dump you,” I say to him, and that sparks some emotion in his brown eyes. Hurt? Anger? I can’t be sure.

“Felt that way from over here.”

“How in the world can you even think that I dumped you?”

“You left.”

I blink at him. “I went away for a *year* for my freaking job, Brax.”

“You left,” he says again. Now I really do need some fresh air, so I stomp back out to his porch and kick the post next to the steps.

“That’s it,” I mutter and pace. “I’m done with this. If I don’t leave and wash my hands of this, he’ll suck me in with that smile and *sweetheart*, and I will *not* let this man break my heart twice.”

I walk back through the door, ready to tell him that I’m leaving for good, and almost collide with the man himself. He’s standing in the middle of the living room, watching me.

“You’re supposed to be resting. Why are you standing?”

“Because I saw you throw that adorable little fit on my porch.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Josie,” he says and reaches for my hand. “I’m sorry, okay? Really.”

His voice has softened, lost that cocky edge, and now I know I’m in deep shit.

“I should go,” I say but don’t pull away as he gently tugs me closer to him. “And you should lie down.”

“I think we need to talk some things out.” He presses his lips against my forehead, and my eyes slide closed. It’s always felt so right when I’m right here, like this. And I know I’ve missed him.

Yeah, we have plenty to talk about.

His fingers link with mine, and his free hand drifts up my arm to cup my face. As if in a trance, my mouth lifts to his, and his brushes over mine, so gently it's almost like a whisper.

His fingers tighten on my cheek as he takes the kiss just a little deeper, nibbling my lips and rubbing my nose with his.

My God, did he get even *better* at kissing since the last time I saw him? How is that even possible?

“Josie,” he says in a whisper. “We need to talk. But I might fall over if I don’t sit.”

That pulls me out of the romantic haze. “Oh, God. Of course, you need to sit. Come on, let’s get you settled.”

“I think everything just caught up with me,” he says as he carefully lowers himself to the couch and lies down. “Don’t go, okay?”

“I’m going to go get you some supplies,” I tell him as I cover him with a throw blanket. “You just sleep.”

Before I finish the sentence, he’s breathing deeply, already under. The poor guy was in a traumatic accident less than twelve hours ago, and I’ve been arguing with him.

Not that he doesn’t deserve it, but it can wait.



I SET the medicine on his counter with explicit instructions that I wrote on yellow sticky notes and placed in front of the bottles. While I wrote instructions for him earlier, these are clearer. There’s also soup in the fridge that he just has to heat up. That should last him a couple of days.

I check his temperature one last time before I go.

I don’t want to see any sign of fever, and thankfully, there isn’t any.

I need to go home and sleep.

So, I kiss Brax on the forehead and then let myself out, locking the front door as I leave by pressing the button on the

keypad and turning the deadbolt.

I feel like a zombie. I'm exhausted from work and not much sleep to speak of yesterday, and I'm emotionally drained after having Brax unexpectedly crash back into my life.

Literally.

All I need right now is *rest*.

Maddie's already left for work when I get home. I don't even bother eating anything, just bypass the kitchen on my way up to my bedroom. I quickly shower off the night of work, put on pajamas, and make sure that nothing interrupts me while I sleep by setting the phone to DND, drawing the black-out blinds, and turning on my sound machine to drown out any noise from outside.

It's dark and cool in my room as I snuggle down under the covers and fall into a dreamless sleep.



“HAVE YOU HEARD FROM HIM?” Maddie asks. I've been awake for all of fifteen minutes after a solid eight hours of sleep. The first thing I did was walk downstairs and tell Maddie about Brax's accident and everything that unfolded afterward.

“No,” I reply and pour myself some coffee. “Either he's still sleeping, he doesn't want my help, or he woke up and remembered that he doesn't want to have anything to do with me.”

“I'm sorry he was in an accident,” she replies and sips her tea.

Maddie will likely head to bed in a couple of hours, but my day is just getting started. Even on nights when I don't go into work, I stay up because I don't want to have to readjust my internal clock for three nights off.

“He'll be okay,” I reply.

“I can see that it messed you up some.” My sister narrows her eyes at me.

“Damn twin senses,” I mutter and then shrug. “I was surprised to see him, and then I was mad at him, and *then* I felt bad for him and helped him. It was a bit of a rollercoaster of emotions. You know, until the day we broke up, we never fought. Not really. We argued sometimes, sure, but we didn’t have a fiery, tumultuous relationship.”

“Maybe it would have been easier when it was over if you had,” she suggests.

“Probably. Today, I was *so* mad at him. I would have been angry even if I hadn’t heard him on the radio, but that made me even madder. And he just smiled and told me I’m beautiful when I’m pissed off.”

“He’s right.” She smiles with satisfaction. “And I can say that because we look alike.”

“We had some of the best sex of our relationship after we argued,” I admit.

“You had sex with the patient today?” Maddie demands. “You should have led with that, Jose.”

“No.” I laugh. “I meant *before*. He did kiss me today, though. All soft and sweet and romantic. The big jerk.”

“Yeah, what a horrible man he is to softly and romantically kiss you.”

I raise a brow at her sarcasm. “Ha. Ha.”

“Listen, we all know that he’s your soul mate. Or one of them, anyway—if you believe in that sort of thing. And, yes, he did break your heart. If he tries to do it again, I’ll sic Dad and the uncles and cousins on him.”

“So, you’ll murder him?”

“Absolutely. But maybe he just wanted to try to make amends with you. Maybe his apology was sincere.”

“I think it was.” I sigh and drink my coffee. “Who knows, Mad? I might not even hear from him again once he comes to his senses. And that’s okay.”

In no universe is that okay with me. But it is what it is.

Now it's my sister's turn to raise her eyebrows. "Right. Uh-huh. Sure. Well, I'm going up to read for a while before I go to sleep. Come hang out if you need me. And don't forget, we have cousins' night at the Alki house tomorrow."

"I haven't forgotten. Goodnight."

Every month, we get together with all our cousins old enough to drink for a fun night of games and chatting to spend time together.

Our family is tight, and as we grew older, we found we spent less time together. So, we all make sure to make it to the cousins' nights.

I've just settled on the couch with coffee number two and my computer to pay some bills and be an adult for an hour when my phone signals an incoming text.

Brax: *You left. Again.*

"You have got to be kidding me," I mutter as I sigh and lean my head against the couch.

Me: *I had to sleep, you know. How are you feeling?*

The little dots dance on the screen as he types, and I sign into our mortgage company website so I can pay that bill. I've just hit *Pay Now* when his response comes through.

Brax: *Like I was in an accident. Sore. I didn't dream you, did I?*

Okay, that makes me grin.

Me: *No. You didn't dream me.*

I pay the cable and water bills as the three dots bounce on my screen.

Brax: *Good. That would have been embarrassing. I've been taking the meds, and I ate the soup. Thx for that. Hit the spot.*

Me: *You're welcome. You should go back to sleep.*

I finish paying the rest of the bills and send Maddie an email with the amount of her half for the month, as usual. I do

this part, and she runs the errands: goes to the grocery store and does the things that I can't do because I work at night and sleep all day. It works out well for us.

If we end up as old spinster sisters who live together forever, I don't think either of us would be heartbroken.

Just as I set the computer aside, another text from Brax comes through.

Brax: *I'm wide-awake now. Come over, and we'll watch a movie or something. We can talk.*

Damn it, I'm too tempted.

Me: *Do you think we can have a calm discussion?*

His message comes faster than before.

Brax: *Hell, yes. It hurts if I'm not calm.*

Me: *You really should go back to sleep.*

Brax: *You really should get your fine ass over here.*

That makes me laugh.

Me: *There in 30.*

I hurry upstairs and knock on Maddie's door.

"Come in."

"I'm headed over to Brax's."

A slow smile spreads across her lips. "Are you? Well, I'll want all the deets later. I bet you get to be on top since he's injured and all that."

"I'm not having sex with him."

"Sure. Of course, you're not having sex with the hottest man you've ever dated."

"I'm not dating him. I'm...helping him."

"Yeah, you are. Helping him get naked."

"You're a perv."

"If you say you weren't thinking it, your pants are on fire."

“You’re sick. He’s an injured man. He’s my patient.”

“He’s a tattooed musician who’s already been in your pants countless times before. Just be gentle. Be ready to give CPR or something, just in case.”

“You’re not funny.”

Maddie giggles into her hand. “Yes, I am. Have fun. Be safe. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I shouldn’t have told you where I was going.”

“It’s okay. I’ll pump you full of vodka tomorrow night and get all of the good stuff out of you.”

“Love you,” I say, glaring at her.

“Love you more.”

CHAPTER 4



~BRAX~

I don't think I've ever been in this much pain. Not physically, anyway. My chest feels like an elephant did a tap dance on it, and my head is screaming.

But when I woke up, all I could think about was seeing Josie again.

Of course, she wasn't here.

I'm glad I didn't dream her. And when she said she'd come over, I felt as if I won the lottery.

It was better than hearing my song—the one I wrote for her—on the radio, and that was a fucking good feeling.

I hear a car door shut outside. A few seconds later, she knocks on the door and then keys in the code I never bothered to change before walking inside.

It's like getting hit by that fucking car all over again.

With her long, glossy, dark red hair and deep brown eyes, she's the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. She has the sweetest heart, and I can't believe I lost her before.

I don't plan to do it again.

"You don't look so hot," she says, eyeing me critically.

"You're the most beautiful woman in the world," I return and watch in satisfaction as her cheeks darken from the compliment.

"You always were charming. It's how you're able to engage an audience for so long. That and your voice and guitar

skills.”

“Don’t look now, but I do believe you just complimented me.”

She smirks, sets her purse on the table by the door like she always used to do, and walks over to me, pressing her hand to my forehead.

“No fever,” she says softly. “How’s the head?”

“Pretty sure it’s still there given the fireworks going off inside of it.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Let’s get some more water in you. Hydration helps. Your chest and ribs?”

“Let’s not discuss it.”

She narrows those melted-chocolate eyes at me. “Take off your shirt, Brax.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice. I thought we’d start with some small talk, maybe a little foreplay, but this works, too.”

I have to hold my breath as I work the scrub top she gave me up over my head and let it fall to the couch beside me.

Josie sucks in a breath through her teeth and kneels in front of me, her eyes full of sympathy.

“Damn, Brax,” she murmurs and reaches out to gently brush her fingers over my bruised flesh. “You have to be so careful. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

Jesus, she’s amazing. She’s my heart, beating outside of my body.

I take her hand and kiss her fingers.

“I promise I won’t be responsible for my actions if you keep touching me like that.”

Her gaze, full of worry, latches on to mine. “It could have been so much worse.”

Her words are a whisper.

“But it wasn’t,” I assure her. “Come here so I can snuggle you. I’d pick you up, but—”

“You are *not* going to pick me up,” she says as she settles next to me. She’s still facing me so I can’t cuddle her, but at least she’s here. “You’re not going to do much for a few days.”

“I had a gig tonight,” I reply and twirl a piece of her hair around my finger. “Before you freak out, I already canceled. I canceled next week’s, too, just in case.”

She cups my face in her free hand. “Good. You never were a careless man. Your body needs rest, which I know isn’t easy for you. But you’ll be a lot better in a couple of days. So, maybe this *is* a good time to talk. If you’re up for it.”

“Talk,” I instruct her.

“*Why* would you tell the whole world that I dumped you?”

Should I tell her the truth? I never lied to her before, and I have no intention of doing it now. But she might get angrier before she starts to feel better.

But I do so love it when she gets worked up.

“Don’t hit me, okay?”

Her eyebrows wing up into her hairline. “I’ve never been violent before.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a first time for everything. I was hoping you’d be listening yesterday. And, if you *were* listening, and you heard me say what I did, I hoped that it would piss you off enough to seek me out and kick my ass so I could talk to you.”

She licks her bottom lip, seeming to soak in the information. “Have you ever heard of something called a phone? You just call a person. Or, there’s this newer thing where you can text them and talk in little messages. There’s no need to bait a girl on the *radio*.”

“Okay, when you put it like that, it might sound childish.”

“It *might*?”

“I tried calling you, Jose. It always goes to voicemail. So, I stopped. I guess I was trying to get your attention.”

“Well, you succeeded. And it pissed me off. Because I didn’t *dump* you.”

“You keep saying that, but you left.” I swallow hard, remembering how it’d felt when she walked away, her mind made up. “And I didn’t want you to.”

“I had an incredible job opportunity,” she insists. “And it was only for a year. We could have survived a year of long-distance while I did the travel-nurse thing. I made almost three years’ salary in that one year, Brax. That’s a lot of money. And I was honest with you about it. You gave me the ultimatum: Stay, or we’re done.”

I wince at that. I can’t deny it. I did. “I panicked,” I admit. “I knew for damn sure that I didn’t want you to go. I didn’t like being away from you for a *day*, let alone a whole year, and I didn’t want you to go. I was a selfish prick. I get that. And you called my bluff, which I didn’t expect.”

“It wasn’t right,” she says with a strong voice. “To ask me to choose.”

“No,” I agree immediately. “It wasn’t. And I regretted it as soon as I said the words.”

Her mouth drops open in surprise. “What? Well, why didn’t you just say so at the time?”

“Pride. Stubbornness. Idiocy.”

“Jackassery,” she suggests. “Childish tantrums. Ridiculous, boneheaded, moronic...” she continues, ticking the items off on her fingers.

“Okay, I get it,” I say with a chuckle. “I am all of those things. Especially, then. But damn it, my heart was busted up, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“We never had communication issues before,” she says, shaking her head. “Then, one day, I tell you that I need to do something for my career because it would be an amazing learning experience, and I’d be able to get ahead financially, and you basically tell me no. That if I do, I can’t have you.”

“Not my finest moment.”

“What if the tables were turned, Brax?” she asks, getting worked up again. “What if you got a tour deal with someone like Nash, and you had to be gone for a year or longer? What if I told you no? Said, *‘Nope, you’d better turn it down, or I’m out of here.’* Not cool, right? And I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“First of all, Leo Nash hates me because you’re his niece, and we broke up. Secondly, listen, I’ve had a lot of time without you. And, like I said, I’ve regretted that day every minute since. I’m not proud of how I acted, and if you walk out of here now without looking back, I won’t blame you. But I needed to come clean and apologize because I *am* sorry. I’ve never regretted anything in my life the way I regretted how I treated you. And I know I’ll never regret anything else so badly. You didn’t deserve that. Neither of us did.”

“You should have just talked to me,” she says. The wind seems to leave her sails, and she slumps against the couch. “I haven’t seen you in *two years* because you had a panic attack.”

“Well, now it just sounds stupid.”

She glances at me and raises a brow. “It *is* stupid.”

“Yeah. It is.” I mimic her position and lean my head back on the couch. “God, my head hurts.”

“When was the last time you took something for the pain?”

“Just before you came over. I’ve stuck to your strict med schedule, don’t worry.”

“You look like you got hit by a bus instead of a Corolla.”

I sigh and close my eyes. “I hate that the other guy died, Jose. I know he was drunk and stupid, and he almost killed both of us, but fucking hell, it sucks.”

She takes my hand and links our fingers, squeezing mine. “I know. It sucks big time. You need a shower, by the way.”

I roll my head so I can look at her. “Are you implying that I smell?”

“Not implying at all. Stating a fact. Can you maneuver your way upstairs?”

“Are you offering to help?”

“Maybe. If you behave.”

“Me?” I do my best to look insulted. “I’m the epitome of good behavior.”

“Was I the only one who actually listened during our conversation less than five minutes ago?”

I shrug and muster up the energy to stand. “Jesus, every muscle hurts.”

“I told you. And tomorrow will probably be worse,” she says. “But you should start to feel better each day after.”

“I think I need you to help me up the stairs.”

“Okay, come on.” She hops up and takes my hand, being patient with me as we slowly climb to the top of the steps. We walk through my bedroom to the bathroom, and I grin at her.

“I think I need you to help me get undressed.”

“You’re already halfway there without your shirt,” she points out, then narrows her eyes. “And if you think I’m going to fall for that, you don’t know me very well.”

I shrug and then immediately regret the motion.

“Fine.”

Without any hesitation, I let my pants pool at my feet and kick out of them, suddenly standing before her naked.

“I’m not bashful.”

“You have no need to be,” she counters and doesn’t even hide her slow perusal of my body from my tattooed arms, all the way down to my feet.

“You just eye-fucked me.”

She grins and waggles her eyebrows. “Maybe. Is that a new tat?”

She points to my ribs, and I glance down. “Yeah.”

“Is it a—? Wait. What is it?”

I smile and shake my head. “I don’t think I’ll tell you.”

“Then I don’t think I’ll help you.”

“That’s a low blow, Josie Montgomery.”

She snickers and then turns to start the water in the shower. “Whatever. It looks like a bunch of squiggly lines.”

“It’s your name. In Sanskrit.”

She stops and then slowly turns to me. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She walks back to me and leans over to take a closer look at the ink. It’s on the side that isn’t black and blue, right under my heart.

“Putting someone’s name on your body is corny,” she whispers.

“Or, you know, romantic.”

Josie leans in and hugs me, wrapping her arms gently around my middle, just holding on. I plant my lips in her hair, breathing her in.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admits softly. “I don’t know what there *is* to do.”

“Give me a second chance,” I suggest. “Let’s try again. I will do my best not to be an asshat this time.”

She snorts at that and looks up at me with shining brown eyes.

“Ah, babe, don’t cry.”

“It hurt really bad before,” she says and wipes away a tear. “If it doesn’t work again, I don’t want to have to go through that a second time.”

“Me, neither,” I admit. “But there aren’t a lot of guarantees in life. I know if we don’t try, I’ll miss you forever. Let’s try, Jose.”

“Okay,” she says at last and kisses my shoulder. “Let’s try.”

CHAPTER 5



~JOSIE~

“So, let me get this straight,” my cousin, Olivia, says as she pours herself a lemon drop martini.

All of the cousins are here. The guys are out back by the pool, playing beer pong since it’s not raining for a change. And the girls are in the living room, listening to my ongoing drama with Brax.

“You’re seeing Brax again,” Olivia continues, “after he was a complete idiot to you two years ago?”

“That about sums it up,” I agree with a nod and eat the olive from my regular dirty martini. “But I’m also being smart about it. I’m being careful.”

“Using protection is important,” Stella says with a nod and then laughs when I glare at her. “What? It is.”

“That’s not what I meant. And it doesn’t matter because we’re not having sex yet.”

“Which is a world record for those two,” Maddie interjects. “They used to fuck like rabbits. It was disgusting.”

“He was in a bad accident,” I remind them all. “He’s hurt. Otherwise, he probably would have come with me tonight, but I made him stay home and rest.”

“It could have been interesting if you’d brought him and the guys saw him,” Sophie adds. “It’s good to warn us all first to avoid any accidental beatings.”

“You know,” I say and eat another olive, “we always talk a big game about the cousins and uncles beating the crap out of people, but to my knowledge, none of them has ever done that.”

“But they *could*,” Liv stresses. “If we needed them to.”

“Good point,” I concede. “Anyway, he’s probably sleeping. He felt worse today than yesterday, which I figured he would.”

“Vaughn and I saw him a few weeks ago,” Olivia says, surprising me.

“You did?”

“Yeah, we went to a party downtown with the Seattle football team, and Brax’s band was playing. I didn’t talk to him. I may not like him a lot, but he sure can *sing*. We danced our asses off that night.”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “He *can* sing.”

“I heard the song he wrote about you,” Sophie says and nudges me with her shoulder. “It’s super-romantic. No one’s ever written a song about me before.”

He’s written dozens.

The memories fill my mind: intimate nights spent with Brax as he sang to me, songs he wrote for me, and ones I love by other artists.

He’s so damn talented.

“We don’t have to keep talking about Brax,” I suggest and point at Liv. “How are things with you and Vaughn? I have to get over to your new place.”

Olivia recently moved in with her new boyfriend, the super-famous and ridiculously handsome Vaughn Barrymore. I love seeing my cousin so happy.

She smiles behind her martini glass and takes a sip. “Good. Things are really good. We’re planning to have a big party for everyone soon. Maybe the next cousins’ night will be at our place.”

“It’s weird that you don’t live here anymore,” Lucy says with a frown. “I like Vaughn a lot, but change is hard.”

“It sucks,” Stella agrees. “I don’t get to rope her into midnight ice cream feasts anymore.”

“But I get to move in,” Haley reminds us all. Haley is Olivia’s sister. “I’ll have midnight ice cream with you.”

“I knew I could count on you.” Stella high-fives Haley.

Suddenly, we hear a huge splash from the backyard.

“The pool is covered,” Stella says as we all hurry through the kitchen and the back door to find Liam treading water. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“They dared me,” Liam says simply.

“We shouldn’t be surprised.” Olivia shakes her head. “This is the kid who went streaking through the neighborhood and got arrested on a dare.”

“New rule,” Stella announces. “No more daring Liam to do stupid shit.”

“You guys are no fun,” Liam says as he climbs out of the pool, buck-ass naked.

“Dude! Put your clothes on,” Maddie says, blocking her view of his dick with her hand. “Ew.”

“It’s not a dare if it doesn’t include nudity,” Drew says with a laugh and then shrieks as Liam pushes him into the pool.

“It’s not heated,” Stella reminds everyone. “And it’s, like, forty-five degrees outside.”

“I’m too sober for this,” I decide and walk back in to refresh my drink. “No one is going to toss my ass in that pool.”

“Is that a dare?” Keaton asks and runs after me.

“Don’t you do it!” I point at him and run around the kitchen island. “I will shave your head in your sleep, you big jerk.”

“I’m a light sleeper.” He catches me and carries me, kicking and screaming, out to the back patio.

“Don’t let him!” I yell. “Shit, I don’t want to be cold all night.”

He carries me to the edge of the pool but sets me on my feet.

“You’re a baby,” he says with laughter in his eyes.

“Oh, yeah?” I surprise him and push *him* into the pool, much to everyone’s delight. “You deserved that.”

Keaton comes to the surface, sputtering. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Sure. You scare me.” I walk away once more. “I really do need that drink.”



“SOMEONE SENT YOU FLOWERS.”

I glance up at Beth’s announcement, but instead of her face, I see a bouquet of orange roses.

“Wow. They sent a lot of them.”

“These are heavy,” she agrees as she sets them on the counter. I’m at the nurses’ station in the ER, and it’s my first night back after Brax’s accident.

I didn’t get to see him yesterday. I ended up sleeping off a hangover, and then I had to get ready for work this week.

I snag the note from the clear holder and open it.

I MISS YOU. HAVE A GREAT NIGHT. LOVE, B.

“Okay, that’s sweet. Who’s B?” Beth asks.

Instead of answering her, I stand and pick up the flowers. “I’d better put these in the back in case someone’s allergic.”

I wink at her and walk away. Once the flowers are tucked safely in the break room, I open my phone and shoot him a text.

Me: *The flowers are lovely. Thank you.*

I bite my lip and wait as I watch the bubbles dance on the screen.

Brax: *Come over in the morning when you're off shift.*

Me: *I'll be boring. I'll just sleep.*

Brax: *Come over.*

I sigh. I don't have to think about it too hard before I reply.

Me: *See you around 6:30.*

It's another busy night in the emergency room with several car accidents, a child who hit their head on a coffee table and busted open their scalp, and a woman who had a colony of bees set up residence in her hair.

I couldn't make this shit up if I tried.

By shift-change time, I'm dead on my feet.

I manage to shoot Maddie a text to let her know that I won't be home, and then I drive over to Brax's place with the flowers in the front seat next to me.

There was no way I'd leave them at the hospital.

I see a new Audi SUV in Brax's driveway. Did he already replace his car?

I knock on the front door and then walk inside, following my nose to the kitchen where Brax is at the stove, making what looks like pasta.

I set my bouquet in the middle of the kitchen table.

"I hope you're hungry," he says with a cocky grin and walks over to kiss me. "I made you dinner."

"I'm starving," I reply. "Thank you for the flowers. You're full of surprises. You don't like to cook."

"I like you being hungry even less," he says and tosses a strand of hot spaghetti onto the wall, nodding in satisfaction when it sticks. "It's ready."

“I’m sorry, who are you and what have you done with my —with Brax?”

“With your what?” he asks after turning off the burner and walking to me.

“It was a slip of the tongue.”

He raises a brow, slides his hands around my ribs to my back, and pulls me against his hard body.

“I’ll show you a slip of the tongue.”

Before I can reply, his lips are on mine, and he’s kissing me, long and deep. His tongue does, indeed, slip against mine, and those magical hands of his roam down my back to my ass.

“Is something burning?” I ask when I can catch my breath.

“Shit! The bread.” He hurries away and opens the oven, pulling out a pan of garlic bread with a grin. “Just caught it. A little toasty but still edible.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Sit,” he instructs and points to a chair at the nearby table. “I’ve got this. It’s easy.”

“You don’t need to have dinner for breakfast.”

“I stayed up all night, so this is dinner for me, too.”

I blink at him as he plates our food and carries it over to the table, setting a plate in front of me.

“This smells amazing.”

“*Bon appétit*,” he says with a wink.

“You must be feeling better.”

“Yeah, I definitely turned the corner. Bruises are still dark and pretty nasty, but it looks worse than it feels now.”

“Good,” I reply with a nod and take a bite of the bread. “Oh, God, this is delicious. Have you been hiding cooking skills from me all these years?”

“No.” He laughs and takes a bite of his own bread. “I actually got the bread and sauce from that Italian place we like

downtown. I only made the pasta. Even I can't screw that up."

"You already got a new car?"

He nods and slurps up some spaghetti. "Same as the last one. I know it looks like a soccer mom car, but it carries all my sound equipment. *And* it's cool."

"I like it."

"I got a call today from the other guy's family." Brax stops eating and takes a drink of water. "They wanted to apologize and asked if I planned to sue them."

I reach for his hand. "What did you tell them?"

"Fuck, no. I'm not suing them. They're going through enough as it is. My insurance will take care of the car and the medical bills. I don't need or want anything from them."

"Wow. A lot of people would be looking for compensation."

"You should have heard her," he says, shaking his head. "It was his wife. She just retired and lost her husband. She has enough on her plate. I have some bumps and bruises. I'll be okay."

"And, knowing you, you asked her if there was anything you could do for her."

He shovels some more food into his mouth and shrugs. "It's no big deal to help her out now and then if she needs it. They didn't have any kids."

I stand and cross to him, kissing his forehead. "You're a good man, Braxton Adler."

"I like it when you use my full name when it's because you're happy with me."

I grin and kiss him again, then return to my seat.

"My mom asked about you when I talked to her," he continues.

"You're just full of news today." I reach for more bread. "How is your mom?"

“She’s taken up knitting. I told her that she could knit me scarves, but I won’t wear them on stage.”

“You could start a new fad.”

“No, not gonna happen. She’s also happy that I’m seeing you again. And she wants us to come over sometime to say hi.”

“Okay.” I finish my food and pick up the plate to set it in the sink. “I need a shower. I don’t have any clean clothes with me because I used my spare car stash the other day when I was here with you and haven’t replaced them.”

“I’m sure I have something you can sleep in.”

“Are you sure you want to sleep all day with me?”

“Honey, there’s nothing in the world I want more right now than to get you in my fucking bed.”

“You really are feeling better.”

“Come on. I’ll show you just how good I feel.”

CHAPTER 6



~JOSIE~

“*I* thought about offering to wash your back,” Brax says as I walk into the bedroom after my shower. I’m wearing one of his old Metallica tees and nothing else as I slip between the crisp sheets in his bed. “But by the time I changed the sheets, you were pretty much done.”

“You’re doing too much, too fast,” I warn him as he pulls me over to his side and cuddles me close. “You should still be taking it easy, Brax.”

“I’m not running any marathons,” he says and kisses my forehead. His hand slides up and down my arm, and I can’t help but let my eyes drift closed and just breathe him in, soaking in the fact that I’m lying in his bed, next to him as if the last two years didn’t happen at all.

My hand drifts down his chest and over his ribs to his hip.

Where he’s naked.

Of course, he’s naked. Brax never wore clothes to bed.

God, I love the indentation on his hip, that smooth skin and sexy line that runs all the way to the promised land.

“Keep that up, and we won’t be sleeping for a little while,” he warns me.

“I’m not particularly tired right now.”

He starts to shift, but I move faster to straddle Brax’s hips. Sitting up, I pull the tee over my head and let it fall to the floor.

He swallows hard, and his eyes roam all over my torso. He runs his flattened hand up my breastbone, between my breasts, and I lean over to kiss him softly.

He bites my lip.

I grin.

“I’m going to play a bit first, okay?” I ask.

“By all means,” he says. “Play.”

I kiss his lips once more, and then his chin, leaving wet kisses down his neck to his chest as I move down his body and pause where he has my name written near his heart. I love all of Brax’s tattoos and have spent many hours tracing them with my fingertips and tongue, but this one shocked me.

He’d always said he would never get a woman’s name on his body. That it was too cliché. Too...silly. But there I am, in black ink.

“I can’t believe you did this.”

He brushes his fingers through my hair, and I continue down his body until his hard-and-ready cock is before me, a little drop of dew coming out of the tip.

Brax has the kind of cock that inspires grateful prayers to the gods. Not too thick, not too long, but holy shit, is he well-endowed. I remember exactly how it feels when he fills me, and as much as I can’t wait to ride him, I want to work him over with my mouth first.

So, I do.

I start by licking my way up the underside of him, then around the head. When Brax bares his teeth, I sink down and suck.

He moans and grips my hair in his hands, not to push me onto him but as an anchor. It only fuels my hunger for him. How many times have I thought about doing just this over the last couple of years?

Countless times.

It's one of my favorite things to do because it drives him absolutely out of his mind with lust, and I love the control that I have over him. I move faster, and his hips thrust. I use my teeth, and he hisses out a breath.

But when I swallow around him, and he chants "*Yes, yes, yes,*" it's enough to make me absolutely drunk with excitement.

Finally, before he can come, I kiss up his torso and position myself over him, ready to take him inside. But then I pause.

"Condom?"

He cups my face in his hands and kisses me tenderly. "There's no one but you, sweetheart."

I raise an eyebrow. "You haven't had sex in two years?"

He just shakes his head, and everything in me softens.

"Me, neither," I whisper. "And I'm still on the pill."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

With my forehead still pressed to his, I lower myself over him. When I'm seated, completely filled, Brax sits up and kisses me tenderly. He's so tall that he's at eye-level with me, even in this position.

"Wrap your legs around my waist, babe," he coaxes.

I comply.

And with my arms around his neck, and his hands on my ass, lifting me up and down, I ride him, clenching his length as our gazes lock.

The house is quiet around us, filled with only our soft moans and breaths. Finally, Brax's fingers press harder into my flesh, and he bares his teeth.

"Fuck, Jose."

"Oh, yeah, we are."

That makes him smile, then swallow hard. After just two more thrusts, we come apart together.

I hug him closer and rest my forehead on his shoulder as we each fight to catch our breath.

“Was it always that good?” I ask quietly.

“Yeah.” He drags his hands away from the globes of my ass and moves them up my back so he can hug me close. “You’re like a goddamn drug for me.”

Well, isn’t that just satisfying?

“You were supposed to lie down so you didn’t get hurt.”

“I can’t even feel my lips right now, babe. You didn’t hurt me.”

I lift myself away from him and walk into the bathroom. After cleaning myself up, I take a wet washcloth back to the bedroom for Brax.

“You just lie back,” I instruct when he moves to reach for the cloth. “I’ve got this.”

He shakes his head. “If you rub me down again, I’ll tackle you to the bed.” He winks and takes care of cleaning himself up. When we’re settled in the bed once more, Brax spoons me from behind and brushes my hair off my neck so he can kiss it and whisper into my ear the way he used to so long ago. “God, I missed you.”

“Same.” I snuggle against him, trying to get even closer. “Is this okay? Are you hurting?”

“Stop.” He kisses my shoulder. “I’m fine, and if anything hurts, I’ll move. You don’t have to worry so much anymore.”

“I care about you,” I remind him simply. “And you were really hurt.”

“I’m fine,” he repeats. “Get some sleep.”

“I have to work again tonight.” I yawn and give in to my heavy eyelids. God, this feels good. Warm and safe.

With Brax pressed up behind me, already breathing steadily, I fall asleep in his arms.



“HEY, MADDIE,” Brax says to my sister after I let him into the townhouse. It’s my first day off again after four days and nights of work and sex with Brax.

It was *not* a bad week.

But tonight, we’re going on a real date. Sort of.

“It’s about time you came over,” Maddie says with a smile and then hugs Brax. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thanks,” he says. “You should come to next week’s show with Josie. Come hang with us.”

“Already planned on it,” Maddie says with a wink. “Josie invited me.”

“I wanted someone to sit with,” I say with a shrug.

“Awesome. It’s an intimate show at a club, with only about five hundred seats, so it won’t be too chaotic.”

“Are you insinuating that we’re old and past the days of chaotic concerts?” Maddie asks him.

“You’re an *accountant*,” Brax reminds her.

“You’ll see,” she says. “Josie and I are still cool. Where are you guys going tonight?”

“The Pink Door,” Brax says and takes my hand, kissing my knuckles. “And we’d better go if we want to make our reservation.”

“I’m ready,” I reply and grab my bag. “See you later, Mad.”

“Have fun, kids,” she says with a wave as we leave.

“Is your sister dating anyone?”

“Not right now,” I reply as I buckle my belt in Brax’s new car, and we set off toward downtown. “She *was* dating a guy she met at the grocery store, but that fizzled out.”

“She met him at the *store*?”

“Yep. In the bakery. When you hit thirty, there are fewer places to meet men.”

“I remember the night I met you,” he says with a half-smile.

“Yeah, you were with another girl.”

“Don’t make me remind you that you were also on a date with a dude who was *not* your type.”

“What’s my type?”

He looks over at me and smiles. “Me.”

“Right. Of course. Anyway, I forgot about him. I wonder what ever happened to Jerry?”

“Who cares?”

“Who was the chick you were with?”

“Rhonda...something,” he says. “One of the guys in the band set me up with her. She was nice enough, but then I saw you, and it was like an explosion in my chest.”

“You’re already having sex with me,” I remind him. “You don’t have to butter me up.”

“It’s true.” He shrugs and takes an exit off the freeway. “I was sitting there in that bar, and I looked over and saw you. It was like something out of a movie. The music stopped, I couldn’t hear anyone or anything else, and you looked as if you were moving in slow motion.”

“And then you spilled your beer on me. Classy.”

“So, maybe it’s a rom-com movie,” he says and searches for a parking spot. “I didn’t see the barstool because I was too busy looking at you.”

“Right.” I laugh, but I totally got it. I’d felt the same way when I saw him. One look, and I didn’t give two shits about Jerry anymore. We were inseparable for more than three years after that night. “I don’t think I’ve ever been to the Pink Door.”

“The food is spectacular, but they also have entertainment.”

He locks his car and takes my hand, escorting me near Pike Place Market and down an alley where we find the restaurant tucked away. Once inside and seated in the lounge, we can see the water and the big Ferris wheel on the waterfront.

“Wow, great views,” I say as I pick up the menu.

“Look.” Brax points above us, and I gasp.

“An aerialist?” I blink in awe as a woman wraps herself in some deep red silks and flies above us gracefully. “Holy crap, that’s amazing.”

“Dinner and a show,” he says.

Once the server takes our order and leaves us with our wine to enjoy the show happening above us, Brax takes my hand and kisses it. He’s always done that.

“I’m grateful that I spilled that beer all over you that night,” he confesses.

“Me, too. And I guess I’m not as mad about you telling lies on the radio.”

He laughs at that, and it makes me grin.

His bruises have faded to green and yellow, telling me he’s healing nicely, which is a relief.

I trace a heart tattooed on his hand between his thumb and pointer finger.

“Oh, by the way, I think I’m going to Portland with Maddie in a couple of weeks. Just an overnight trip.”

“For anything fun?” he asks.

“A basketball game.”

That surprises him. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s her favorite thing. They’re playing that team LeBron is on, so she wants to see it.”

“They’re playing Los Angeles,” Brax says helpfully. “I didn’t know she was a big basketball fan.”

“She loves all the sports. She was torn because we’ll have to miss a home football game and she *loves* being in the box for those with the family, but basketball won out.”

“That’s cool. Do you have good seats?”

“How in the world should I know?” I ask with a laugh. “I’m going purely because I love her, and she doesn’t want to go alone.”

“You’re a good sister.”

“Man, don’t I know it?” I sip my wine. “I don’t mind, though. It’ll be fun.”

“Be careful. Portland has been a little shaky on the safety scale lately.”

“We will be,” I assure him. “You do know who our dad is, right?”

“Even the daughters of an ex-Navy SEAL can be at risk.”

“I’ve been trained on how to kill a man with just my hands since I was nine,” I remind him. “We’re well-equipped city girls. But we’ll still be careful.”

The woman above us spins and spins, and my heart stops when she pulls off a move that any mere mortal would have fallen from.

But she just smiles at the applause.

“Are you Brax Adler?”

A woman stands next to the table, nervously wringing her hands.

“I am,” Brax says. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I just have a photo? I know you’re here to eat, but I *love* your music. I go to most of the shows that I can, and—”

“No problem,” he says, cutting her off and standing to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

“Can you take it?” she asks, shoving her phone at me.

“Uh, sure.”

I stand and take the photo for the fan. She’s all smiles as she hugs Brax and tries to start a conversation with him about his music, but the server brings our meals.

“Thanks for stopping by,” Brax says kindly, “but we’re going to eat now before it gets cold.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Thanks again.”

The woman hurries off, and Brax and I blink at each other.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Why? You’ve wanted that for as long as I’ve known you.”

“It’s kind of cool but also weird because I just want to enjoy my night with you.”

I shake my head and cut into my steak. “You can’t have it both ways, Brax. I’ve been a part of the Montgomery family long enough to know that if you’re famous in any capacity, you lose some of the anonymity. It’s just the way it is. And you’re seeing some success with *My Girl*, and I think that’s just the beginning.” I take a sip of wine.

“Things like that,”—I point in the direction where the woman walked—“don’t bother me.”

“You’re pretty cool.”

I chew my food and smile over at him. “Oh, I know. I’m the coolest.”

CHAPTER 7



~BRAX~

I can finally hold and play my guitar without my shoulder screaming bloody murder at me.

And it's a damn good thing because I have a gig in a few days, and I have to play.

"Play that one Taylor Swift song," Josie says. We're on the couch, she's wearing my old T-shirt, and she has her bare legs draped over my lap.

This is my idea of Heaven.

"You're gonna need to narrow that down, babe. She has about ten million songs."

"You know," she says, waving her hand in the air, "the one that goes '*I almost do.*'"

"Sing it again."

Her cheeks flame and she wrinkles her nose. "No. *You* sing it."

I start to pick out the tune. "*I bet...*"

I sing the song, and as the lyrics take shape in my mind, I realize that Taylor could have written this song about me and my experiences over the past couple of years.

Longing for someone, wanting so badly to reach out to them but not being able to.

I can't say hello to you and risk another goodbye.

Fuck, it's just so *sad*.

And when I finish the song and look over at Josie, she has tears in her eyes.

“I forgot how sad that one is,” she admits and wipes away a tear. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Hey.” I set the guitar down and pull her into my lap, brushing her dark hair off her face. “I’m right here.”

“Yeah.” She cups my face and tips her forehead against mine. “I almost called you a million times.”

“Me, too.”

“God, we were dumb, Brax. We lost two whole years.”

“I like to think of it a little differently. Sure, we were apart for that long. However, I don’t know about you, but I learned a hell of a lot during those two years. About myself.”

“I did, too,” she admits.

I let my hands roam over her. “I never could resist you in one of my T-shirts, you know.”

“Why do you think I wore it?” Her smile is pure vixen, and I immediately put her onto her back on the spacious couch, then hover over her and kiss her senseless. God, I love the feel of her beneath me. She’s warm and soft and everything I’ve ever wanted.

She sighs when I cup her breast, and when that hand drifts even lower, she squirms and parts her legs in invitation.

She’s always ready for me. Always eager to fuck as if it’s the last thing we’ll ever do.

It’s just one of the things that I love about her.

I can’t go slow or take my time with her right now. I just want to be *in* her. I manage to get my jeans down my hips before I plunge deep inside of her and groan in pleasure when she sinks her teeth into my chest.

“Flip me,” she says, her eyes bright with lust. “Put me on my knees.”

Jesus, she’s the sexiest little thing.

I pull out, and she scrambles onto all fours, braced against the arm of the couch. I smack her round ass before I grip onto her hips and push back inside her.

“Yeah, that’s the spot,” she groans.

I reach around and flick her clit with my fingertip as I ride her hard and fast. By the time she comes, she’s a moaning, screaming mess.

She pushes back against me and bears down, clenching around me like a fucking vise, and I can’t help but follow her over, coming hard into her.

“That’s the good stuff,” she says on a sigh and rests her cheek on the arm of the couch.

“We’ll kill each other inside of a year if we keep up this pace,” I warn her as I pull out and reach for some tissues.

“Yeah, but what a way to go.” She grins and stands, kissing me before hurrying off to the bathroom.

My pants are back up by the time she returns, and I’m strumming the guitar again.

“Let’s go say hi to your mom,” Josie suggests.

“Isn’t it a bit wrong that right after a really good fuck sesh on my couch, you immediately think of my mother?”

She wrinkles her nose and then busts up into laughter. “Trust me, the two are not connected in any way. I just haven’t seen her in a long time, and we should go say hello.”

“If you’re up for the drive, so am I.”

“Cool. I’ll go get dressed.”

When she bounces out of the room, I shoot off a text to my mom to tell her to expect us in about an hour and then put away my guitar.

I glance down at the couch and grin. I think we’ll have to have an encore of that little performance later.



“WHAT A NICE SURPRISE,” Mom says as she opens her door and immediately opens her arms to hug Josie. “You’re even prettier than before. How is that possible?”

“I did change my mascara,” Josie says helpfully, making Mom laugh. “That could be it.”

“Well, whatever it is, it looks good on you. Come on in, I just made cookies, and I have coffee, too.”

“You always made the best sweets,” Josie says.

“She still does.” I wink at my mom and follow the girls through the house I grew up in, to the kitchen where a plate of chocolate chip cookies waits on the table with three empty mugs.

Clearly, Mom was excited after my text.

“Brax told me that you’ve started knitting.”

“I have,” Mom says as she pours us each some coffee and then sets the cream and sugar on the table. “But I’m not very good at it. I keep adding extra stitches to rows where they’re not supposed to be and forgetting other stitches, so nothing I make is very pretty yet. But I’ll keep working on it.”

“What made you decide to do it?” I ask her.

“You remember Shana Cassidy, don’t you?”

“Sure, she used to yell at me for being on her lawn. She’s always been old.”

I sip my coffee as Mom’s eyes narrow on me.

“You probably shouldn’t have been on her lawn. Anyway, she and some of the other ladies I have lunch with once a month started a knitting group. Bitch and Stitch.”

Josie spits out her coffee and then wipes her mouth. “Sorry, I’ve just never heard you swear.”

“I’ve taken up all kinds of hobbies,” Mom says, and I laugh. “Anyway, I thought that sounded like fun, but I don’t sew or anything. So, I started watching YouTube videos on knitting. I’ll get the hang of it.”

“That’s fun,” Josie says and then glances at her phone when it signals. “Sorry, that’s my uncle Luke. He’s planning a trip for the whole family at Christmas, and he sends periodic texts to fill us in on stuff.”

“Speaking of fun,” Mom says, “where are you going?”

“Yeah, where *are* you going?”

Josie’s head turns to me, and she frowns. “I didn’t mention it before?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Well, we’re all going to Iceland.”

I sit back, and Mom immediately gets excited for Josie, talking about how much she’d love to see Iceland.

Hell, who wouldn’t?

But I hadn’t planned to be away from Josie for Christmas.

“It’s been in the works for a couple of months,” Josie says and bites her lip. “Sorry, Brax. I should have mentioned it.”

“You shouldn’t apologize for going on a trip for the holidays,” Mom says.

“No, you shouldn’t. I’ll miss you, but it does sound like fun.”

“Maybe you could go with them,” Mom suggests, and I shake my head.

“I’m not leaving you alone during the holidays, Mom. No way.”

My dad died when I was a kid, and I’m an only child. There’s no way I’d leave my mother alone.

“Oh, please, I’m not alone. I have lots of friends. And your aunt, Anita.”

“It’s not the same.”

“You’re a grown-ass man,” Mom says, surprising me again with the curse word. “I can’t expect you to be here every single year. I’m fine. If you decide to go to Iceland for Christmas, I won’t be upset at all.”

“We’ll talk about it,” Josie suggests and squeezes my hand. “We’re still a ways out from it.”

This just reminds me that although we’ve picked up our relationship again, a lot happened over the two years we were apart that neither of us knows about. There’s a lot to catch up on, and all I’ve been thinking about is fucking Josie every chance I get.

But who wouldn’t? I mean, look at her. She’s absolutely gorgeous.

I’m obsessed with her in every way.

Though not in a creepy way.

“How did your gardens do this year?” Josie asks, changing the subject.

“Oh, you should have seen the tulips,” Mom gushes and goes into detail about the colors, the placement, and how happy she was with it all.

Josie bites into her cookie and winks at me as if to say, “*It’s all good. We’ll talk later.*”

With that, I decide to enjoy the two women I love more than anything.



“HOLY SHIT, you guys, Josie’s back!”

My drummer, Lex, hurries over to snatch Josie up off her feet and twirl her around.

Lex is a laid-back guy who rarely gets upset. He always says he takes his aggression out on the drums.

It seems to work for him.

“Hey, Lex,” Josie says with a grin. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“I’m better-looking than him,” Lex says and points his thumb at me. “You should dump his sorry ass for me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. You guys remember my sister?”

“Hey, you two. Good to have you,” our bassist, Steve, says.

“Maddie,” Willy says with a wink. “Good to see you.”

“It’s been a while,” Maddie says in way of greeting, and if I’m not mistaken, a little wave of awareness moves between them.

Josie and I look at each other.

I raise a brow.

Josie shrugs a shoulder.

Interesting.

The girls are beautiful. Josie’s in black leather pants with a white shirt that falls off one shoulder, and Maddie’s in a red dress that seems to be missing the skirt.

Willy can’t keep his eyes off her, and I can’t blame him. They look like they’re here to see a rock concert.

Because they are.

And it’s hot as fuck.

We’re at a bar in downtown Seattle that’s well known in the music scene and has been for at least fifty years. Bands like Nirvana, Nash, and Pearl Jam have all played here. Pearl Jam still does once in a while.

It’s awesome.

This is our third time back this year, and it never gets old. The audience is always fun.

“I got you a table up front,” I inform Josie and kiss her cheek.

“Oh, good. I won’t have to throw my panties very far.”

“I sure missed her,” Lex says with a laugh.

“Just your panties?”

“I could throw my bra, too, but you’ll have to earn that. It’s a matching set.”

I narrow my eyes and grin, and she just laughs and sips beer from a can that someone gave her.

“Okay, guys, you’re on in five,” the producer says. “Let’s do this. Have a good show, everyone.”

“We’ll be out front,” Josie says and boosts herself up onto her toes to kiss me. “Break a leg, handsome.”

“See you all later,” Maddie says with a wave, and they’re off.

“Okay, guys,” Lex says as we huddle up the way we always do before a show. “We got this. We’re going with the standard set, but we’re mixing it up a bit with *My Girl* going last. It’s a hit right now, and we want them to wait for it.”

“Let’s kill this,” Willy says, and we all bump fists.

“Before you go out,” Ralph, our manager, says as he marches into the room, “I have some good news. Get packed up, boys, because you’re going on a six-month tour with Radiohead. You leave right after Christmas.”

He leaves again, his phone pressed to his ear, and we all just stare at each other.

“That’s it?” I ask. “No contract to look over, no discussion?”

“It’s Radiohead,” Lex says. “Are you seriously thinking about turning that down?”

“No, it just seems so...informal.”

“We’ll have to talk about it,” Willy says.

“Ralph’s a moron,” Steve adds. “We’ll hammer out the details later. Focus, guys.”

“Right.” I nod and take a drink of water. “Let’s do this.”

The bar is packed, and even though it's a small venue, it's loud, and the crowd's energy is amazing.

I love to perform, and there's nothing better than when those in attendance sing along.

Better yet is when I look down at Josie and see she's singing every word, clearly very proud and happy to be here.

It's a hell of a night.

When we get to the last song, I sit on a stool, just me and my guitar, and start strumming.

The crowd goes wild. Having this song hit the radio has been incredible.

But there's only one woman I'm interested in right now, and she's smiling at me like I'm her prince charming.

When I finish the song, I offer Josie my hand, bring her up onto the stage, and kiss the hell out of her. As the crowd goes wild, we all walk off.

"You were all fantastic," Josie says. "Where's Maddie?"

"Here I am," Maddie says as she hurries through the door. "Good show, guys."

"They're calling for an encore," Lex says. "Let's go give them one. Brax, let's do that song we wrote a few months ago. *Back in Time*."

"Yeah, let's try it out on them," Willy agrees.

"Go give them what they want," Josie says. "We'll be here."

"Let's do it." I kiss my girl and then hurry back out onto the stage with the guys to thunderous applause. "You want some more?"

"YES!"

I nod at the others as I drop my guitar strap over my head and start to strum.

"One, two, three, four."

It's an upbeat song, heavy on bass and drums, and by the time we're done, the crowd goes wild.

"Let's keep going," Lex yells out.

We play for the next hour. Maddie and Josie return to their seats, and we weave in covers of other bands' songs that the crowd knows by heart, along with some original stuff of ours that no one's heard yet.

It's one of the best performances of my life, and I'm so fucking grateful that Josie's here to see it.

By the time we're finished, after nearly a three-hour set, all of us are ready to drop.

I've pretty much lost my voice.

"Totally worth it," Willy says. "You were a maniac tonight."

"He was a rock star tonight," Josie amends with a proud smile. "You all were. Good job, boys."

"Fuck, yeah," Lex says and twirls one of his drumsticks in his fingers.

There's just nothing like this.

CHAPTER 8



~JOSIE~

“*A*h, look at that,” Brax growls in my ear.

I was in the middle of packing for my overnight trip with Maddie when Brax sat on the side of my bed, pulled me onto his lap, spread my legs wide on either side of his knees, and then pointed us toward my closet mirror.

The lower half of my body is completely exposed, spread wide for him. The top is covered by one of his old T-shirts.

I’ve managed to commandeer at least half of his collection as my new sleep shirts.

That’s when I sleep with anything on—which isn’t often these days.

“Look how wet you are for me,” he says and kisses my neck as his gaze moves up and down my reflection in the glass. “Look at how pink and swollen you are. Are you sore?”

“No,” I whisper, completely hypnotized by watching what he’s doing to me. We’ve always had an adventurous sex life, but this is new.

And damn sexy.

He tugs the shirt up over my head and glides his hand over my breasts while the other goes back to driving me out of my mind down *there*.

“It’s like playing a guitar,” he murmurs. “When I strum you like this...”

I moan as the muscles of my core instinctively tighten.

“You make that sound. But if I pluck right here...”

I gasp and let out a little squeak, and Brax grins at me in the glass.

“You do that. What if we do this? Keep your eyes open and watch, sweetheart.”

I didn't even realize I'd closed my eyes. I lick my lips and avidly watch as the very tips of his two middle fingers disappear inside me.

“Jesus, yes.”

“I get words with that, huh? Okay, what about...?”

He presses the heel of his hand against my clit, and I jerk, crying out, “Brax! Holy shit, Brax.”

“I get my name with that one. I'll make a note of it. I think I like it best. Keep your eyes open, Josie.”

“I can't.”

He bites the top of my shoulder, redirecting my attention.

“Do it. Watch this. God, you're so fucking gorgeous.”

I can't help but stare as I grow wetter, and he pushes me not just over the line into oblivion but so far past it, I couldn't tell you where it was.

The next thing I know, I'm on my back on the bed, and Brax has my hands pinned to the mattress above me as he pushes his cargo shorts down his hips, impatient to get inside me.

When he slides in, we both groan with pleasure.

“Fuck,” he whispers in my ear. He's moving fast, as if he's on a mission. As if he can't help himself.

It doesn't take long before he pushes in and grinds himself there, coming apart inside me.

When he's done and out of breath, he grins down at me.

“I guess that was more fun than packing,” I say, making him laugh.

“Hell, yes.” He pulls away and rolls onto his back, setting my arms free. “I couldn’t help myself. You were just strutting around the place practically naked.”

“Uh, I was *walking* around, wearing a shirt, gathering things for my super-fast trip today.”

“Walking, strutting. Same thing. You’re hot as hell, and I can’t keep my hands off you. Also, that was a gorgeous show in that mirror. I’ll never look at it the same way again.”

“I won’t, either.” I grin at him and see that he’s relaxed and content. “What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

“We have a gig tonight,” he says and reaches over to trace my collarbone. “What time are you heading out?”

“Maddie’s getting off work in,”—I check my watch—“shit, she’ll be here in fifteen minutes. She wants to leave right away so we can get checked into the hotel and have dinner before the game. You made me late.”

“Not sorry,” he says as he links his hands behind his head and watches with a satisfied grin on his handsome face as I hurry to get dressed and throw some clothes and toiletries into a bag. “Jesus, you’re only going for one night, Josie.”

“So?”

“You’re packing for a week.”

“I don’t know what I’ll need,” I reply and shove my curling iron into the suitcase. Granted, I haven’t curled my hair in at least five years, but what if I want to *tonight*? “I need to be prepared.”

“Is this a fancy ball?”

“No, it’s a basketball game.”

“Then why do you need high heels? Hey, I haven’t seen those before.”

“They’re new.” I cradle them to me and kiss the toe of one red shoe. “I don’t like a lot of fancy things, but these shoes are to *die* for. I can wear them with jeans.”

I gently slide the heels into their dust covers and place them in the bag.

“Later, I want to fuck you when you’re wearing those shoes and nothing else.”

That makes my head come up. I narrow my eyes at him, and when I hear the front door open downstairs, I toss a towel over his dick area, and he shoots me a grin.

“Are you dressed up there?” Maddie calls up.

“She knows you too well,” Brax says, and I stick my tongue out at him. “Come here and say that, sweetheart.”

“We’re covered,” I call back with a laugh. “And I’m almost ready. Just throwing a few extra things in my bag. I’ll take a shower before the game.”

“Oh, good. You’re bringing your curling iron. Hey, Brax.”

“Hey. You know, I’ve never seen either of you with curly hair.”

“But we might want curls *tonight*,” Maddie says, echoing my thoughts. “And now we’re prepared.”

“Women are weird,” Brax says, shaking his head as Maddie hurries away to gather her things. “I hope you have a good time. Text me to let me know you arrived there okay.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Okay, *Dad*.”

“It’s my job to make sure you’re safe.”

Now I raise both eyebrows. “Why?”

“Because I love you.”

It’s said so simply, so matter-of-factly, that I almost stumble. I cross to him and take his face in my hands, staring into those gorgeous eyes of his.

“I love you, too.”

I brush my nose over his and then kiss him long and deep, but before he can wrap his arms around me and tumble me back onto the bed, I back out of his reach.

“No more sex,” I say, pointing at him. “I have to go.”

“We should probably do it again,” he says, “since we just said the L-word.”

“We don’t have to do it every time we use that word.”

“We probably should.”

“No.”

He grins. “You can’t resist me.”

“I *am* resisting you. But I’ll make it up to you when I get home.”

Brax sighs as if I’ve just shot down all of his hopes and dreams, then stands to get dressed.

I hurry over and shut the bedroom door.

“Your lack of modesty might be a little concerning.”

He smirks, not at all uncomfortable in his tattooed skin.

“Nudity doesn’t bother me, babe.”

“Clearly.”



“DID you see that game-winning shot at the end, right at the buzzer?” Maddie demands as we walk out of the arena toward her car.

“I was right there,” I remind her.

“It was *the best*,” she says. “And we were so close to the court. I swear, someone sweated on me.”

“Ew. That can’t be sanitary.”

“And Lebron totally winked at me.”

“I don’t think he did, Mad.”

“He did, too. You were looking at your phone or something and missed it. Man, basketball players are *hot*. I like my men tall.”

“That’s not tall. That’s *tall*.”

“Exactly. I like them *tall*.”

“That really narrows down the pool of possible men, if you’re holding out for someone over six-foot-five, Mad.”

“Hey, a girl can dream, right? Stop raining on my parade. That was so fun. I love the football games back home, too, but this was even better than that, and we didn’t even have a box.”

“We probably could have scored one,” I say, considering. “I’m sure someone knows someone.”

“I didn’t even think of that,” she says and stares at me for a full ten seconds. “Holy shit, maybe we can get box seats next year.”

“Maybe you’ll fall in love with a player, and you can go to every game and cheer him on with the other wives.”

“Don’t play with my emotions,” she says, shaking her head. “That’s not nice. You’re my *sister*.”

I laugh as she unlocks the car doors, and we both get inside. We’ll have to wait for a few minutes before we can leave as the swarm of people and cars try to empty out of the parking structure, but we don’t mind.

“I don’t even know who your favorite player is,” I say, thinking it over.

“Blake Howard,” she says immediately. “Not just because he’s hot and six foot eight, and holy crap *he’s hot*, but also because he’s won the dunk contest two years in a row, *and* he can shoot threes like it’s nothing.”

“Was he out there tonight?”

She looks at me as if I’ve just asked if he’s in the car with us.

“Dude, he shot the *winning* buzzer-beater from behind the three-point line! Were you even there?”

“Oh, *him*. Yeah, I get it. He is hot. I don’t know their names, Mad. I’m sorry. Hell, I hardly know the football guys’ names in Seattle, and that should be in my DNA by now.”

“You never really loved sports much,” she says with a shrug. “That’s okay, I love you anyway.”

“Thanks.”

She grins and then puts the car in reverse so we can finally go back to the hotel.

“So, things look like they’re going well with Brax,” she says and stops at the stoplight outside the garage.

“Yeah, we’ve worked some stuff out, and now we’re just plugging right along.”

“Good. I like him.”

“I’m glad. I don’t know how Mom and Dad will feel about it, though.”

“I thought Brax and Dad used to be tight,” she says, looking both ways before turning left.

“They were. *Before*. I don’t know what Dad’ll think about me getting back together with Brax.”

“Well, remember when we were kids, and he left for a while, and then Mom took him back? Shit happens, you know? He’ll probably understand better than you expect him to.”

“You could be right. He said he loved me today.”

“Dad?”

“No, Brax. We’re back to saying it again. And I feel it. I’m not just saying it.”

“But?”

“I don’t know. Fool me once and all that jazz... I don’t think things will go the way they did before. I think we both learned from that time and are moving forward.”

“But you don’t want to let your guard down all the way just in case he rips your heart out and eats it for breakfast again.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, comforted that my sister gets me. “I still have some guards up.”

“I think that’s probably normal. He really did a number on you before.”

“Why are you so gung-ho about us getting back together? You were the one who had to give me your shoulder to cry on, buy me ice cream, and agree that he was nothing but a piece of shit.”

“That’s my job because I’m your sister,” she says and pulls into a parking spot near the hotel. “And I was mad at him, too. But if ever there were soul mates, the kind that our parents are, or the others in the family are, it’s you two. You fit together. And you’re better when you’re with him. You’re way happier, that’s for sure.”

“He does make me happy.”

“As long as you’re happy, I am, too. It’s not my job to hate him forever for hurting you. But I will keep my eyes open, and I’m here if you need my shoulder or some ice cream.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know. Let’s go talk about basketball some more.”

“I can’t wait.”

CHAPTER 9



~BRAX~

“So, you weren’t just blowing smoke out of your ass?”
Lex says to Ralph.

Ralph tried, again, to talk to us about this so-called tour last night just before the show, but we told him to meet us at Lex’s place today to talk about it formally, rather than in bits when our heads were already on stage.

“This is the contract,” he says and tosses it onto the table between us all. “It basically says that you start in Seattle in January and will be with the tour during all of their North American dates through June. It’s six months, nonstop.”

“Holy shit,” I whisper. “What’s the pay?”

Ralph lifts an eyebrow at me.

“Come on, man, you can’t expect us to work for nothing. Like you said, we’ll be working our asses off for six months. Sure, the exposure is there, and we’ll gain some notoriety for it, but we have to pay the fucking bills.”

Over the next hour, Ralph outlines it all for us and breaks down how much we’ll each make per show, as well as all of the terms of the contract.

“It sounds pretty standard to me,” Steve finally says. He toured with other bands in the past before he joined our group. “It’ll be a hell of a good time.”

“We’re obviously in,” Willy says and then turns to me when I remain quiet. “Come on, Brax, this is what we’ve busted our nuts for all these years. It’s *finally* happening.”

“I know.” I can feel it in my bones. “I just—”

“If you’re waffling because of that skirt...” Steve says, his voice hard with anger.

“I’m not waffling. I’m thinking.”

“Same thing,” Willy says.

“I want to do this,” I admit. “Hell, yeah, I want to do it. But I have to talk to Josie about it, too. We’re a team, and I just got her back. I’m not willing to do something that will send her packing again.”

“But you *would* do something that would send the rest of us packing?” Lex asks. “Because if you make us turn this down, I guarantee that’s what will happen, man. I won’t stay if we’re not *all* in this for the success it could mean for all of us. It’s not just about you.”

“I didn’t say it was,” I reply, feeling frustrated. I rub my hands over my face in agitation. “Of *course*, I want this for all of us.”

“Then sign on the fucking dotted line,” Willy says.

“I will. *After* I talk to Josie. And you can call me a pussy or whatever you want, but damn it, it impacts her, too. Give me a few hours. That’s all I’m asking.”

The guys turn to Ralph, who holds up his hands. “I’m not going to force anyone to do anything. In my professional opinion, you’d be stupid to pass. But, hey, it’s your life.”

“No, it’s *our* lives,” Steve says. “Remember that when you ask your girlfriend for permission to elevate your career.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” I reply, glaring at Steve. “I’ll be back.”

I stand, grab my leather jacket, and leave Lex’s house. I don’t know if Josie’s home yet. I haven’t heard from her since she and Maddie left Portland a couple of hours ago.

They should pull in anytime, depending on traffic.

So, I drive over to her townhouse to wait for her. But when I arrive, there’s a vehicle in the driveway.

Not Josie's or Maddie's car.

When I get out of my SUV and walk to the door, Josie's mom, Brynna, answers it.

"Brax."

"Oh, hey. I didn't mean to startle you. I was hoping Josie was back."

"Not yet," she says, shaking her head. "I had to stop by to check on something real quick. Maddie got some flowers, and she didn't want them to sit on the porch. What's up, Brax? You don't look so good."

I blow out a breath and sit on the front step. "I'm... worried."

"About Josie?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, tell me about it." Brynna steps down and stands in front of me, shoving her hands in her pockets. "What's wrong?"

"You know what happened between us, right? A few years ago?"

"I do," she confirms. "Sometimes, we make decisions off the cuff rather than really thinking about how it might affect those we love."

"Yeah, well, I'm trying *not* to do that again. I can't lose her twice. I don't think I would survive it."

"Ah." She nods and looks up when it starts to sprinkle. "Damn weather. I love Seattle, but I never did get used to all the stupid rain. Do you think you're about to make a decision that will cause you to lose my daughter?"

"I fucking hope not."

Brynna smiles. She's a beautiful woman. The twins get their looks from her. Caleb is a lucky man.

"I think it speaks volumes that you're worried and are here to talk to Josie about it, rather than running away like last

time.”

“I’m done running or hiding or living in denial. That’s dumb.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Brynna turns as Maddie’s car pulls into the driveway. “And there are my girls now. You have good timing, Brax. It’s good to see you.”

When I stand, Brynna offers me a hug.

“Everything’s going to be just fine. You’ll see.”

I nod and watch as Josie gets out of the car, hugs her mom, then frowns at me.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“I think I’ll help Maddie with the bags and stuff,” Brynna says with a wink. “You two go and talk.”

Josie nods. “Thanks, Mom. Come on.”

Josie takes my hand and leads me into the house, through the living room, and to the kitchen at the rear of the townhouse.

“What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you because I don’t want to make a really bad decision.”

Josie frowns again and reaches for me. “What is it?”

“The band has been offered a tour.” The words come out fast, as if I have to just spill it all at her feet and let her decide what she’ll do with it from there. “We’d be gone from January until June, with an option to sign on for another six months at that time.”

“Holy shit, Brax.”

“I don’t know if I should go.”

Her face is blank, and then she blinks at me. “What? Why *wouldn’t* you go?”

“Because I just got *this* back,” I say, gesturing between us, “and the whole reason I fucked up before was because you were going to be gone for your job, and I threw a fucking fit over it.”

“I’m not throwing a fit.”

“If you don’t want me to go, I need you to say so. Because I’ll always choose you first. *Always.*”

“Hey.” She moves forward and frames my face in the way she does that calms me faster than anything else. “This is *incredible* for you and the guys. It would kill them if you turned it down.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty pissed that I even paused.”

She presses her lips together. “I love that your first instinct was to consider me. Thank you for that. But, babe, we got this. You’re going on freaking *tour*. ON TOUR!”

She starts to jump up and down in excitement. “Holy shit, you’re going on tour!”

I scoop her up and twirl her around the kitchen, finally feeling excited enough to celebrate with her a bit.

“I don’t think it’s set in yet,” I admit. “You’re okay with me being gone for that long? I feel like a hypocrite.”

“Being away from you won’t be fun, but it’s an excellent opportunity for you. Of course, I’m okay.”

“This is what you needed from me two years ago.” I tip my forehead against hers and feel like such an asshole. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“You can’t keep beating yourself up,” she says softly. “Yeah, this is what I needed, but we were different then. This isn’t exactly the same.”

“It’s pretty much the same.”

“Okay, it’s kind of similar. But it’s okay. We’re moving forward, not dwelling in the past, Brax.”

“You’re incredible, and I don’t deserve you.”

“That could be true, but you have me all the same. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere—even if you *are* on tour and groupies will try to get in your pants.”

I laugh and hug her close. “You’re the only groupie I’ll allow in my pants.”

“If I find out otherwise, they won’t need to get in your pants anymore. What’s in there will be gone.”

I swallow hard and then kiss her head. “You’re the best thing that’s ever been mine, Josie Montgomery.”

“Isn’t that a Taylor Swift line?”

“It fits,” I say with a laugh. “I guess I’d better go sign that contract before the guys put out a hit on me.”

“Jesus, you didn’t sign it?”

“Not until I talked to you. Because you’re the most important part of my life. And if you weren’t on board, then I wouldn’t have been on board, either.”

“Wow,” I hear Maddie say from the island. I turn and find Maddie and Brynna watching with tears in their eyes. “That’s so romantic.”

“There’s not a lot of privacy in our family,” Brynna says as she wipes away a tear. “You’ll get used to it.”

Josie laughs and cuddles up beside me. “He’d better get used to it. He’s stuck with me.”

“That’s the best problem I’ve ever had.”

EPILOGUE



~CALEB MONTGOMERY~

“*I*’m glad they worked it out,” Brynna says as we stand in our living room and watch the family chat and get excited for Brax and his band.

We’re hosting the pre-tour party at our place, and we’re all stuffed in here like sardines.

Not to mention, we’re all still jet-lagged from our trip to Iceland for Christmas.

“Why didn’t we do this at Luke’s place?” I ask my wife.

“Because we’re Josie’s parents, and we should host.”

“It’s not a fucking wedding,” I mutter.

“Why are you so grouchy about this?” Brynna takes my hand in hers and squeezes it. “You’re grumpier than usual.”

I watch as Brax twirls my daughter around the living room, then kisses the hell out of her for the whole fucking family to see.

“Because she’s mine,” I say on a sigh. “She’s been mine since she was nine, and I’m not ready to let some wannabe rock star just waltz in and decide that she’s his.”

“Oh, babe,” Brynna says and kisses my biceps. “She *is* his. And she’s yours, too. She doesn’t have to choose. She can have you both. And what a lucky woman she is that two good men love her so damn much.”

I blink, considering. “I like him,” I finally admit. “But he hurt her once.”

“And he will likely do it again without even realizing he has. You’re not perfect yourself.”

“I hurt you?” I stare down at her in horror. “Shit, what did I do, Legs? I’ll fix it.”

“Nothing today.” She leans on me once again and watches our kids with all the others. “But we hurt each other. We’re human. But we also love, and we’re a family. Brax is a part of that now, whether you like it or not.”

“They’re not married,” I mutter.

“Yet,” she says.

“You’re way too chipper about this.”

“You’re freaking out enough for both of us. She’s happy, Caleb. Just look at her.”

Josie’s laughing, eating a cupcake.

“Yeah, she’s happy.”

“That’s all we can ask for.”

“If he fucks this up, I’ll kill him with my bare hands and make it look like a goddamn accident.”

“I’ll help,” our son, Drew, adds as he joins us.

“You’re a good kid,” I tell him and bump fists with him.

But we watch as Brax brushes his fingertips down Josie’s cheek, and I know in my heart that he loves my girl. It’s written all over his face.

It’s the same look that I still give my wife.

Twenty years of Christmas mornings and trick-or-treating run through my mind. Nursing Josie through the flu and comforting her when she didn’t make the cheerleading squad.

It all passed in the blink of an eye.

And now, she’s mixed up with a *musician*.

“Stop being grumpy,” Brynna says. “And congratulate Brax and his band.”

“Later.” Josie looks my way and gives me that special smile. The one that says, “*I love you, Daddy.*”

“Let them have fun. I’ll talk with him later.”

“Don’t scare him.”

“You’re no fun.”

I may have to share her with him, but she’ll always be my little girl.

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When—and it's *when* not *if*—my family finds out that I've been keeping this secret, will I have to choose between the

man I love and those who mean the most to me? Or, by some miracle, can I have both?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Proby has published more than sixty titles, many of which have hit the USA Today, New York Times and Wall Street Journal Bestsellers lists.

Kristen and her husband, John, make their home in her hometown of Whitefish, Montana with their two cats and dog.



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