

Under the

LEO

MAYHEM



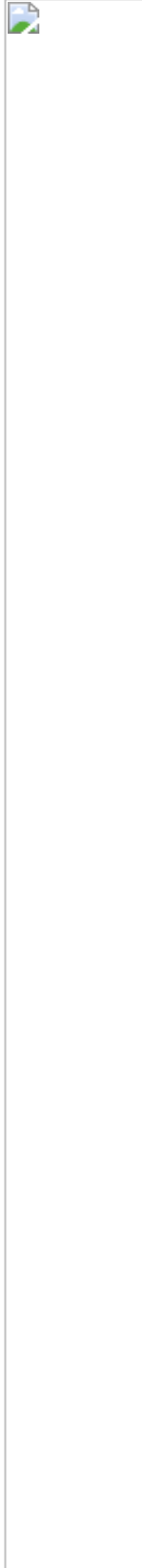
MAKERS

DESIREE LAFAWN

UNDER THE COVER

MAYHEM MAKERS MMM

DESIREE LAFAWN



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CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More from Mayhem Makers](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Desiree Lafawn](#)

[Also by Desiree Lafawn](#)

CHAPTER ONE

ABEL

I stared at the woman in front of me, her red hair bright enough to signal aliens from space. I blinked slowly to process what she'd just said.

“Seriously, take off your pants.” Her gum cracked loudly, and I figured everybody in the whole damn room was probably looking at us by now.

“Why?” I cleared my throat. This whole shit show was unfamiliar territory. It was the only explanation for the discomfort I experienced when a woman asked me to take off my pants outside the doctor's office. Albeit... she wasn't exactly my type, but still. There's something about a forceful female that really got my engine going sometimes.

Now was not one of those times.

“Because it's time for an outfit change. We're done with MC. It's time for cowboy. Now shuck the leathers and get your jeans and hat on.” The twenty-something-year-old photography assistant cracked her gum again and shoved the pile of denim and flannel at me. I was too slow to grab the stack of clothes from her hands, and the heavy brown belt with the ginormous buckles slid to the floor with a clang. She stood there, holding the tan cowboy hat in her other hand, staring at me with pity.

I looked anywhere in the room except at her. Danielle, I think her name was, snorted with laughter. Making fun of my discomfort, probably. “Is this your first photoshoot?”

“How could you tell?” I let my eyes roam over the huge warehouse room while I answered her. Every part of the room was sectioned off and turned into a different background. Some areas were plain, with just rolled paper walls, others were entire sets, with furniture and props. One corner had all black walls, a ceiling, and a rubber floor with a black tarp in the middle to catch water. Apparently, that was for rain shots or something. It sounded kinky, just not something I wanted to partake in.

“Because I can’t think of another reason for you to be so stiff and nervous.”

My eyes widened in shock at her words. Me? Nervous? “What makes you say that?”

My eyes snapped to Danielle again, and this time the look in her eyes wasn’t pity, it was irritation. Maybe a little anger.

“You know, most people are here because they want to be, and sometimes we even have a little fun while we’re working. But you—you look like someone dragged you here to pay on a mob debt. So why are you here if you hate it so much?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, mostly because I couldn’t. I didn’t want to be here. I just had to be because of the job. The job I couldn’t tell her about it because it was a secret.

Danielle held out a bottle of water and sighed when I took it. “Look, I don’t know what your deal is or why the publisher said it had to be you modeling for this shoot, but we’re all doing our jobs here. This isn’t a porn set, and I’m not a fluffer,

so a little respect for all of us working hard here could go a long way. Oh, and stop stressing Matteo out. He's on keto right now, and the lack of carbs makes him very cranky. You might not have to deal with him when you leave here, but I do."

And with that, she was gone, stiffly walking over to another corner of the room to hand out more water to other staff members working on different sets.

Look, I wasn't trying to be an asshole, but I definitely did not know what I'd be walking into when I took this job. My employer could have done me a solid and explained his expectations a bit more.

"Abel, what's up? Are you good over there?"

Aw, hell, I'd summoned another headache.

"Devon." I hissed through clenched teeth and a locked jaw. I grabbed the slender man by the elbow and yanked him close enough so I could maintain low tones. "This is humiliating. I didn't agree to this."

"The hell you didn't." Devon Crowley, PR professional and the signer of my current paycheck, said with a half-smile, "This is exactly what you signed up for, Pumpkin. Your job is to look handsome and smile at the camera. And that includes several outfits and scenery changes. *For your portfolio.*" He looked down at my chaps and grinned.

Deviant.

"I don't need a portfolio." And I didn't. A portfolio of multiple pictures was not part of my contract. To grace the cover of a single book, a single photo was in my contract. The rest was.... well... the rest I could handle. This was something

else. “They put baby oil on me, Devon. Did you know they have a person on staff just to oil people down for photos?”

“Some people have all the fun.” Devon gazed wistfully off to the side, his posture that of someone lost in a daydream. It was much too soft a look for a man wearing skinny jeans and no-show socks with pastel blue loafers. The shoes matched his half-open, button-down shirt, with the cuffs artfully rolled up so close they could have been dyed to match. I didn’t get fashion. People did some weird shit.

“Do not have fun with this.”

“Oh, it’s way too late for that, Cupcake.” Devon grinned and shook his head, the movement swishing his hair away from his face, showing the wink of the diamond stud in his ear. “Besides, the publisher doesn’t know exactly what look they want for this cover yet, so we have to take a bunch of shots. The only given is that you are the model on the cover. That’s the must. That’s the constant.” He rolled his eyes and stuck his index finger in the crack of his chin. My younger brother had a chin like that. We called it a “butt chin” growing up. It was a peculiar quirk Devon had, one I noticed in the three weeks since I’d accepted him as my next employer. “Anything else is up in the air.”

Up in the air... but I didn’t *do* up in the air. I was a professional bodyguard. A private detective as well, but mostly hired muscle for celebrities for periods of time when they needed me. I used to have a more respectable job, but well...life can get funny sometimes. Things change.

Now, I was a cover model for a romance book.

Actually, it was considerably more complicated than that, and it wasn’t like I did just anything for money, but it was part of the job. I just didn’t realize it would be the first part of the

job. And so *involved*. There was a photographer, two assistants, and the outfits. So many outfits. And the posing, and the body oil, and the *shirtlessness*.

“Don’t bitch about being shirtless. It’s what sells the books.” Devon had told me two hours ago when I balked at taking off my shirt. “Seriously, we’ve done the market research. Cartoon covers for romcom, artistic covers for fantasy and for contemporary romance? Just abs, baby. Just abs.” Then he’d clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and walked away with his phone glued to his ear, leaving me to the mercy of the photographer, much like he just did again.

As he walked away, I stared at the back of his dark, curly head. Don’t abandon me, I wanted to yell, but I didn’t get a chance. Matteo, the photographer, was bearing down on me from across the room, a crease between his eyes that I’d already come to recognize as irritation at me for not being quick enough to do... whatever it was he wanted me to do.

“Aye, Abel. You still haven’t changed your pants yet? Time is money, and you’re about to owe me interest if you don’t hurry and strip.” He held his hand out to me, and when I didn’t immediately move, he flapped his hand up and down, an impatient wrist movement that reminded me of a harried mother trying to get her child to obey. “Give.”

Oh shit, he wanted my pants.

It had been two hours already, and honestly, I just wanted to be done. So I hurriedly stripped out of my leather chaps, which was as fast as I could get out of a leather anything, handed them over, and clutched the jeans and flannel shirt to my chest.

I felt like a dumbass standing in my boxer briefs, but no one gave my ass a second glance. They were all here to work, and I was holding up the show. “Rapido Rapido, Abel.” Matteo wasn’t even looking at me anymore. Instead, he was looking down at the camera hanging from the heavy strap around his neck, twisting and pulling on the ring around the lens. Doing... I don’t know... photographer shit.

I slid my legs into the jeans and slipped the belt with the ostentatious buckle through the belt loops before zipping the fly and clasping the belt shut.

“Nope. Leave it open.”

I looked at Matteo with my mouth slightly open. Huh?

Matteo sighed and rolled his eyes. “Leave the belt open and your pants undone a little. Is—” he flapped his hands in the air some more — “Suggestive.”

I shook my head and flicked the button on my fly open again. Whatever.

“Can we do something about his nipples?” Matteo hollered over his shoulder at the assistants running around behind him.

Do something about my nipples? Like what?

“Close your mouth, Abel.”

The nerve of him telling me to close my mouth when he didn’t just spend a bunch of time during our last shooting spree, snarking at me, “*part your lips.*”

I must not have moved fast enough. “Close your mouth Abel, nobody wanna see your teeth. Be sexy.” And there he went again, clicking away and walking around me. I learned early on that Matteo didn’t want me just to pose. He wanted

movement from me and from him. It was more natural that way.

I guess.

“Be sexy.”

Like, on purpose?

“You like man or woman?”

Excuse me? I had a hard time understanding Matteo, partially because of his unknown accent, and because he talked as fast as a hummingbird flaps its wings. But I was pretty sure he just asked for my sexual preference.

“I like women, Matteo.”

The photographer rolled his eyes and grimaced. Did I offend him? Did I care?

“Relax, I’m not hitting on you. I’m just asking a question.”

“Okay, well, there’s your answer. Women. All day. All the time.”

“Uh, huh?”

Well, damn, if he wasn’t serving it back to me as fast as I could deal it out. I didn’t entirely hate a good banter session. I just didn’t know where he was going with his line of questioning.

“Ok, you a macho man. You love the ladies. Well, lemme tell you something.” Matteo never stopped moving, walking around me in circles, crouching, standing, leaning over to the side. “It’s gonna be a lot of ladies looking at these pictures. Not all of these gonna go on a book cover, but maybe one or two, yeah? We wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t the case. So you need to think of how you want people to see you.”

I really didn't care how anyone saw me, but I guess I understood his point. I had to be on the cover of a book to get close to a certain someone so I could do my job—which was protection. The author of the said book needed my services, even if she didn't know it yet. And that's the reason Devon hired me, and that was the ONLY reason I was in the studio now, shirtless, with my pants unbuttoned and my ostentatious belt undone. It was a means to an end, and I should probably start taking it seriously.

“You like soup?”

What the hell was Matteo talking about now?

“It's okay. Yeah, I guess I like soup.”

“Okay, well, you wanna be a can of condensed cream of mushroom? Or beef stew?”

The hell?

Matteo stayed clicking like a maniac while I tried not to spin in circles with him. I propped my leg on the rough wooden bench that was part of the props for our particular set and tipped my hat a little to cover my eyes while I thought. Was that a trick question? What the hell did soup have to do with our conversation?

Frustration ran through my veins, and I smashed my lips together to keep from spouting all the obscenities fighting to spew forth. It's a job, it's a job, it's a job, I repeated to myself. And I was under contract, so technically, if I walked off said job, I would forfeit a lot. Besides the NDA I had to sign, if I didn't comply with the terms of this employment contract, I could face legal action.

But soup?

“I think I get it.” A female voice chimed in from behind me, and I turned to see a little blonde waif of a woman standing next to Matteo. She wore black leggings and a huge maroon cardigan sweater. Seriously, it looked three sizes too big for her, and the sleeves dangled down past her wrists and partially covered her fingers. Her brown shoulder bag was stuffed so full and so heavy it dangled precariously over one shoulder like it was going to fall to the floor and take her sweater with it.

Her blonde hair hung in a loose ponytail over the other shoulder, and her face was taken over by huge round-frame glasses. She looked like she had just rolled out of bed, and a stiff breeze would pick her up and put her down in the next town.

“Think of it this way,” she continued like she wasn’t a stranger interrupting a conversation. And maybe she wasn’t to Matteo, but I sure didn’t know her from Eve. “Do you want to be a boring-ass can of mushroom soup, or do you want to be hot beef stew?” Because right now, you’re giving me mushroom soup vibes.”

“Lady, I don’t want to be eaten at all, and who are you to be commenting on someone’s looks? You’re giving me chicken broth vibes. You look like you could blow over with a soft wind..”

Shit. I winced as soon as it was out of my mouth. I couldn’t imagine a time when I was ever so disrespectful to a lady. But I was tired, irritated, and completely out of my element, and it was too late to take back the words.

Matteo looked like he’d been shot, his mouth hanging open and his hand over his heart like he was covering a wound. The girl next to him just blinked, her glasses making

her eyes look more owl-like than ever on her almost expressionless face. There was no excuse for my behavior. None.

“Aw, shit, ma’am. I’m sor—”

I didn’t get a chance to vocalize my apology. Devon came rushing up beside her, one arm on her shoulder protectively. He looked embarrassed. But for whom? Her or me? “Nads, I didn’t see you come in. You were supposed to text me when you were coming. I was going to get us lunch.”

“I don’t need it. I ate before I came over, and I couldn’t text because my phone died, and I forgot to pack my charger. Sorry, Dev.”

Devon didn’t say anything to me about lunch, so I assumed I wasn’t part of that invitation. However, something he said struck a chord of warning inside me. That name was familiar. Nads? What the hell kind of name was Nads? Was it a nickname? Where had I heard that before? And maybe she looked a little familiar, but I could swear I’d never met her before. I’d definitely remember someone named Nads.

A sick feeling bloomed in the pit of my stomach. Oh no. Oh *shit*.

Devon motioned to me. “This is the model the publisher picked for your next release. And since they are debuting him at the same time as the book launch, you’ll be touring together for the next three signings, so let’s get along, huh?” That last part was delivered to me with an absolutely feral look of disgust.

“Abel Mick, meet Nadia Wells, your author.”

CHAPTER TWO

NADIA

Well, that stung. I hadn't been trying to piss him off, but I could tell by how fast he reacted and fired off that insult; I said something I shouldn't have. Again. *Dammit, Nadia, you can be so stupid sometimes.* I fought to keep my face passive and expressionless. The man in front of me looked powerfully irritated, and I learned a long time ago to make my face as smooth as possible. Non-aggressive.

I had a habit of being rude and I did my best to mask it. I mean, it wasn't like I was trying to be insulting, but a lot of times my words could be misconstrued. And I usually didn't realize I'd said something upsetting until...well...people got upset. It's why I didn't interact with the public much and preferred writing over conversation. At least with writing there were edits. Upon edits. Upon edits.

You can't edit words once you say them. Once they're out there, they're out.

And even though Devon said this guy was the model the publisher picked for my new release; he was scary looking. Not that he wasn't handsome, in that rough and tumble way, because he was. But when he snapped at me with his eyebrows all creased together and his forearms bunched up with tension, he looked like he could do some real damage to someone if he

wanted to. I didn't mind that I didn't get to pick things like book cover models or cover design at all, really. I'd been an Indie author for a while and honestly, all that extra decision-making took time away from writing. As an Indie author, I was responsible for my writing, finding an editor, getting my own models and cover designer, and picking what worked. How was I supposed to do all that, market for myself, run my newsletter, and maintain a presence on social media, all while at the same time writing the next breakthrough novel?

I couldn't. Which was why I signed with Wesley Prints. They liked my writing, signed me on for a three-book contract, and promptly took half the work off my hands, allowing me to focus just on writing. So, if they wanted to hire Captain Hair Trigger to grace the cover of the book, then let them. They had more knowledge about this stuff than I did. It would probably make for a better working experience if we didn't continue insulting each other.

I said something he perceived as shitty, then he responded with something the whole room perceived as shitty. This was not a good impression for either of us, so I decided to be the bigger person and offered my hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Mick. I apologize for my comment. I was just explaining what I thought Matteo meant and inserted myself into your conversation uninvited." I had to grit my teeth to get it out, but I was proud of myself for the effort. "In my defense though, sometimes Matteo's analogies need interpretation."

Matteo laughed next to me and shrugged. "I say what I say. You hear what you hear."

I'd known Matteo for years. This guy had known him for a couple of hours. Matteo was an experience, and he took some getting used to. He was also not insulted by my explanation in

the least and leaned down to kiss my cheek before addressing Abel.

“I give you fifteen minutes, then we continue. Don’t bother to button your pants.” Then he turned and left the three of us standing there, me with my hand still out, arm extended, an olive branch of peace.

Thankfully, Abel relaxed his clenched jaw and took what I offered, enveloping my hand in his much larger one. “There’s no excuse for rudeness, and I apologize. Please don’t think badly of me. I’m just a grumpy, very hungry man standing in front of a bunch of strangers with my nipples out and my pants undone. It’s a new experience for me.”

He grinned, and let go of my hand, and of course, at the mention of his pants, I looked down. Who wouldn’t? Then I had to act like I wasn’t looking at his crotch, even though he was the one who brought it up. But when I dragged my gaze back up all I could see was washboard abs with a fine dusting of dark hair covering them. It looked like it would be soft under my fingers and my palms itched to feel it. *Get your life straight, Nadia*. I yanked my attention to Devon, who didn’t even try to hide his amusement.

Wait a minute, did Devon say three signings?

“Dev, I thought I only had two signings. I distinctly remember marking two signings on my digital calendar.” I pulled my phone out to check, suddenly remembering I’d let the battery die like an idiot. “Devon, when’s the third signing? I know there’s only two because I had to fight to keep them on my roster. Also, I’m on deadline. Ok, so I had plenty of time, but I was contractually obligated to provide a manuscript by a certain time period. Even though we were celebrating the release of a new book, I was already well underway on the

third in the series. The second one was still going through edits. Sometimes that's how things work in our industry. We do all the work before releasing the first book, so we can rapidly release all three in a series to increase sales.

“Devon, I need a charger for my phone.”

I wasn't sure if he was making fun of me, but I thought I saw him hide a smile behind his hand before he shook his head. “Nads, you know I'm an iPhone guy. I don't know anything about that android life.”

Oh yeah. “That's why it would never work between us, Devon. We're technologically incompatible. And please stop calling me Nads. It sounds like you're calling me *balls*.” I moved too fast, and my tote bag slipped off my shoulder, taking the sleeve of my sweater with it. “Ouch.” My ponytail swung to the side just in time to get tangled in the strap, and the whole damn mess almost took me to the floor.

“Miss Wells, you need a keeper.” Just before my tote bag hit the ground, a big hand grabbed the falling strap while the other hand slipped my sweater back up onto my shoulder. It was Able, and he looked amused. He waited until I slipped my arm out of the way before handing the bag back to me, which I thought was kind of nice. I tried not to think of how warm his hand felt on my shoulder when he patted my sweater back into place. Don't be weird, Nadia. Just a second ago, he was scary.

“Here, Miss Wells. I happen to be a card-carrying member of the Android family myself.” And he produced a charger from somewhere. I don't know. I wasn't paying attention to what he was doing while I was fumbling. I just accepted the charger like he'd done a magic trick on the street and turned around to find an outlet in one of the pillars behind me.

Score.

“Thank you so much. You’re a lifesaver. And as soon as I get some battery charge, I’m checking the dates of these signings, Devon. Did he tell you three signings? I swear I only scheduled two. Oh, and please, you don’t have to call me Miss Wells. That sounds like my grandma.”

The warm laugh that rumbled out of his throat directly violated the scary look that had been on his face only moments before, and I almost dropped my phone, looking to make sure it was the same guy.

“Should I call you Nads?”

Was this even the same guy? I mean seriously, the smile made him look like a completely different person. That smile...it was....

I needed to write it down.

I put my phone down and grabbed my tote bag. Rummaging inside, I dug for my notebook. No, not the red one with the crinkled spiral binding. No, not the emergency comp notebook. Why was that even in there? I needed to get rid of that when I got home. Instead of a notebook out flopped a little black cord with a piece of electrical tape wrapped around the end of it. I shoved it back into the bottom of the bag.

“Isn’t that a phone charging cord?” Abel asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, I forgot it was in there. It doesn’t work all that great, hence the tape on the end, but I keep it in there for emergencies.”

“If it’s an emergency, you probably need a cord that actually works though.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, I’m aware.”

Finally, I found my black notebook with the purple pen stuck in a loop on the side. I loved that purple pen. It wrote like sex on silk sheets. So smooth.

His smile was blinding, like the early morning sun through a car windshield. Too low for the visor to block, so you just had to let it burn your eyeballs until it decided not to shine anymore. Or you turned the corner.

I slammed the notebook shut with a satisfying slap and stuck it back into the still-crammed bag before turning to face the two men waiting for me. Devon just stared at me, a little smile playing on the corners of his lips, but Abel looked like he'd seen an alien.

“So?” he said, looking slightly annoyed.

I had no idea why he suddenly went from blinding sun to dark moon, but I'd clearly missed something.

“So...what?” I asked.

He had the audacity to huff. “What should I call you, ma'am?” The last word had an edge to it, and now I was the one getting irritated. “Well, *ma'am* isn't it, *sir*. Nadia is my name, and it works just fine.” I added my own spike to the last word. And I could tell by the predictable nostril flare he enjoyed being called Sir about as much as I like being called ma'am. “I wasn't ignoring you, but you smiled at me, and it made me feel some kind of way, and I had to write it down, okay? If I don't write it down, I forget, so when I think of things, I need to write them down. I was still listening, all right? I'm not sorry, and I can guarantee you I'm gonna do it again.”

My therapist had told me I should stop apologizing for things that I can't or won't change. And this was certainly

something I wasn't going to change about myself, so it was time to put the suggestion into practice. Sorry, not sorry.

Devon laughed out loud this time, and Abel shifted from one foot to the other like he didn't know whether to be irritated or not anymore. I think he kind of settled on quiet exasperation until he nodded over at my bag.

“What did you say about my smile?”

“That's private.” I mean, it wasn't a big deal. That book was full of scribbled midday epiphanies that might one day make it into a book if the mood struck me. Sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't. Sometimes my chicken scratch madness went to a notebook to die. But I still had to write it down.

“Yeah, but it's *my* smile. Just let me see. I'm curious.” He leaned towards me, trying to get closer to the bag, probably, but his nearness made my throat close, and I caught the distinct scent of warm body and baby oil.

I dug the notebook out and handed it to him with the page open and braced myself for the laughter. The ridicule.

Instead, he pursed his lips thoughtfully and said, “I can probably do better.”

“Well, they aren't all hallmark greetings, my guy. Sometimes there's gold, and sometimes it's pyrite. I just scribble the turds and polish as I go.” I grabbed the book and slammed it back in the bag, trying not to crinkle the edges but mostly failing because the bag was so full of stuff.

“No, I mean I can probably give you a better smile than sun in the windshield. I feel like we got off to a bad start, and I need to fix this.”

What now? And why did Devon look like he was enjoying himself so much?

“How about this?” The smile he gave me was absolutely wild. All teeth, no lips.

I couldn't stop the bark of laughter that escaped my mouth. “No. Stop. Think of the children.”

“Look, that's at least *flashlight in a haunted house wattage* right there, lady. Let me practice a little. I think we can come up with something together. Give me time.”

“I hate to interrupt this riveting dialogue. Just kidding, you're gross, stop it,” Devon interjected. “But you asked about a third signing. You're going to Lake Conroe, Texas, for the third signing.”

I looked up at Devon, puzzled. “What's in Texas? I didn't have that on my list.”

Devon rolled his eyes. “Duh, Nads. Wesley Prints is sending you to Texas. For MMM.”

My eyes widened and I gasped. “No shit? Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem? I thought they were full. They have a waiting list as long as my arm. As long as his arm.” I gestured to Abel.

“What's Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem?” He asked slowly, like he was afraid he might get made fun of for not knowing the answer.

Devon responded before I could. “It's a signing for people who write in those three genres. MC, or motorcycle club romance, mobsters is self-explanatory, and mayhem.” I nodded in agreement.

“Ok, but what's mayhem?”

I looked at Able like he had grown a second head.
“Mayhem. You know...craziness. Pew pew pew. Punch, stab.
Save the girl and the day.”

Devon snorted, but Abel just stared.

“Pew pew?”

I nodded, dead serious. “So much pew pew.”

“Sounds awesome. I can’t wait.”

CHAPTER THREE

ABEL

“Devon, I made an ass out of myself, and it’s your fault.” After the social gaff I’d made with Nadia, I made Devon take me out for food. She didn’t want to eat because she had writing to do since she was on deadline. But I hadn’t had anything before my shoot for twelve hours, *to make my abs pop as much as possible*, and I needed sustenance.

“How is it my fault?” Devon stared at me over the table, eyeing my full plate of corned beef hash and eggs with a side of the crispiest hash browns I’d ever tasted. I was glad we stopped at a place that served breakfast all day, even if it was a pretentious gastropub with words like “flake” and “essence of grapefruit” on the menu. He sliced into his plain chicken breast and speared a piece of asparagus at the same time. Both food items looked desperate for some seasoning. “I sent you all the info three weeks ago. It isn’t my fault you didn’t do your homework.”

And he had the gall to look disappointed in me as he chewed and swallowed. No, it had to be the taste of that bland-ass lunch that made him look so constipated. I sliced into a sunny egg and watched the golden yolk ooze over the meat and potatoes with glee. *That’s delicious, right there.*

“I read every bit of the info you sent me, Devon. I also saw the pictures of Nadia Wells you sent, and none of them looked anything like the teenage librarian I just met. I feel like you set me up.”

“You know, if you want to make it up to her, she likes candy. Sour candy is her favorite. Although, I’m not sure that will be enough to make up for insulting her appearance before you even say hello. And I didn’t set you up. The photos were her author headshots, and while I admit they are a little more glamorous than normal, that really is Nadia. Even the most beautiful women can’t be super-hot all the time. Maybe you shouldn’t objectify her. And she isn’t a teenager. She’s thirty-three years old. Which you would know if you read the information I sent you.” Devon stabbed another asparagus spear and shoved it into his mouth aggressively, causing the divot in his chin to jump around while he chewed.

Mocking me.

Ok, that was enough.

“I’m getting the distinct feeling you don’t like me, Devon. And that’s okay if you don’t. I don’t give a shit as long as I can do the job I was hired for and get paid. But what I don’t understand, given your thinly veiled bitchy attitude, is why you hired me in the first place if you think I’m so incompetent. We have a contract, man. What’s your deal?”

It was the word contract that had Devon setting his fork down with a slight clang. He sighed and patted his mouth with a napkin. I don’t know what he was wiping away, there wasn’t even any sauce on his food to dribble, but I guess manners are manners.

I looked down at my shirt and checked to make sure I hadn’t dribbled anything on myself. No. Okay.

“I don’t particularly like or dislike you, Abel. And as far as the contract goes, yes, I hired you, but at the request of the publisher. I needed to find someone to do this job and also look the part. That left a pretty narrow pool of contestants, if you know what I mean.”

What the hell was he talking about? Look the part.

Oh, wait, my looks. I had to look like a book cover model. Well, shit, who was being objectified now?

“Do you know how exhausting it is to keep up with Nadia? When she is in writing mode, it’s all-consuming. She doesn’t think about anything else besides her characters. She sees nothing and hears nothing besides the dialogue she’s writing. You know what she did with you and the notebook today? That is one hundred percent a daily occurrence for her. That bag is shoved full of notebooks and pens. She writes things down constantly. She has different notebooks and different pen colors for different moods. It’s crazy. And when she’s off in la la land, someone else has to be paying attention to everything else.”

I read the info he’d sent me, but it didn’t mention anything about her quirky attitude or habits. Just that her writer’s block was easily triggered, and they couldn’t really afford a delay with her current project. Devon looked like he had more to say, so I just scooped more food into my mouth and chewed in silence, letting him continue.

“When she was an indie author, she could operate on her own timeline. She didn’t have to answer to a publisher, and any deadline she had was set by herself, so there wasn’t any penalty for not meeting it. But since she got picked up by a major publishing company, she has to follow their rules and timelines.”

“Is it really that bad?” From what I’d seen and read, Nadia Wells wrote pretty quickly and had a loyal and rapidly growing following.

Devin set his fork down for the last time and pushed his plate to the side. “It’s unpredictable, is what it is. She’s always gotten fan mail. It used to go to her PO box, but she never checked it, so we have everything forwarded to the publisher. It used to be just a random card here and there, but now that her last book hit the best-seller list, it’s really picked up. People send homemade gifts based on her books and characters. Some people buy Nadia things, and some send letters and cards telling her how much they love her and her stories.”

“That sounds really nice.” Maybe a lot to deal with, but nice.

“Yeah, if it was just that. But it isn’t.” Devon ran his hand through his curly mane, and I saw some of his bravado slip a little. The man looked exhausted. “I sent you a couple examples of what she gets. The last book was really popular, but it was also really different from what she usually writes. A romance novel, by definition, has an HEA.”

“What the hell’s an HEA?”

Devin looked at me like I was an idiot, then, as if he remembered that I wasn’t from this industry, he explained.

“An HEA is a happily ever after. That means no matter what happens in the book, the main characters end up together. No matter what happens.”

“Okay, so what happened in her last book? Wasn’t it super popular and the whole reason the publisher asked her to sign

with them? They are laying down a lot of money and expectations if people are all pissed off about it.”

“Oh, it’s an amazing book. A real emotional powerhouse, and yes it shot straight up in the rankings and stayed there for a long time. Hence the massive surge in popularity. But she also committed the cardinal sin when it comes to writing a romance. She offed her main character. She killed the female lead in her book, and while it fit the story, her die-hard fans, who have followed her career from the get-go and felt betrayed. So while she’s gaining a whole new and interested reader base, her existing fan base is *pissed*.”

“How pissed can they get?”

Devon looked me straight in the eyes and deadpanned. “Comic book fanboys when the movie based on their favorite comic comes out.”

“Oh shit. That’s some real wild stuff right there. Those folks get *angry*, angry.”

“We got a few emotional letters, mostly from heartbroken readers that couldn’t figure out why she’d changed her writing style from what they were used to reading. Some are actually quite hostile without being threatening. Most of those were signed though, so they weren’t cause for concern. I mean, people are entitled to their own opinion, and if they’re willing to put their name to their words, chances are they aren’t planning anything nefarious. But then we started getting other letters.” Devon pulled a manilla folder from the seat next to him and slid it across the table at me. He waited expectantly while I fiddled with the little metal tabs that held it closed. I pulled out a stack of probably ten letters, all typed on the same plain white paper and the same font style.

The Pain of Loving You was a disgusting disappointment. You should be ashamed of yourself for writing such a ridiculous ending. How can you call it a romance if the main character dies at the end? You're an idiot. You should just die like Everly did.

The Pain of Loving You was her last novel. At least I knew that much. While the letter was a bit much, it didn't actually constitute a *threat* per se. I stuck the page on the back of the pile and went to the next. It said pretty much the same thing with just a couple of different descriptors. But closer to the end of the pile, the tone changed. I stopped and stared at a piece of paper that had obviously been crumpled, likely in rage, before it was mailed. I thought that because of the absolute vitriol of the words on the page.

You stupid whore. You really screwed up. You think you can mess with your loyal readers and we're just going to keep buying your books like mindless puppets while you just throw words on a page and call it a day and collect a paycheck? I want my money back for every book I've bought from you. I hope you die broke.

"Damn, that escalated quickly." I couldn't even imagine writing something like that to someone, much less someone I had never met.

"You haven't seen the worst one yet." Devon tapped the last page with one finger from across the table. His eyes looked pinched and tired.

I pulled the last page forward. This one was handwritten and angry, with letters that slanted backwards and forwards. It was written in pen with a heavy hand that caused indentations in the paper. It's like the writer of the letter was so pissed they couldn't decide on whether to print the words or write in

cursive, and the words sloped down the unlined paper like it was twisted sideways. There were a few sentences just calling her names, but what really stuck out to me were two sentences.

I can't wait to see you in Texas. I hope you get exactly what's coming to you.

“Holy shit.” I breathed heavily as my eyes scanned the page. “That’s a threat.”

“Not according to the cops, it isn’t. Not yet anyway.”

“Why are you keeping this a secret from her? This is something she really should know about, don’t you think?” I handed the papers and the envelope back to Devon, and discarded them like they were dirty rags. Creepy weirdos.

“So she can get freaked out and completely stop writing? No, thank you. She hasn’t even seen these because she doesn’t collect her mail anymore. And she’s fine with that. Part of the reason she went with a publisher and left the indie scene to begin with was that she couldn’t handle all the extra stuff that went into publishing and took away from her writing. She sees a letter like that and she will freak the fuck out. The words will dry up and she will be in breach of contract. It’s a losing situation.”

“Fuck the contract, holy shit, this is her safety you’re messing with.”

“What the hell do you think you’re here for? To be pretty? We hired you to keep her safe while she does the appearances she is contractually obligated to do, and finishes the other two books she is contractually obligated to write. In the time frame pre-negotiated so no one loses out on any money. The publisher or Nadia.”

“Or you, either?” I eyed him from across the table. I didn’t like Devon’s attitude.

“Don’t make this about me, Abel. There is more at stake here than my paycheck. It isn’t that impressive, anyway. Listen, Nadia is my friend. I’ve known her since before she was my client so don’t give me a hard time for this. Keeping her in the dark on this is what’s best for her, trust me. Otherwise, I would tell her.”

Our server came over just then to ask us if we needed anything else and Devon shut his mouth with a snap. A public place probably wasn’t the best location to talk about such sensitive information. He shook his head and asked her for the bill, then waved my hand off when I reached for my wallet. Business expense? Probably. Okay, if he wanted to buy me lunch, I’d let him.

CHAPTER FOUR

NADIA

Abel was surprisingly helpful. Not surprisingly, he could be helpful, but he was willing to do whatever I needed. I was so used to handling everything myself that I wasn't used to having an actual body next to me, asking to do the heavy lifting. It took me a minute to figure out I had to delegate, which wasn't one of my strong points to begin with.

“At least let me get the boxes out of the car for you.” He'd scared the hell out of me when his hotel room door opened as soon as I stepped into the hall. He didn't even raise his eyebrows at my pajama pants, sneakers, and ratty cardigan. Of course, he'd pretty much only seen me dressed down since we met, so I guess there wasn't anything to be surprised about.

Freshly showered and with his curly hair slicked back against his head, I was reminded of how dangerous and scary he'd seemed when I first met him. The tight black button-down with the sleeves rolled up the forearms did nothing to stop the thump in my chest, either.

“I don't want you to get all dirty lugging my stuff around, Abel. It's why I always do set up in my jammies and get ready afterwards. So why don't you go have breakfast or something, and I'll meet you down for the author photo?”

He ignored me and followed me silently out to the parking lot, where he waited until I clicked the auto lock on the hatch of my Kona, and expertly unpacked the puzzle of my trunk. Complete with layering my wagon with all the boxes in order of heavy on bottom, light on top. Then he grabbed the three giant bags with stretched out handles and slipped them all over one shoulder, pulling the wagon with his free arm, leaving me to close the hatch and follow behind him with my mouth open.

“I bet you’re the kind of guy who gets all the groceries in one trip, even if you have to carry a bag with your butt cheeks, aren’t you?”

“How do you know I don’t carry all the bags with my butt cheeks, anyway?”

He didn’t even turn around when he said it, which was good, because I caught myself staring at said rear end against my will. The jeans he wore weren’t tight, at least not in the way that Devon found fashionable, but they sure as hell didn’t leave much to the imagination, either.

Do not think he’s sexy. You’re above that. He’s a coworker. A coworker. We don’t lust after coworkers.

He’d even unloaded my boxes and silently let me put everything on the table myself, just waiting to see if I needed him for anything else before he excused himself. “Do you mind if I see if anyone else needs help unloading since you’re pretty much done?”

I blinked at him, not registering what he’d said for a minute. “Why do you need my permission for that?”

He looked puzzled. “You’re my author, Nadia. My time is yours while we’re at this event. I’m not just going to leave you if you need or want me here.”

Oooh. Need, no. Want? Unfortunately for my dusty libido, yeah.

“Hey. If you want to help someone else unload, that’s awesome. A lot of us do this on our own, and it gets really exhausting. So if you want to offer those muscles around the room, I say go for it. Make some friends. Hell, you might get some future work out of it. You attract more flies with honey than vinegar. At least that’s what my mom always told me.”

He laughed and walked away. I saw him walk up to another author I’d met a few times before but couldn’t remember her name. He asked her something, and I could see the relief on her face when she smiled and walked toward the parking lot. I should have offered to let them borrow my collapsible wagon, but I didn’t think of it fast enough, and they were already out of the ballroom, so I folded it up and shoved it under the table.

“Girl, you look like a wreck first thing in the morning, as always. Say cheese.” The snap of the camera flash burst behind me, and I just knew someone had taken a picture of my ass when I bent over to slide my wagon under the table.

Rebecca, you ass.

“Dammit Becca, if that ends up on the signing social media page, I will write you in a book and give you crabs.” It wasn’t the first time she’d taken a picture of me in an unflattering position, and it wasn’t the first time I’d threatened her with a fictional STD. I whirled around to catch the gorgeous photographer with her platinum hair in victory rolls and tight leather pants grinning at me like a lunatic.

“Don’t worry, Nadia, this one’s for my private collection.” Then she blew me a kiss that let me know she was kidding. Probably. You never could tell with Becca, but we had a pretty

good relationship over the years. Even if it was strictly signing-related. So I chose to think she meant no harm, and my butt wouldn't end up as the event page social media banner later.

“Tell me everything about the new guy. Give me all the deets.” Becca sat her butt on the edge of my table, seemingly oblivious to the fact I was still arranging my books and swag on it, and crossed her ankles. The leather of her pants and her ankle boots squeaked with the motion.

“What do you want to know?” I didn't know a lot about him myself. We didn't get a bunch of time to talk between when we met at the shoot and this signing.

“Name, age, location, and is he single?” Her red lips enunciated every word as she ticked everything off on the fingers of her hand, her camera hanging from the strap around her neck.

She wouldn't leave me alone until I gave her what she wanted, and I still needed to finish setting up my table. Her ass was right where my custom bookmarks were supposed to go. So I told her.

“Name is Abel, which you should know since it's on the signing info, along with the author names and all the other cover models they brought. He's thirty-five years old and I'm pretty sure he lives in Michigan. Not sure where though. As far as if he's single or not, I don't know. It hasn't come up and I'm not going to ask. Also, what does it matter if he's single or not? You aren't. Where's your wife?” I looked around for Greta, but I didn't see the silver-haired photography assistant anywhere. It didn't matter though, they always worked together. I knew she was around somewhere.

“You’re no fun.” Rebecca winked as she scooted off the table and smoothed the cloth down. I appreciated the gesture, even though she wrinkled it in another place, and I would have to fix it, anyway. “And it’s not for me, obviously. It’s for everyone who’s going to ask me later, and you know they will.”

I could hear her leather-clad thighs swish swishing as she walked away, probably to find Greta and give her the information. I loved the leather look, but I didn’t know how anyone could wear it for any amount of time. It looked so restricting and the sound...ugh. I wouldn’t be able to handle it. But we all dressed up in our own way for signings. Everyone had an image to uphold.

Speaking of getting dressed, I had about an hour and a half before the author photo to get my life straight, and my ass out of my pajamas. I didn’t want any readers to see me looking like a bridge troll. Of course, I hadn’t had anyone around to do the lifting for me before either, so not only was I done with set-up early, I didn’t exactly have a reason for looking so gross.

I glanced at the ballroom doors just as Abel returned, pushing a tall hotel cart loaded with boxes, followed by a different author than he’d left with. Her hair hanging in her face and sweat visibly running down her neck. I felt for her. That was usually me. At a glance, I could tell Abel probably helped the first person, then rescued this next one in the parking lot while she was struggling with her load.

What a stand-up guy. We had a rocky introduction, but he wasn’t showing me douchebag vibes right now at all. He looked at me as he entered the room, and the quick flash of

teeth had my heart racing for reasons I didn't want to think about at that moment. *Is he single?*

That's none of my business.

He looked over his shoulder and said to me, "Hey, Ma'am. I'm just finishing up. Are you done? Want to grab some breakfast?" The author behind him snorted and asked something I couldn't quite hear. He let go of the cart and let her grab it. As she started walking away from him, pushing her stack towards the back corner of the room, I heard him reply. "No, she loves it when I call her that. Trust me." The feminine laugh going towards the back of the room led me to think she didn't believe him. It looked like Abel was just making friends all over the place. Which was good for him. You never knew who your next connection could be, your next author, your next cover.

"I'm glad you're here, actually," I told him as I finished laying out the last of the swag, and shoved the empty containers under the table, on top of the folded wagon. I had to keep them under there because if I kept them behind the table, I was just going to trip all over them all day and it made the back of the table look like a garage sale. I hated it. "I need to go back upstairs and get ready, so I wanted to let you know in case you came back and I wasn't here."

"You could have texted me, you know."

I could have if I hadn't left my phone upstairs in my hotel room.

"You don't have your phone with you right now, do you?" Abel eyed me suspiciously.

I thought for a second before I responded. "It's in this building."

“Woman. Please help me help you.” Abel rubbed his hand over his face. What the hell was he so stressed out about? All he had to do was sit next to me all day, look handsome, and be nice to people. I had a lot of stuff to remember. Dang. He ran the same hand through the curls he’d slicked back and two of them sprang out around his forehead. I thought about telling him he messed up his hair, but then decided against it. He’d figure it out. And my therapist told me I don’t need to point everything out, I notice. Some people take it as nitpicking, even if I don’t mean it that way.

Let those springs spring if they want to. I thought to myself.

“I have to go get a shower and get dressed so unfortunately, I can’t get breakfast with you—but this hotel has an amazing buffet that comes with the room, so you should go decimate it. Give ‘er hell.”

He flashed me those teeth again, and I tried to keep my brain from firing on all cylinders so I wouldn’t get distracted by it.

“When are you going to eat?” He folded his arms across his chest. I definitely didn’t notice how the rolled-up cuffs of his shirt strained against his forearms with the motion.

“I have a protein shake in the fridge in my room. It’s my normal breakfast. I don’t like anything heavy on my stomach for signing days. It helps with my nerves.”

“That sounds awful, but if that’s what you want to do, it’s fine. I’ll walk you up.” Abel turned to leave the room but when I didn’t follow him, he stopped and turned around again. “What are you waiting for?”

“I can walk up to the room by myself. I don’t need you to escort me.” Was he really thinking he had to stay with me every second? “It doesn’t even make sense. You’re going to breakfast, which is literally directly to the left of these doors and down a hallway. I’m going all the way back up to the fourth floor.”

“First of all, you don’t need to announce to the room what floor your room is on. Privacy Ma’am.” I looked around the room at the handful of authors and assistants busy setting up for the day. Not a single one of them paid us any attention. “Second of all, let’s go. You taking anything back upstairs with you?”

I looked at the tote bag with my purse and my room key on one of the chairs behind my table, and he grabbed it and slung it over his shoulder without giving me time to argue. He turned around again and headed for the double doors leading out to the first floor of the hotel.

“Let’s go.”

I had no choice but to follow.

CHAPTER FIVE

ABEL

I didn't destroy the buffet, as Nadia so delicately put it, but I did put a hurt on the hash browns and bacon laid out in the silver trays. I got back downstairs after making sure Nadia was safe in her room with the door locked, just in time for them to refill the bacon, and I loaded up my plate.

It was crispy, just how I liked it. For me, if the bacon doesn't stand up straight in your hand while you're holding it, it isn't done enough.

I told her I'd meet her up at her room right before the author photo—which was an hour and a half away at the time. But since she had an attitude about me escorting her back to her room in the first place, something told me she wasn't going to wait for me to pick her up, so I waited an hour, then I hit the elevator to go back upstairs to my room. I'd hear her if she tried to leave without me since our rooms were right next door to each other and the walls were about as thick as a wet tissue.

I'll be damned if that woman didn't walk out of the elevator just as I was approaching.

You little brat.

That thought was immediately squashed by all the blood in my body rushing straight to my cock. *Holy shit, she did a*

reverse Uno.

I wouldn't have recognized her if I hadn't already seen her author headshots in the dossier Devon had given me originally. But this was Nadia, all right. With her blonde hair brushed out glossy and long down her back. It had a little wave to it, but not a lot, so I couldn't tell if she actually curled it that way on purpose, or if it was her natural texture.

I wanted to touch it.

She wore a simple black wraparound dress that hugged her curves magnificently, making me choke and swallow on the very shitty thing I'd said to her when we first met about her being too skinny. Or missing meals. Or whatever the hell I said, it was wrong, wrong. I bet when she walked; she heard drumbeats. I know I heard them with each step she took towards me.

And what the hell were those shoes? Those black stilettos with the pointed toes and the ankle straps? Those were straight FMP's. Fuck me pumps. She was almost as tall as me with those shoes. And as she walked closer to me, her steps never faltering, despite the sky-high heels she was wearing. I caught a whiff of her perfume. *If you get an erection in this elevator vestibule, I'm never going to forgive you.* I spoke those words with my mind directly to my dick.

Nadia didn't even stop as she breezed right past me, her heels clacking like little exclamations against the tile of the hotel floor. I could see the triumph in her eyes as she made it from the room to downstairs without me coming to get her. She thought she won something.

"Close your mouth, Mr. Mick." She kept on walking.

This brat right here...

The author photo was pretty uneventful. They made me and the other models in attendance sit on the floor in front of everyone else while the authors were squeezed together en masse in the lobby. The photographer was a loud blonde with pinup hair, leather pants, and a top that showed an enormous amount of cleavage. Her assistant was opposite her in every way. Short, spiky silver hair, green carpenter pants, and well-loved Doc Martens.

The photographer stood on a chair while her assistant stood next to her, filming the entire exchange on her phone. Somehow, with everyone squeezed together like sardines she got a photo, or twenty, and we were able to go back into the ballroom about five minutes before the signing started.

We sat at the table for a good half hour before I dared to look at the time on my phone and ask the obvious question.

“Wasn’t the signing supposed to start at eleven?”

Big sigh from Nadia. “Yes.”

I tapped my fingers on the table and thought about my next words. “You’re a pretty popular author, though, right?”

Nadia smiled at the author across the aisle and made eye contact with her by accident. She didn’t turn her head to me at all when she replied, “That’s pretty new, to be honest. I have a very popular book. That is probably only popular because it has the backing of a big publishing house. Most of my backlist doesn’t get that much read-through, but that isn’t what you want to know anyway, is it?”

“Nadia, where are the people? I don’t see any readers here. I only see other authors and the people they brought with them. I don’t even see the event coordinators. Who’s running the show today?”

“Oh, the event coordinator is hung over in her hotel room right now. That’s where she’s at.” The photographer from earlier, who had been eavesdropping behind us, shoved her head between our chairs and butted into the conversation.

“Hi, Becca. This is Abel. Say hi to Becca, Abel.” Nadia waved her hand vaguely next to her face. It was the best she could do, considering Becca was two inches away from her.

“Hi, Becca.” The woman with the enormous boobs smiled widely when she noticed the effort I made to keep my eyes above the equator. She bounced a little for effect. I didn’t so much as flinch.

Not today, lady. She was the type that got off on making people uncomfortable, I could tell.

“Are you telling me the person running the event is, in fact, not running the event at all?” So unprofessional.

“Some events are like that. You don’t know when they’re going to happen, and if you take a chance on a new event or one you’ve never heard of before, you run the risk of a total bust. This one is a total bust.”

“I haven’t seen a single reader, Becca. All I’ve seen are other authors going from table to table, making conversation. No one has stopped here, though.” I looked around to see Nadia was right. Some of the authors had left their tables and were conversing around the room, but everyone avoided our table, for some reason.

“I don’t know if you’re familiar with the gossip, but Nadia isn’t on the favorite people list right now in this industry.”

Nadia groaned. “I’m sure Devon filled him in already.” He did, but I wasn’t going to tell Nadia that.

“Devon is part of the reason you got that reputation in the first place, my beauty.” Becca looked over at me and winked. “She used to slum down here with us in the indie scene. Then she went and got picked up by a big trad pub house and got a public relations specialist. How bougie.”

“I’m not bougie, Becca.” I agreed with Nadia. The way she was dressed today aside, I’d seen the real her. Bougie—she was not.

“I didn’t say I agreed, babe. I’m just saying that was the word for a while. Then you canceled signings you were scheduled to be at. The rumor mill went wild. Then your last book had the ending that it had...” Becca trailed off and pursed her lips like maybe she’d said too much.

Nadia slapped her hand on the table. Not hard enough to get anyone else’s attention, but hard enough to make Becca jump a little. I definitely didn’t react to her bosom about to jump right out of her top when she did.

“I am so tired of people thinking I should apologize for the ending of that book. The title of the book was “The Pain of Loving You.” There is literal pain in the title. Just because I normally write HEA’s doesn’t mean they are all going to have one. That’s a preconceived notion. Can you believe someone wanted me to have a trigger warning on it? Like... a trigger warning saying the main character died. It’s literally part of the storyline. It’s not a trigger warning. That’s a damn spoiler.”

I’d only heard Devon talk about the drama, so I was interested to hear Nadia’s views on the whole thing, but I still couldn’t wrap my head around her getting such nasty fan mail.

“Do readers really get that upset about things like that?” It was an innocent question, I swear.

Both heads swiveled to me, and two sets of eyes widened in shock.

Becca snarled down at her hands. “Boy, you have no idea. Readers are the most amazing group of people you will ever meet. When they love you, they really love you. But if you do something they don’t like, they can form a posse and tear you down in a second. You should have seen the drama when I started adding MM and FF shots to my portfolio. You’d think I started a personal crusade against the sanctity of traditional marriage.”

“FF is female, female romance and MM is male, male.” Nadia offered the information, and I was glad I didn’t have to ask and make myself look stupid. That kind of thing didn’t matter to me, and I didn’t see why it should be that big of a deal to anyone else either. It’s photography. If you don’t like it, don’t look at it.

I got doxxed on social media, which led to me and my wife being outed when we kept that information private. I normally keep my personal life to myself in this industry, and people didn’t know my assistant, Greta, was my wife. But people got mad at the photography I added to my website and literally stalked me until all that information was made public. I was made to be ashamed of something I had never been ashamed of before. And it might not seem a big deal now, but outing someone’s sexuality when they aren’t comfortable, or ready, or consenting is just a horrible thing to go through.

“I can’t even imagine.” And I couldn’t. I literally couldn’t fathom such a thing.

“Well, that was three years ago, and things calmed down for me after a while. I didn’t really lose any business over it, just a lot of sleep. I still get called to photograph book signing

events aside from cover shoots, so people must still like what I'm doing. Shame this event is such a dud, though. I don't think I saw any advertising for it."

"I'm surprised people aren't here to see Nadia. Even if a bunch of authors talk about her behind their hands, her readership has blown up recently. You'd think people would be clamoring to get in here and see her."

"That's an entirely new thing, actually. And my fault." Becca stood up and moved to the other side of the table, so she wasn't in between us anymore. She leaned sideways and scooted her butt right on the table, wrinkling the table cover with Nadia's name on it, and sending bookmarks sliding to the side. Nadia didn't say anything to her, but I could almost see her holding back from moving the bookmarks back where they belonged. She was quirky like that. "When I signed with Wesley Prints, they made me back out of all my previous signings because they were indie and not formally sanctioned by the house. So I literally had to cancel all appearances I had already booked, which pissed off a lot of people. I got removed from all banners and event coordinators were pretty po'd about it."

"So, what are we doing at this one? Your publisher isn't mentioned anywhere, and Devon isn't here. Isn't he supposed to be at all your appearances, too?"

"Yeah, so I was able to keep this one at the last minute. Anna had already taken me off the signing roster because I canceled, but I told her like two weeks ago I would still come, so she didn't really have time to update anything."

"How did you get this one?" And why would she want to be here? The place was graveyard quiet. I think I saw four or five people walk in the door since we'd been having this

conversation. It was wild. Not that I cared. I was getting paid either way, but I couldn't imagine backing out of a signing and then fighting to get back into one that was such a clear dud.

“It was only a couple of hours away from where I live, so it was stupid for me to cancel. Also, I was irritated with Devon for making me pull out of everything. The house didn't have to be associated with it, and I'm not selling any copies of my latest book, so technically, it's just another indie signing for me. There's no publisher representation here at all. I kind of threw a fit until they let me come.”

“You. Threw a fit.” It wasn't a question, because I literally couldn't believe it. Nadia seemed like she traveled through life in the most unaffected, noncommittal way possible. I couldn't see her getting riled up about anything, much less throwing a fit about a shitty signing.

“Yeah. I worked really hard to build my brand and my reputation with my readers. I hated that people were mad at me for *The Pain of Loving You*. I wouldn't go back and do anything to change the book, but I never wanted to disappoint my readers. And canceling appearances is a really crappy thing to do unless you can't help it. Some of these signings people save up all year for and spend their vacation traveling to see their favorite author.” She must have seen the look on my face, because a little line appeared between her eyes. My mother always called that her angry line. “Well, some signings, anyway. This was just the one I was allowed to keep. Probably because there wasn't much of an investment for the publisher, so it didn't really matter.”

“Okay.” I sounded like I got it, but maybe I didn't, really. It sounded kind of dumb to me, but it was the most passionate I'd seen her get about anything in the brief time I'd known her,

so I chose to go along with it. Nadia Wells cared about her readers and her reputation in the industry.

I could respect that.

Our conversation was interrupted by a tired woman pushing a cart loaded with Styrofoam containers. Her skin had a green tinge to it and her long brown hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. She had the look of a woman who wanted to be anywhere else but here, doing anything else but pushing that cart.

“Well, hello, Miss Anna, welcome to the party. Nice of you to crawl out from under your buzz to hang out with the plebes.” Becca’s voice dripped honey and venom all at the same time. I couldn’t tell if it was good-natured ribbing or a caustic burn.

“I’m so sorry, you guys. This whole thing is a dumpster fire. We sold fifty tickets, but only ten ticket holders have walked through the door. I cried the blues into a tequila bottle last night. I swear I died at some point and my body just got up and kept moving on its own. I feel like hell. Here’s your lunch.”

She didn’t even ask us what we wanted, just plopped two containers on the table and handed one to Becca, and plodded on, pushing the cart until she stopped at the next table. I swear she was sweating raw agave. I hope no one lit a cigarette by her until she had time to shower.

Becca opened her container, stuck her tongue out, and made a face before scooting off the table and leaving us sitting there. I thought I heard her murmur, “That bitch needs an exorcism” She could have been talking about Anna or the food. Either way, she was right. I opened my foam container

and inside was a soggy chicken sandwich, a pickle spear, a bag of chips, and a chocolate chip cookie.

It was nice enough for the event coordinator to provide us with lunch, but no way I was eating that. I looked over to Nadia and saw she set hers on the table, out of sight behind her small table sign. She looked at my container and then looked at me. Then she looked at the container again.

“Are you going to eat your cookie?”

CHAPTER SIX

NADIA

The first wave of cramping came at about six pm. I was supposed to take Abel to dinner. We were supposed to meet Rebecca and Greta at the steakhouse in the lobby at seven. Abel helped me pack up the table, load up the Kona, and walked me upstairs to my room, much to my irritation. I couldn't argue with him about it since he was going to his room, which was right next door. I thought I would get a quick nap in before we went out to eat, and I would wake up refreshed and hungry since I'd only had my protein shake and two cookies since waking up that morning.

I was looking forward to a fat steak with thick-cut fries and a pile of roasted asparagus.

Instead, I was doubled over in pain, wondering whether to run for the toilet or the garbage can. I barely had time to process the sharp pains in my midsection before the vomiting began.

Oh, God, please help me. After a half hour of intense abdominal pain and vomiting of nothing but fluid, I knew I wasn't making it to dinner. I'd be lucky to make it out of the bathroom. I crawled across the carpeted floor on my hands and knees, my hair hanging in strings in my face until I made it to the bed where I'd left my phone. It felt like a pilgrimage just

to get over there, but I certainly managed to sprint back to the bathroom with my phone in my hand when the urge to purge rose again. I'd have given my entire soul for a bottle of cold water.

With shaky fingers, I managed to text a message to Abel.

Super sick. So sorry. Can't make it to dinner, go ahead and go without me.

I thought he'd text back but didn't. I'd curled up on the bathroom floor, my phone clenched in my hand, and my forehead pressed against the cold tile. I tried to ignore the fact that it was a hotel room bathroom and only focused on the temperature against my heated skin

"It's clean enough," I whispered to myself, not believing a damn word.

I was almost close to falling asleep on the floor when a knock sounded on the hotel room door.

"Nadia, are you okay?" Oh, Abel, can you just use the phone like a normal person?

I tried to answer, but my weak "*Yes, I'm fine*" didn't even make it past the open bathroom door. And I wasn't fine, anyway. Through blurred vision, I typed out a message.

I'm throwing up, Abel. Just leave me be. That's why I texted you instead of calling or answering the door.

"Open the door, Nadia. Let me help you. I'm worried."

Let him help me what? Watch me puke? Horrified, I swallowed a wave of nausea just to type out another message.

Please leave me alone. I'm so sick. I just want to die. I'm so gross.

The numbnuts still didn't text back but hollered through the locked hotel door.

“Oh, I bet you're gross, but I'm still gonna need you to open the door. I've been sick, too. I've *seen* sick. But you know what's really gross? You ever get up in the middle of the night to pee, and step in fresh, wet cat puke? I got two cats, Nadia. Think about that. Barforama.”

What the hell was he talking about?

I smashed my phone, my fingers moving at the speed of anger.

Leave me alone, or I'm going to get mad.

“I'm afraid I can't do that, Nadia. Not if I know you're sick. Devon would have my ass. So you can either open the door and let me in to help you, or I can go downstairs and tell the clerk we have a medical emergency and I can't get into your room. What do you want to do?”

I silently prayed he would just turn around and walk away, but no such luck.

“What's taking so long, Nadia? Is it coming out both ends? Are you poo—”

Using all the remaining strength in my body, I lurched towards the door and swung it open, grabbed the hulking lunatic by the forearm, and yanked him into the room, letting the heavy hotel door slam shut behind him.

I stood there, swallowing down another wave of nausea and trying to muster the energy to tell him to fuck all the way off when he turned white as a sheet and the cocky half smile slipped right off his face. There was something in his hands, but I didn't get a chance to look at it before he moved both arms behind his back and dipped his face close to mine.

“Holy hell, you really are sick.”

“No shit, you dick waver. I told you I was.” I sat down on the bed with my arms wrapped around my middle. He was in the room already, and he saw me looking like a corpse. There really wasn't anything else to hide at this point.

“I thought maybe you were faking it because you didn't want to go out to dinner.” Abel took four steps towards me and stopped, looking uncertain. He still had his arms behind his back like he was hiding something, but I was too miserable to care what it was. It could be a weapon for all I cared. Put me out of my misery. Instead, he kept talking. “Devon told me you get like that after signings. You need decompress time so sometimes you regret making plans and find ways to cancel them.”

Dammit, Devon. He was talking about me to Abel too much. Okay, so I did do that. But that's not what I was doing now.

“Devon can suck my dick.” I groaned and lay on my side on top of the covers, my legs curled up in the fetal position. I hear Abel lay something on the credenza across the room where I kept the leftovers from lunch. I had planned to snack on them later. Now I never wanted to eat again.

“You don't have a dick. And your mouth gets real nasty when you don't feel good, doesn't it?” Abel sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed. I didn't have the strength to push him off. I just wanted to close my eyes and go to sleep. If I was asleep, I wouldn't feel the nausea, or the horrible cramping under my rib cage and in my stomach.

“He can suck my metaphysical dick. And my spirit balls.”

I couldn't tell for sure, but the mattress wiggled a bit. Like maybe Abel was laughing. I wasn't trying to be funny.

"I need some water or I'm going to die." I could barely whisper the words. My strength and consciousness were fading fast. I should have been kicking Abel out of my room. Or at least I should have been concerned he was in there with me, but the stranger danger alarm just wouldn't go off.

And quite frankly, I didn't care.

I heard the faucet run for a moment, then a few seconds later a glass was pressed against my hand. "Can you sit up and take a drink? I'll hold it until you're ready."

With a little help from Abel, I was able to sit up enough to hold the glass to my lips. I greedily gulped down the clear, cool liquid and sighed as it slid down my ravaged throat.

It was bliss.

For about sixty seconds.

I'm pretty sure my feet didn't touch the carpet as I flew towards the bathroom, but my knees sure busted hard against that tile floor as I knelt on the ground.

The indignity.

Seconds later big hands gently pulled strands of my hair away from my face and secured them behind my head in a lopsided ponytail. He must have found the scrunchie I'd left on the sink.

"I already threw up in my hair."

"I know." He sounded like he was talking to a little kid. All soft tones and concern.

"It smells real bad."

“Yeah, it does.”

I don't know why I started to cry. I just know I was so exhausted, on my hands and knees in the hotel bathroom, with a man I barely knew holding my hair for me while I threw up. I didn't want to be awake anymore.

I was utterly defeated.

I didn't register when he let go of my hair, but I heard the water running in the tub, and then his large hand rested lightly on my shoulder. “If I give you privacy, do you think you can stand to lie in the tub? It's warm, not hot. I have a towel and a washcloth down for you. Do you think you're going to have to throw up again?”

I didn't know. I didn't think so. I just felt empty and drained. I shook my head no.

“You want to get in the bath?”

I nodded, still mute.

“Okay, I'm going to leave the bathroom, but don't lock the door just in case. If you start throwing up again, I think we're going to have to go to the hospital, but right now, you just look run ragged, so I think a little soak will do you good. And I swear, I mean nothing by it, but if you need help let me know. I won't look. I just don't want you falling and busting your ass. Or your head.”

I don't know if he was joking or not, but I was pretty sure I could get my own clothes off and handle the tub by my myself as long as I wasn't heaving at the same time, so I let him leave.

That damned water was heaven. Pure heaven. The temperature was perfect, and I laid my head back against the wall and just breathed. Just let the water run over my legs and

stomach, closed my eyes, and breathed. I had never been more humiliated in front of a man in my entire life, and I couldn't bring myself to care too much about it. Maybe tomorrow would be different, but for now, I was just so grateful he was there to help me.

I had no idea how long I lay there. I must have dozed off in the tub because a knock on the door startled me awake.

“You okay in there, Nadia? It's been about an hour.”

Was I okay? I think I might have been. Better than earlier, anyway.

“Yeah, I'm okay. I think I'm going to get out now.” The water felt cold against my skin, but I didn't hate it.

“I didn't want to go through your stuff, so I pushed your suitcase right outside the bathroom so you can grab new clothes.”

I took back every aggravated thought I had had about that man previously. He was an angel. True to his word, I cracked the bathroom door, towel wrapped as much around me as I could get it, and saw my suitcase right outside. I looked farther into the room to see Abel sitting in the chair next to the television, his eyes cast firmly down on his phone. I snagged the luggage and shut the bathroom door again, digging into the depths to find my pink and grey flannel pajama set. It was ugly as hell but super comfortable, and I was grateful for the softness against my aggravated skin.

I stumbled from the bathroom to the bed and collapsed in a heap on top of the covers again. Abel got up from his chair and came around to my side of the bed, wiggling the comforter and blanket out from under me so he could pull it up over my body, up to my shoulders.

“I’m running down the hall to get some bottled water and clear soda from the vending machine. You’re dehydrated and need fluids.”

Visions of what happened the last time I drank something danced in my head, and I groaned. “I don’t want to drink anything.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to go get it anyway.”

He never listened.

“Hey, Abel?”

“Yeah, Nadia?”

“Thanks for helping me.”

He might have said, “You’re welcome.” Or maybe he said nothing. My eyes had already closed, and I’d already fallen asleep before I could hear a response.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ABEL

“I don’t know how to prove it, Devon. But that was poisoning.” I hadn’t had much contact with Nadia since the Detroit signing. I’d sat in the chair watching her most of the night but went back to my room at about two in the morning. I didn’t feel creepy watching her sleep since I was trying to make sure she wasn’t going to throw up again or need an emergency room trip, but I also didn’t think she’d appreciate waking up in the morning to find me staring at her either.

She’d been fine when she got up, if not completely drained of energy and looking like death. The good thing about mornings after signings was that everyone was in a hurry to get the hell out of Dodge, so by the time Nadia was able to drag herself out of the room and get moving, the place was cleared out, and there was no one to ask any questions. Like why she looked like a reanimated corpse.

I waited to leave until she did. I also followed her home to make sure she got there okay. One of the perks of being local—Nadia didn’t live a hell of a long distance away, just over the Michigan border into Ohio. And I didn’t live too far away from Nadia. She didn’t know I had followed her. I’m sure her radar would have been way the hell up. But there was no way I’d let her get in the car after a night like she had and just assumed she would get home just fine.

I waited until I got home and unloaded my suitcase before I called Devon.

“Why didn’t you call me last night?” It was a solid question.

“Because I had my hands full. I wasn’t sure if I would need to take her to a hospital or not.”

“Are you sure it was poisoning? Like food poisoning? What did she eat? She hardly ever eats at signings. She hates trying to talk to people with food in her mouth, and it never fails. As soon as she takes a bite of something, someone comes to the table to talk about her books.”

I thought back to what I had seen her eat and drink and the leftovers I’d taken out of her room to be analyzed. Something wasn’t right, and I was going to figure it out.

“She had a protein drink she brought with her, a couple bottles of water, an energy drink, and two chocolate chip cookies.” I mentally checked the list in my head as I rattled off what I remembered.

“That sounds about right.” Devon didn’t sound concerned. “I know she always packs the protein shakes and the energy drinks. Where did the water and the cookies come from?”

“The water and the cookies were provided by the event coordinator. I think the hotel catered it. Everyone had the same food, and I haven’t heard of anyone else getting sick, but you would have more contacts than I would. Can you check on that?” I didn’t have any industry contacts, but I would think an entire ballroom of authors getting sick would be something that would cause an uproar.

“I’ll make some calls. She didn’t go to the hospital, and it seems like an isolated incident, so I can’t really say it has

anything to do with what we're concerned about, but did anything else weird happen? Anything out of the ordinary?"

A ripped-up copy of her book and a hate letter disguised as a bookmark probably qualified as out of the ordinary. It definitely meant something, but the issue was who could have put it there.

"I found a copy of her latest book with the pages half hacked out like it was slashed with a hatchet. Another letter telling her to 'Die, bitch' was folded up and shoved inside it like a bookmark. The fucking thing was propped outside her hotel room door like room service."

"Holy shit, did she see it?" Devon sounded breathless on the other end of the phone.

"No, I hid it from her. She was too sick to notice anything anyway." I reassured him, and he audibly sighed on the other end of the phone.

"The place was dead all day, Devon. We only had like six readers come to her table. The only other people that talked to her were the photographer, Rebecca, and the event coordinator. I think her name was Anna."

"Oh, God, Anna is a drunk-and-a-half." No shit. Hard to believe. "I knew it would be dead, but I didn't know it would be that bad. Sometimes signings can be like that. It's why the publisher didn't want her doing them anymore. Too much investment and too little return. They want to vet every place she goes—she just had to have her way this time. Look what happened."

I wouldn't draw that kind of parallel, but I guess I could sense his frustration. Attending a dead event didn't help anyone. And it took time away from her writing, which

seemed like the opposite of what everyone was trying to accomplish here.

“Anything I should know about the next event, or will it be more of the same?”

“Well, I already talked to Nadia, and you guys are going to drive together to this one. It’s only a few hours to Louisville, and it’s a long-running indie signing, very respected in the industry.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means it will probably be pretty busy, lots of readers and authors. There will be a meet and greet the night before the signing, and probably functions to attend after the signing. People split off into cliques. Nadia floats around. She doesn’t really belong to any of the cliques but gets along with just about everybody.”

Uh, huh. She used to get along with everyone, from what Rebecca said.

“How come you didn’t tell me other authors had beef with Nadia because she got picked up by a traditional publisher and had to back out of a bunch of signings?”

I heard Devon sigh.

“Because it’s not important. It’s people being jealous and pissy, and it literally happens all the time. Anytime anything good happens for someone else, there’s usually a posse of haters that kick up a fuss. Nadia doesn’t make it a big deal, so I don’t make it a big deal, so you don’t make it a big deal, okay? It’s just a matter of not feeding the trolls. And since this stuff happens in the industry all the time, I do not think it correlates to our little letter-writing goblin.”

I wasn't convinced, but I wasn't getting paid to solve a mystery. I was getting paid to make sure nothing happened to Nadia at any of these events. Devon had someone else working on solving the mystery. I was just the muscle. That had been made clear to me in the beginning.

"How can you be sure it's not a jealous author?"

"Look, I don't know how to explain it, so you understand. Nadia is the flavor of the week. Before her, it was someone else. Someone else is going to catch a break, and it will be their turn on the chopping block. And Nadia doesn't need to lose sleep over it because she's not an indie author anymore. She's in a different world now, with different responsibilities and perks. All she needs to worry about is writing. That's all. She doesn't need to stress about the opinions of people who can't do as well as she can."

That sounded a little condescending, and I highly doubted Nadia would agree with him at all, but she trusted Devon, and he was my employer, so I just let him pop off. He obviously had a bias about it. It really wasn't my business.

"Look, Abel. I need you to be sharp on this one. This next signing in Louisville is going to be your last chance to practice before the Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem signing in Texas in a month. That's going to be a huge event, and not only that, there's going to be a ton of different people there. A lot of these MC writers are members of clubs themselves, so there's going to be rough-looking people all over the place. I need you to be hip to how an event works before you get there, so you can play your part and be sharp

"I'm a fucking professional, Devon. Isn't that why you hired me?"

Devon laughed on the other end of the line. “Yeah, amongst other things.”

Shut the fuck up.

I’d saved the ripped-up book and the letter, that much I’d told Devon. But I also saved the leftovers from lunch that Nadia kept in her room. I was going to tell Devon about it, but for some reason, I didn’t. Sure, she could have had food poisoning, but for only one person to get sick in a room full of people eating the same food? That was so suspicious that I couldn’t ignore it. Someone wanted to hurt Nadia. It was the whole reason I was here in the first place. I know Devon said the publisher was doing an investigation, and my only job was to watch over Nadia during the three signings, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was done to her on purpose. And right under my fucking nose.

The image of Nadia crying on the bathroom floor invaded my brain, and I clenched my fists in anger, willing the image to go away. No way was I going to ignore this after what I saw her go through. No matter what Devon said.

I looked over at the Styrofoam container on my coffee table. I had my own ways of getting information, and I wasn’t above holding on to smelly leftovers to get it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NADIA

Letting Abel drive to Louisville was a lot harder than I thought it would be, considering I never went anywhere without my own wheels. Letting someone else have that kind of control over what I did or where I went would usually send my anxiety skyrocketing. But Abel's truck was bigger than my Kona, with a cover on the back, and it fit all my stuff with room to spare. He only briefly raised his eyebrow at my loud-as-hell red luggage with the flowers and stickers all over it, but hey, at least I'd never lose it in an airport baggage carousel. We didn't have to shove anything in the second-row seating but our snacks, which was good because, apparently, Abel packed for a four-and-a-half-hour road trip like a ten-year-old with his first allowance.

"That's a lot of beef jerky and 'tato skins, my guy." There were also enough energy drinks to give us both a case of the zoomies all weekend, and a couple of my preferred protein drinks, which was nice. Sometimes the words that came out of his mouth didn't sound so nice, but Abel really was sweet.

"I almost got you a chocolate chip cookie but thought maybe you weren't ready for that yet." I grimaced at the reminder of what happened the last time I ate cookies. Or nothing but cookies. My face flooded with embarrassment. It had been weeks, and we'd talked since then, but I was still

humiliated by how Abel had seen me. And we'd become kind of friends since then, considering Abel texted me almost every day to check on me after we got back from Detroit. Then every day after that, for no reason at all. Then before I knew it, it was time to head to Kentucky.

Oh, real quick, before I forget...

I dug my black cross-body bag out of the tote. There were zippers all over the outside, and I had to open every single one of them before I found what I was looking for. I knew I put it in there, I just forgot which pocket.

“Do you really keep a small purse inside a big purse? What’s the point?” Abel pulled onto the highway with the grace of someone very at ease driving such a large vehicle. He wasn’t even looking at me. I don’t know how he even noticed what I was doing.

“The small bag is my purse, and I take it out when I only want to carry that one bag. The larger bag is my tote and pretty much carries my life. So yeah.” I’d never thought it was weird to carry my bags that way, still didn’t. Finally, after zipping and unzipping five different pockets, I found the wad of cash I’d set aside and handed it over to Abel.

He looked at it, confused, but kept both hands on the wheel.

“What’s that?”

“Your payment for the weekend.”

“You don’t pay me. Devon does.”

Devon didn’t pay him, the publishing company did, but I didn’t feel like correcting him. I learned in therapy that people generally don’t love being corrected all the time, and I didn’t

have to always point out that I was right, especially if it didn't really matter to the conversation. So I let it slide.

“This isn't a publisher-sanctioned event. It's the last Indie event I get to do, and since you agreed to do it with me, I am responsible for paying you. I booked our rooms and paid for them already, but you need money for food and for your time. It's your daily stipend. It's normal. Plus, you're driving, so I'm paying for gas.

He looked surprised for a second, opened his mouth like he had something to say, and then thought better of it. Instead, he sighed like he had the patience of a saint and took the money from my hand like it was covered in dog shit, then threw it in the glove box and snapped it shut.

I didn't question what other people did with their money, especially since I just had to go on a zipper expedition to find mine. I let it go.

We'd been driving for about two hours and jamming to the nineties station on the radio before Abel looked at me and asked, “You want your surprise?”

“A wha... Yes.” I didn't hesitate. A surprise for me? *I hope it's candy.*

He reached into the center console and pulled out a lime green bag. “Oooh. Sour skittles. My favorite. How did you know?” I don't know why I asked. Devon probably told him.

“I know lots of stuff. Here, if you're a good girl and promise to eat regular food this weekend, you can have these.”

I snatched the bag out of his hand, ripped a corner off the bag, and popped a few in my mouth. I rolled the top of the bag closed and thought about sticking it in my purse before

thinking better of it and tossing it into the larger tote. “I’m always good.”

He didn’t say anything or call attention to the fact that I promised nothing. Just smiled a little smile and faced the road.

I didn’t want him to ask me about it, so I made a mental note to write about it in my notebook later. This smile was a different smile. A secret smile. A smile that said, *I know what you’re thinking, and it’s okay, I’m still going to win.* I also didn’t want him to know how much I liked it.



I loved meet-and-greet events at signings. I really did. But that shit was exhausting. The drive wasn’t bad for me, especially since Abel drove the whole way and didn’t let me get out to pump the gas or anything, even when I offered. We checked into the hotel, went to our rooms, and had an hour to prepare before the reader event started. The event coordinator rented out the atrium next to the bar on the first floor of the hotel, and that’s where everyone met and mingled and got to know each other before the signing the next day.

It was also a way to have a few drinks and unwind after a lot of travel. Some people flew in for this event, but some people drove halfway across the country. This was the last year for the Louisville event, and it was packed out. This signing had a lot of history in the indie community, which was one of the reasons I fought so hard to keep it on my roster.

I knew and loved most of the people here, but holy hell, was I tired. Even my jaw hurt from introducing Abel to everyone. Every two seconds, we were rushed by readers and other authors who wanted to know his name and how he got assigned to me. I hated boring people with the details, but I didn’t really make those decisions. My publisher did. I liked it

that way, but it wasn't the romantic story that everyone else wanted.

Sorry to disappoint.

I took a drink from my third crown and cola, grateful for the social lubrication. I didn't drink a lot, but I did welcome the alcohol to get me through socially exhausting situations. Like, I genuinely enjoyed seeing and interacting with people, but I also really wanted my pajamas and to lie down watching late-night cartoons. I took another drink. My straw rattled against the ice cubes melting in my plastic cup. Damn, I was on empty. The drinks were small and expensive, but that was to be expected. I eyeballed Abel's drink; he was sipping on a vodka soda. It wasn't his favorite, he'd told me, but it was something easy to sip on that he knew wouldn't put him on his ass.

He looked about empty.

"You need a new drink?" he asked me before swallowing the last of what was in his cup, ice cubes and all.

"I'll go get them for us." I move towards the crowded bar, but he put his hand on my arm.

"You need to eat something before you have another drink." He looked over at the bar, there was a neon list of menu items, and I could see his eyes moving as he read them.

"That ship has sailed, sadly. I don't want to eat this late. I'll just have another drink and probably go upstairs to bed. It's only about ten. That still gives me time to get plenty of rest before I have to set up in the morning." I looked at my phone to confirm the time. Yep, just before ten p.m.

"You mean before we set up in the morning, right? I'm here too, you know. Use me."

“Yeah, *Nadia*, use him,” Lindsey, a reader I’d known for probably five years, said at my elbow. She looked at Abel with lust-glazed eyes. She wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that she was sizing him up.

Able walked towards the bar, oblivious. I wondered if he was going to bring me back the drink I asked for.

“Dear God, he’s fine. And not in the young, hairless gym bod kind of way that’s popular these days. He works outside and probably has a lot of chest hair and calluses on his hands fine.”

“Lindsey, he’s a person. Mind your manners.” I tried not to let my temper make me say something nasty. Something like, “Hey bitch, shut your lips and keep your eyeballs pointed towards the ground.” Or something else that didn’t make any damn sense. Like why I was irritated in the first place. Inappropriate comments were a dime a dozen at these events. It didn’t make them right or acceptable by any means, but I was sure Devon had already given Abel the rundown on behavior he did or did not have to tolerate.

But I didn’t want to see or hear it. Abel was a nice guy. I mean, he was my friend now, right? It was hard to tell sometimes, but he did hold my hair while I puked my guts out, so I guess you could say we were close.

“Are you sleeping with him? I mean, *have* you slept with him?” Another voice at my other elbow took my attention away from Lindsey. Another author I vaguely knew from a few other signings looked at me expectantly. I knew her as Jennifer, but I didn’t know if it was her real name or a pen name. We weren’t that close.

“That’s not any of you—”

“Open your mouth.” The deep rumble rose above the sound of the music and settled across my shoulders like a caress. I turned to find Abel standing behind me, balancing a ceramic bar plate of French fries in one hand and two small plastic cups in the other. I grabbed the two drinks with both my hands to lighten his load.

“My name is Jennifer.” Her attention was fully fixed on Abel now, I no longer existed. She was probably thinking about how to get him to her table tomorrow. Some people were like that. Not most, but some. I didn’t blame her. Abel was a handsome man, and handsome men brought readers to the table. That’s the math. That’s why he was on a book cover. The marketing wheel.

Abel nodded politely at her before turning back to me. “I got us some fries. They’re the good steak cut kind, with lots of salt. Try them.” I looked at the plate and down at my hands which were each holding a beverage.

“No thanks, I’m not hungry,” I declined politely.

“Nadia, open your mouth.” His brown eyes burned into mine, and I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. The sound of the music and the people talking nearby fell away until all I could hear was the thumping of my own heartbeat and the rush of blood in my veins. Was this what people wrote about when they talked about an awakening? Because I didn’t know I could get that turned on by someone telling me what to do, but there I was.

“I don’t want—”

My hands were full, so I couldn’t do anything, but his hands were not. Balancing the plate in the crook of his elbow like a seasoned server, he bit one French fry in half while he slid the other half into my open mouth. Then he used his other

hand to gently hold my jaw shut, so I had no option but to chew.

The audacity.

Warm, salty potato filled my mouth. It was hot, but not as hot as the fingers caressing my cheek and chin. And the fool kept eye contact with me the whole time, both of us chewing, neither one looking away.

“Are you sure they aren’t fucking?”

I wanted to turn around and tell Jennifer to shut up, but I was rooted to the spot. Abel acted like he couldn’t hear her at all, but I could feel everyone in a ten-foot radius looking at us.

“Abel, you are embarrassing me.” I tried to say the words, but he just scooted his hand up from my chin and used his fingers to squish my cheeks like a child, so everything came out muffled.

“You gonna share these fries with me?” A boyish smirk betrayed his ruggedly handsome face. Damn this man.

“I’ll eat the damn fries. People are looking.” I couldn’t see anything but Abel and his fiery gaze, but I knew they were staring. This was a spectacle, of course, they’d stare.

He just smiled, now a feral smile. Not like sunshine on a windshield or a secret joke. That flash of teeth was pure mayhem. A man who’d gotten exactly what he wanted and was satisfied with the methods in which he used to get it.

Dammit, I wish I had my notebook.

As soon as he let go of my face, I grabbed another fry off the plate and shoved it in my mouth, chewing violently. I took a swig from my cup and realized it was water. Both cups were water. Mine and his.

“I’m just looking out for you, Nadia, we have a big day tomorrow. I can’t wait to see the famous pajamas to the professional author transition. I wonder what kind of shoes you’ll wear?” He smiled.

I didn’t.

“You’re such a weirdo.”

He laughed a loud laugh that made everyone who wasn’t already looking at us turn their heads in our direction.

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

CHAPTER NINE

ABEL

Louisville was nothing like Detroit. We were slammed from one end of the day to the other. I met so many people, accepted so many hugs, and took so many pictures I couldn't tell if people were there to see Nadia or me because she was caught up doing the same thing.

The dress transition was just as awesome as I thought it would be. Today she wore a royal blue blouse with a little black lace showing at the neck and a pair of slim-fit black slacks. It might have been boring if not for the black leather over-the-knee boots she paired with it. The kind that laces all the way up the front. They didn't have particularly high heels, but they didn't need to. They were a statement on their own.

When I said as much to Nadia her response was to tell me she was a medium-hot girl. She didn't look the part all the time, but it didn't mean she didn't know how to throw a look together now and then. Then she smiled at me like she knew what I was thinking when I was looking.

I guarantee she didn't, because if she did, she'd run. That outfit had "chase me" written all over it, and if we weren't in a contract-type relationship, I might have tried to make a move.

Shit, I still might in a few weeks when the job is over. The more time I spent with Nadia, the more I understood her

quirks, and watching her face light up with joy talking to people about her books... Well, I didn't mind just sitting there watching. That's all.

Nadia Wells was a woman who loved what she did.

One thing I did take note of, though, was the lack of people showing up to the table to discuss their dissatisfaction with her books. On the contrary, *The Pain of Loving You* flew off the table until she ran clean out of copies early in the afternoon. And people were still bringing in their own copies for her to sign.

She had a distinct fan base, and they all seemed pretty happy to meet and get a photo with her.

If I hadn't seen the letters Devon showed me firsthand, I might not have believed that anyone had it out for her at all. People genuinely seemed to like Nadia, although I could tell all the interactions were taking their toll on her.

"Abel, I don't see you on the cover of any of these books. Do you have any with you?" asked the short, middle-aged lady I'd just met. She told me her name, which I immediately forgot. There were too many to remember. I'd been asked this question all day, so the answer came easily. "I'm on the cover of her next book, she's just breaking me into the industry so I can get a feel for things. My cover comes out in two months, I believe." I looked over at Nadia and she nodded.

"He's never been on a cover before, so we have to be nice and take care of him." Nadia smiled at the reader and she giggled. A lot more women giggled than I thought because they'd been making that noise all day. I didn't know what was so funny.

Nadia had a bit of a crowd at the table still, but they all seemed to know each other and be involved in the same conversation, reminiscing about something that happened in San Antonio and things like that. I had to excuse myself to use the restroom.

I didn't know how authors without a helper did it. How could you leave your table if you had to go to the bathroom? Nadia hadn't gotten up once, even though I offered to watch the table while she went. I wasn't worried about her safety. I could see the ladies' room from where we sat. It was just outside the open ballroom doors.

But I didn't need anyone to watch the table for me, so I leaned over and whispered to Nadia, who nodded, and I left the table to hit up the men's room a little further down the hall.

It was empty. The only men in attendance were the other male models besides me, and husbands of readers who were apparently dragged along to carry the massive bags of books.

I washed and dried my hands, checked my fly, and left in a hurry to get back to Nadia so she wasn't alone at the table. I knew enough about Nadia by now to know she hid her anxiety well but being surrounded by people for an extended period took a toll on her. Plus, she hadn't eaten yet today. She squirreled out of breakfast again by saying she had a protein drink, which was all fine and dandy if she actually drank it—which I didn't see her do.

Nadia was a very smart woman, she just got really into whatever she was doing and forgot to do important stuff. Like eat.

I made it two steps out of the men's room before a hand on my arm stopped me. It was the shorter woman that was at the table when I left. I looked down at her and smiled politely.

“Can I help you?” Not sure what she needed at the men’s room, but part of my job was to be nice to people, so I was being nice.

“What are you doing after the signing? Some of the girls and I are going out to dinner and maybe drinks in the room afterwards. You want to come over for drinks tonight? We’re a lot of fun.”

Her hand was still on my arm, which was weird, and I couldn’t move without shaking her off, so I just stood there smiling, willing her to let go of my arm.

“I’ve got dinner plans with Nadia after the signing, but I’ll see if she wants to stop by the room after for a drink or two—I’m not certain what our plans are yet.”

The woman looked disappointed for a second. “Do you have to spend your free time with Nadia? Aren’t you here to see us?”

Warning bells went off in my head. Devon had mentioned sometimes people will try to get models’ attention like this, but I guess I didn’t really pay attention. There was no way I was going to this woman’s room alone. Or at all. And what free time was she talking about? This was a job for me, my time was bought and paid for by Nadia... well Devon really, but the principle was the same. I was on the clock the entire time I was in Louisville. No solo trips.

“I’m sorry. I can’t do that. I’m really not comfortable with ___”

The woman pouted and cut me off by moving her hand from my arm to my ass and giving it a firm pinch. “You’re no fun.”

What the absolute fuck, lady?

“Don’t touch me like that.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. I mean, I couldn’t say what I wanted to say, which had some swears and exclamation points in it, but I never thought I would be in a position where I had to tell a woman to keep her hands to herself.

“I thought you’d be nice, but you’re kind of an asshole,” the woman shot back, her voice getting a little louder, calling the attention of other people in the vicinity. Curious heads turned in our direction. “You know, it wouldn’t look favorable towards your author if you started pissing readers off because you couldn’t be nice to them.”

Yeah. Okay. Wow.

“I don’t think he wants to hear that from someone who waited for him outside the bathroom and touched him inappropriately without his consent.” I turned to find one of the ladies that had hung around us at the afterparty last night. I think her name was Jennifer.

“That’s not what I did, don’t make things up.” This woman had the gall to act like she didn’t just play grab-ass in the hallway in front of the men’s room with a complete stranger. She was older than my mother, and while age doesn’t have much to do with behavior, she was definitely old enough to know better.

“Ma’am, I was sitting in a chair right over there resting because I was tired.” Jennifer pointed down the hallway to a little sitting area on the other side of the open ballroom doors. It was in a direct line of sight to the bathroom hallway. “I was out there before either of you left the ballroom. I watched Abel walk to the men’s room, and I watched you follow him and stand outside the door waiting for him like a total stalker. And if that isn’t weird enough, you grabbed his ass in front of God

and country then tried to gaslight him into thinking it was his fault, so he'd be guilted into coming to your hotel room later."

Oh shit. It sounded rough, but that's exactly what happened. I didn't want to cause a scene, especially since I was supposed to be staying under the radar, but it felt really good to have someone stand up for me in a situation where people otherwise wouldn't have believed me.

"Jennifer, keep your voice down." The older woman's cheeks were red with rage as she whisper screamed at the woman next to me.

"Fuck no, I won't keep my voice down. Abel, why don't you go back to the table with Nadia. I'm sure you'd rather be in there, anyway. I'll handle this one."

"I don't want to cause trouble. Maybe we should just let this be." I've never wanted to slap a woman more in my life, but people were gathering, and I was uncomfortable. I wasn't doing a very good job of watching over Nadia like this.

"Oh no, this isn't just about you, friend." Jennifer pulled her phone out of her pocket and sent a hurried text to someone. "I've got hotel security coming and they'll let the event coordinator know about this as well. This woman will be escorted to her room and likely not invited to stay again. She certainly won't be invited to any of these events again. We'll make sure of it."

"That's a little much, isn't it?" The woman in question suddenly looked remorseful, but Jennifer shut her down in a hurry.

"No, it really isn't. Besides being a multi-billion-dollar industry, romance writers and readers take a lot of shit and don't get nearly the respect we deserve. Everyone works really

hard to be here and all it takes is someone acting like an entitled asshole to wreck it for everyone. It's not okay behavior and you do not have to put up with anyone talking to you in an inappropriate manner. And no one should have to deal with being touched like that. I understand you don't want to make a big deal out of it, Abel. You don't have to. But I'm going to be handled it how it needs to be handled."

Then she brushed me off like I wasn't even standing there anymore, so I turned and headed back into the ballroom. Nadia had a different group of people at her table and was getting her picture taken in front of her author banner with a couple of grinning readers, obviously over the moon to be with her.

Her cheeks were flushed and her smile was bright enough to light up the room. I didn't think I'd ever seen her look more beautiful than in that moment. No way was I going to ruin her buzz by telling her about what happened. There would be time for that later.

Instead, I smiled and photo-bombed their picture, to the surprise of everyone at the table. I could tell by the squeals of laughter they weren't too mad about it.

CHAPTER TEN

NADIA

“That bitch did what? And you’re just telling me about it now?” I thumped my plastic cup of diet soda so hard on the table the ice almost jumped all the way out. Fury blazed behind my eyeballs at the news Abel just shared.

Someone had touched him? Like that? Stalked him to the damn bathroom? Who does that? Who freaking does that?

But I already knew. Anyone could do that. It wasn’t the first time it had happened in our industry and it wouldn’t be the last. Some people just don’t have proper home training.

It was the first time I’d ever felt so protective over someone.

“That’s bullshit. I’ll kick her ass.” I’ve never kicked an ass in my life, but I felt like maybe I could do it this time.

“Okay, easy, gunpowder. Calm down. The signing’s over and the work is done. Why don’t we have a drink and calm down.” Abel and I had foregone any group activity for a quiet dinner in the hotel restaurant by ourselves. Since it was after the signing and there wasn’t an afterparty most other people were packing up to head home or going off property for the night. There was no need to force any group activities, so we declined all offers and just kept to ourselves. I was prepared to give Abel the green light to go do whatever he wanted that

evening, but it was kind of nice sharing a meal just the two of us.

And there was a meal, he made damn sure I ordered actual food, including a vegetable. I grinned at him over my baked potato and steamed broccoli. “Is this to your standards, Daddy?” I’d said with an evil grin.

“Oh, please start with me, *Nads*.”

I had to give. I hate being called Nads. Only Devon does it and I wish he wouldn’t. I only let him get away with it because we’re so close. I don’t think Devon likes his job very much, but he’s really good at it. I appreciated him so much. If there was any way I could help him achieve his writing goals, I definitely would do it. He just doesn’t want to talk about that stuff with me, and I won’t push it.

But I hate being called Nads.

“I wouldn’t mind a drink. What are you thinking?” Abel interrupted my daydreaming by tapping the table and pushing his empty plate to the side. He’d swallowed a steak the size of my head and the leftover salmon I couldn’t finish. It was impressive really. I’d seen him without a shirt on, and I couldn’t tell you where the food went.

I was feeling good. And brave. And relieved that the work of the weekend was over, and I didn’t have to people anymore if I didn’t want to and I had a whole night to relax before traveling home tomorrow—and I didn’t even have to load up or drive because I had Abel with me.

I felt invincible.

“Let’s do shots.”

Abel’s eyes widened. “Okay, I’m not turning you down or anything, but you don’t seem like a shot person to me. Like,

what kind of shots are you thinking? I can't do the sugary stuff or anything with pudding or pucker in it. Do you do tequila?"

"Do you want to fight me in the parking lot?" He laughed. I was dead serious.

"What about lemon drops? Those are relatively harmless."

Lemon drop shots sounded perfect, so we ordered a round when the server came back.

"You did an awesome job today, Abel. I just want to tell you that." I said as we knocked the first shots back and ordered another round. "You put up with me, which is something by itself, I know I'm... quirky." I hiccupped and covered my mouth with the back of my hand. "I get on people's nerves a lot, but you were solid. Bonus points for you." I ordered another round of shots for us.

"Everyone has idiosyncrasies, Nadia. It's not that hard to deal with once you get to know somebody. Like, it's not that you don't want to eat. You just need to be reminded. Repeatedly." One eyebrow raised as he took the shot glass the server set down in front of him and threw it back.

"Yeah, and you're bossy," I said as I grabbed the glass in front of me and swallowed. Man, that was tasty. "So tell me something. You don't seem the type. Why modeling? Why book covers?"

Abel laughed, embarrassed. "I didn't know there was a book cover type. But honestly, I just kind of fell into it. It was a matter of... circumstance." He thought for a minute before he continued. "It's not my real job, just something I'm doing right now." He looked like he wanted to say more but he didn't.

“What’s your real job?” I believed him. Most cover models didn’t pose full-time. It just wasn’t lucrative enough or sustainable. Hell, I knew a model who wrote books, and one who was a sales manager at a car dealership. Shoot, most authors weren’t even full-time writers. Especially in the indie industry, most of us had full-time day jobs in addition to publishing. I didn’t leave my job as a web store marketing assistant until I got picked up by a traditional publisher. It wasn’t until *The Pain of Loving You* hit the bestseller list and I signed my three-book contract that I was financially able to commit to writing full-time. If anyone understood having a *real* job, it was us authors.

“Well, I do a few different things, but mostly private security.” Abel looked embarrassed, again, like he just confessed a secret no one was supposed to know.

“Interesting. What’s private security?” Maybe I imagined the dark look that crossed his face, it was there and gone so fast.

“Oh, a little of this. A little of that.”

“That’s not an answer at all.” I didn’t know much about private security but it sounded like bodyguarding, which I also didn’t know much about. It wasn’t really my wheelhouse. There was definitely a niche for protector romance out there though.

“Yeah, well, I used to want to be a police officer, but a few ride alongs cured me of that notion. People are crazy and I hated every second of it. It may sound selfish, but I’m definitely not public servant material. I do not have the patience for that kind of chaos. It’s all day, every day. No reprieve.”

“That makes sense.” More shots appeared on the table in front of us like magic. I didn’t even remember ordering them.

“I don’t regret going down the path I did. I know my parents were really set on me being a cop though. I tried to explain why I couldn’t do it—but it was too complicated for them to understand. I started working for a pretty solid personal security firm instead, and you would think there’d be a lot less bullshit to deal with, working with a private firm. Turns out it’s just as complicated, just in different ways.” He didn’t look too pressed about it, so I didn’t push him any further down that road. Not everybody wants to talk about stuff, plus we were supposed to be relaxing.

“I’m assuming you aren’t married but are you dating anyone?” It was an innocent question. Okay, maybe not so innocent.

Abel grinned, a quick flash of white in the darkened dining room. “How do you know I’m not married?”

“Because no woman who loves her man is going to let him take a job that has him traveling with another woman to hotels without even introducing herself. I don’t care who she is. There’s trust, and there’s absolute apathy.”

“You’re right, I’m not married. Or in a relationship, if you’re going to ask that next.”

“Oh, I might have asked but I’m just being curious,” I said honestly. “I would never make that kind of move on you.”

He had the gall to look insulted. “Why not?”

I hurried to reassure him and smooth his fractured ego while trying not to smile at how pissed he looked. “Don’t be aggravated, Abel. You’re very handsome. The most handsome.”

“Oh, shut up.” Now, who was trying not to smile?

“Number one rule in this industry: Don’t sleep with the models. It never ends well. Some people do it. They always regret it. So, rule of thumb, just don’t sleep with the models.”

“That’s a hell of a rule.”

“You wouldn’t believe how many times I’ve been schmoozed by someone because they thought I would buy an image of them for a cover. Like, fake an interest in me to get image sales.”

“That’s gross.” Abel shuddered.

“Tell me about it. I don’t have a lot of spare time for a man as it is, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to waste any of it on someone who’s only getting close to me to sell pictures of themselves. Now that I’m under contract, I don’t worry about any of that stuff. Those decisions are made for me. Some people don’t like the loss of control and choose to stay self-published. I have mad respect for them. For me? The publisher can take that right off my plate so I can focus on writing. Please and thank you.”

“Did you guys want anything else?” Our server brought a tray and cleared the last of our plates and empty shot glasses from the table. I was getting tired, but I was still having fun talking to Abel. I didn’t want to be done.

“Want to do one more shot for the road?”

“Are you sure you should? We’ve had two already.”

“You’ve had three rounds so far.” The polite server interjected, helpfully. Both Abel and I looked at her in surprise.

I didn't remember taking three, but she had it written down, so I chose to believe her. "Three is an odd number. We really should round it out, Abel." I looked at him hopefully. He stared back at me without blinking.

"Please, Daddy?" I fluttered my eyelashes at him.

"Stop it right now." He turned to the server and flashed her a winning smile. She looked jealous. I totally understood her feelings. Abel smiling was a whole vibe. "We'll have one more round and I'll take the check please."

"I'm paying Abel. It's my job." Righteous indignation. That's what I felt.

"There's a wad of cash in my glove box that said you already paid for it, so calm your rowdy ass down. We'll take our shots and go upstairs. You're still in your shit-kickers for God's sake. Don't you want to take your shoes off and put your pajamas on?"

I looked down at my feet. He was right. I was still in my signing clothes. I looked at the time on my phone.

"Normally at this time, I don't even have a bra on."

Abel laughed. It was a warm sound. "Well by all means let's get you upstairs and out of those clothes."

The server returned with our shots at lightning speed just in time to overhear Abel. She flushed from her neck to the roots of her curly brown hair.

"He's kidding," I assured her. Why, I don't know. What did I care what the server thought of our conversation? I was young and attractive. I didn't need permission. If I wasn't an author and him a model, I could totally pull a guy like him. Probably.

“I know what I said, Nadia. Shoot your shot and let’s go.”

I obeyed and took my shot. And maybe I was about to take another.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NADIA

I was not imagining that chemistry, or that sexual tension, right? I definitely wasn't imagining his hand on the small of my back as we went up the elevator and walked down the hall towards our room. His room was before mine. Would he stop? Or would he follow me?

So many goddam questions.

I held my breath as we approached his door, diverting my attention to my purse as I dug through three zippered pockets before I found the room key. Two steps past his room. Three steps past his room. I didn't hear the electronic click of an unlocking door as I stood in front of my room.

Instead, I felt the nearness of his body and his warm breath in my ear as he leaned down and whispered. "Aren't you going to say goodnight to me?"

Jesus Christ.

I couldn't even write a scene as brave as me swiping my key through the electronic slot, swinging my door open, and saying, "Why does it have to be goodnight already?"

I'd heard about laser focus in a man's gaze before. I'd read about it, and I'd certainly written about it, but I'd never seen it before this moment. Abel's nostrils flared, and he walked into

me, forcing me to walk backwards into the room or risk him walking over me entirely.

He pushed himself into me until we were both in the room and the door slammed shut behind him. He just stood there, his chest touching mine and his lips hovering inches from the bridge of my nose, almost as if he was waiting for permission. Permission for what?

Whatever he wanted to do, the answer was, hell yes. Yes, please. Yes, sir. Yes, Daddy. Yes, Abel. Yes, please just do something.

“I’m not drunk.” I don’t know why I felt the need to say that but whatever the reason behind it, it worked.

“Thank fuck for that.” And then he was on me, his lips sliding across mine in the hottest, most velvet kiss I’d ever received in my life. I don’t know why I thought he’d go in rough, maybe just because he had that good old boy look to him. Like he knew how to give a rowdy good time.

But that’s not what happened. He took soft, slow sips of my mouth, running his tongue over my top lip before sucking it into his mouth and running his tongue over it again.

I didn’t think I could stand up anymore. He made my knees shake in my thigh-high boots. Suddenly, getting naked with Abel was the most important thing on my mind, the only thing I wanted to do, and I couldn’t think of a single good reason I shouldn’t accomplish that right now.

But what came out of my mouth was, “I need to take my shoes off.”

Abel just smiled. “Do you, now?” This was another smile I’d never seen from him before. A hungry, feral smile. It was

like he had a never-ending supply of different versions and I wanted to record them all.

Instead of watching me fumble with the laces while I was standing up, which is what I would have done, he scooped me into his arms and walked the rest of the way into the bedroom, depositing me softly on the edge of the bed. I looked at him with questions in my eyes as he knelt in front of me, took my left foot in his hands, and undid the laces. One by one he plucked each eyelet clear and when the boot was open, he slid it off my foot and set it gently aside, peeling my sock down my ankle and off, rubbing the skin of my foot for a moment before moving to the next boot.

“What are you doing?” I could barely breathe. I knew what the hell he was doing. I just couldn’t think straight. I’d never had someone worship my legs and feet before. I’d never had somebody take my boots off for me and rub my feet. Like they wanted to. Like there was nothing else in the world he would rather do. He did the same thing with the other foot but instead of putting my foot down and moving on, he lifted my leg and placed a kiss right in the bottom of my arch, his eyes blazing into mine.

Why is this so hot?

“Abel, don’t.” I moved my foot out of his hand and put both feet flat on the floor on either side of his legs as he knelt in front of me.

“What’s wrong? Does that bother you?” He didn’t look bothered at all, just genuinely interested in my answer.

“I’ve been standing and running around all day. My feet are sweaty and gross.” It was embarrassing. What if they smelled?

“So if they weren’t sweaty and gross, would you let me kiss them?” Abel asked, a distinct twinkle in his eye that let me know he was playing with me.

“Maybe.” Likely. I’d probably beg him to.

“You want to take a shower, then? Want me to take your shirt off?” I could tell he wanted to take my shirt off by the way he was eyeing my chest like he hadn’t eaten all day, when I knew he just did.

“I’d rather take your clothes off.” What horny bitch just said that? I mean, it was true, but I’d never talked to a man like this in my life. Not even someone I’d been intimate with, mores the pity.

His response was to stand and remove his shirt so fast I was afraid there would be buttons all over the floor. He undid his belt and unfastened the top of his jeans before his hands stilled.

“Maybe you should do the rest.”

Oh, yes, please.

I gingerly ran my hand over the front of his jeans, pressing slightly to feel that he was definitely aroused and ready to do whatever it was I wanted to do. I reached for the zipper and pull it down but stopped. In my line of work, I had to look at a lot of half-naked men. After a while, you get kind of desensitized to what you’re looking at, and the image of the man turns into a marketing tool. Which image of which man is going to appeal to the reader? Which outfit? Muscles? Body hair? Facial hair? It was all marketing.

I couldn’t remember the last time I looked at a man with sexual intent. But I did now.

“Abel, can I touch you how I want to?” I was a little scared to ask. I don’t know why.

“Nadia, you can touch me any way you can think of. Just please touch me.”

“You know, I don’t remember what it’s called, but I’ve always been fascinated by this right here.” I ran my fingers lightly over the tight band of muscle that rose out of the waistband of his jeans and formed a tidy vee in his torso. “I don’t remember the name of it, but it sure makes smart girls stupid.”

Abel laughed, but I didn’t look up. I was too busy playing. “I’ve always wondered what that skin would feel like under my tongue. If I were to taste it.” And before I could think about it, I leaned over and licked a line from Abel’s waistband straight up over that line of flesh and muscle, and bit down lightly, tasting his salty skin on my tongue.

“Nope.” That’s all I heard before I was flat on my back on the bed, my ass bouncing a little from the force of the toss. There was the heavy sound of jeans hitting the floor and then he was on me, hands pulling at my slacks and lifting my blouse over my shoulders until I lay underneath him in nothing but my bra and panties.

“Nope?”

“Nope. I’m not going to last if I let you keep doing that, and I have other things I want to do with you tonight. Let me ask you something,” he said while palming both of my breasts with his hands through my bra.

“What?” I gasped as he pinched my nipples, rolling them both between his fingertips in tandem.

“How the hell do you hide all these tits under those baggy shirts and sweaters you wear?”

“They’re comfortable—” His face disappeared between my breasts, and he pulled the lace cups down, swallowing as much flesh as he could get in his mouth, nipping with his teeth, and running his tongue up and down in long wet strokes.

“How can I look at you wearing those long-ass cardigans, knowing you’ve got this underneath? I can’t. My dick will be hard forever.”

I don’t think he even knew what he was saying he was having so much fun playing with my boobs, which, I admit were on the larger side as double d’s. They’d always been something of an embarrassment for me considering I was on the short and leaner side, so I tried to dress to hide them as best I could.

Now I felt proud, with Abel trying to pay equal attention to both of them. His hard cock pressed against my pelvis, and I moaned, shifting a little to get in a better position. Without a word, he lifted slightly, and I took the unspoken invitation and spread my legs wider so he could settle in between them.

My body welcomed him without resistance, and I swear the sound that came out of my mouth was nothing I’d ever made before.

“That’s a hell of a smile, Nadia.” I liked the way he said my name while he was inside of me.

“Hold still for a second. Let me just feel you,” I breathed.

He didn’t answer, just stayed hovering above me, staring at my face with a burning intensity, waiting for permission to move. I cocked my pelvis and gave it to him.

I've never been accused of being a noisy lover, at least not to my face, but there were several times over the course of our evening that I was concerned someone was going to do a well-check and knock on my hotel door. It was hours later we pulled apart from one another, sweaty and breathing heavily. I don't remember at what point I fell asleep, but I woke up to Abel sitting up in the bed, pulling on his jeans. He already had his shirt on. I blinked in the dark, barely able to see.

"Go back to sleep. I'm not ducking on you. I just think it's probably better for you if no one sees me leaving your room in the morning, right?" I didn't want him to go, but he was right. We broke rule number one of the model author relationship. People would talk, and it wouldn't be good. Especially for him.

He leaned over and kissed my forehead. "I'll see you for breakfast."

"I don't eat breakfast."

I heard him chuckle before he kissed me again. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Abel?" I asked him right before he reached the door.

"What, Nadia?"

"It won't be weird with us after this, will it?"

"Hell no. It won't be weird."

CHAPTER TWELVE

ABEL

No matter what we agreed to, shit got weird. It was bound to be weird. First of all, I made Nadia break cardinal rule number one. Second of all, while I might not have been outright lying to her, I was definitely hiding my role in our relationship, and when she found out she was likely never going to talk to me again.

And that was just unacceptable.

I had sex with Nadia. Not just sex. I had the most amazing, tender, loving sex I'd ever had with another woman. I made love to Nadia, and I wanted to do it again.

Too bad she wasn't talking to me.

She wasn't talking to me in a *no-contact* kind of way. I mean, there wasn't an argument or anything. But it was an extremely awkward drive back from Louisville, and after I unloaded the truck for her, I thought about kissing her goodbye, but she squashed that idea by saying she would call me and ran back into her house.

Her last spoken words to me were "I'll call you tomorrow."

It had been three weeks since then, I wonder what kind of time-space continuum Nadia was operating out of, because a

lot of tomorrows had passed since then, and my phone hadn't rung once. I mean, not from her. Devon was up my ass, though.

Someone took a picture of us kissing in the hallway outside the hotel and posted it in the event social media group. It wasn't done maliciously, but of course, Devon found out about it right away and had to ride my dick about it immediately. There was also a picture of me feeding her French fries the night of the meet and greet, and while I don't know why anyone would take a picture of that and post it—I was kind of grateful.

Feeding Nadia was hot. So I downloaded the picture of us and kept it on my phone. The one of me kissing her, too. Why shouldn't I? I was in the photos. It's not like I was being a voyeur on myself. Plus, I missed her. I could see her pacing in her apartment, trying to figure out what kind of damage she'd caused by sleeping with me when there was no damage, and it was nobody's business what two consenting adults did.

Also, I'd slipped her money wad from my glove box back into her tote bag when she wasn't looking, so I wasn't even on paid time. So take that.

Speaking of Devon, he would not leave me alone. My phone beeped at me for the thirtieth time and I pushed the button to answer the call. "Must you keep calling me about this?"

"Must you break every rule in your contract? You are a bodyguard. Your job is to guard her body, not fuck it."

"Watch your mouth, Devon." He wasn't going to talk about Nadia that way. I didn't give a shit if he was my current boss.

“Listen, we got another letter about the MMM signing. I need you to be sharp. Your flight comes in after hers and I won’t be there until the day after you guys get there, so I need you to go straight to the hotel. Do not pass go and do not collect two hundred dollars.”

I stopped mid-angry rant. “Another letter? What’s it say?” To be honest, I was kind of starting to think the letters were an act of a vengeful crybaby who never had any plans to begin with. Everyone seemed to really like Nadia. I couldn’t imagine anyone being so angry about her writing that they went through with such an elaborate scheme. It didn’t make sense.

“Pretty much the same thing. She’s a hack writer. She just got a lucky break, and they can’t wait to see her in Texas. No matter what they are planning to do, it’s pretty clear they are going to be there, so stay sharp.”

This was getting frustrating. “Devon, who do you have working on this besides me? I know you said I’m here to make sure nothing happens to Nadia, but this should really be under investigation if there’s a threat. I’m not saying there isn’t, but someone should be documenting and actively trying to find out who’s sending these letters. What are you going to do about this after Texas?”

Part of me wanted to know for Nadia, and part of me wanted to know for my own curiosity. If nothing happened in Texas, which I was really expecting at this point, did Devon think the letters were just going to stop? That if someone was intent on menacing Nadia they would just quit? I had so many additional questions, especially after dealing with Nadia myself. The math wasn’t adding up. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a stupid game. It reeked of jealousy

and honestly a lack of imagination. A scare tactic. Middle school bullying.

“You should tell her, Devon. I think she could handle it.” If he didn’t tell her, I would have to. Fuck the contract and fuck the money from this job. I didn’t feel good hiding things from Nadia and I didn’t want to think of the disappointment on her face when she found out either.

“If you breathe a fucking word to her, I’ll ruin you. Breach of contract means you won’t get paid and the publishing company will sue you. Do you have a nest egg big enough to go up against a top eight publishing company? Hm?”

Devon’s voice wasn’t low and angry. It was high-pitched and sharp, like someone on the verge of hysteria. Red flag on the field.

“You don’t scare me, Devon. I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but I’m not someone you can push around like that. Threaten all you want but I’ve followed the rules of this job and I fully intend to keep Nadia safe in Texas, with or without your stupid little contract. So fuck your attitude and fuck your tone.”

The line went quiet for a couple of seconds. “Look, Abel I’m sorry. There’s a lot of pressure on me from my superiors. There’s a lot riding on Nadia right now, a lot of money and expectations. Sometimes I hate my job, I really do.”

“I won’t let anything happen to Nadia, but I really think it would be better if she knew. I’m not going to tell her.” I assured Devon before he could squawk off again. “But you know her better than I do, and I think you should have a little trust in her. She’s quirky, not stupid.”

“I’ll talk to you in Texas.” That was all Devon said before he disconnected the call. I didn’t know much about public relations, but if it stressed him out this much, then maybe he should look into a different line of work.

And after talking to Devon, I was reminded of another thing. Nadia. I’d keep my promise to Devon, but I didn’t say I’d stay away from her outside of the job. I never promised anything like that. And while I’d given her the space I thought she needed after our night together in Louisville, that didn’t mean I was going to stay away indefinitely. Both Devon and Nadia were treating me like I didn’t have any feelings, and that shit was going to stop right now.

The phone rang four times, and I was expecting voicemail to pick up any second when I heard the breathy, “Hello?”

“Nadia, I was starting to think you forgot my phone number.”

“Oh. Abel. No, it’s not that. I’ve just been trying to get this book finished and I haven’t been talking to anyone, really.” I half believed her. She was the type of person to get totally immersed in her own mind and shut everything else out. I decided I wasn’t going to let her do that. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

It was, and it wasn’t. I missed her, and she didn’t even try to contact me after we’d slept together. It made me feel kind of cheap.

“Do you remember the last thing you said to me?”

“Um. I think we were finalizing flights for Texas, right? Did something change? You’re still going to make it, right?” Did she sound nervous? Did that mean she’d be upset if I didn’t make it?

“No, Nadia. I don’t mean our last text message. I mean the last words you spoke to me out loud. Do you remember what you said?”

“No?” She sounded genuinely confused.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Nothing but silence on the other end of the line. I didn’t even hear her breathing.

“That was the last thing you said to me. That was three weeks ago. It’s been twenty tomorrows since then, and you haven’t called. There’s me respecting your boundaries and giving you space—and then there’s you giving me the cold shoulder until I take the hint and disappear. What am I working with here?”

“I didn’t realize you were waiting for me to do that. I don’t know what to say to that. Things were weird between us, and I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

“Things are still weird between us, Nadia. Not talking to each other isn’t going to make them any less weird or uncomfortable. We’ve got two options, we can talk it out like two adults and come to a mutually beneficial conclusion, or we can ignore it like it didn’t happen until we run into each other again. Incidentally, that will be Texas, in a couple of weeks. I think about you every day. Every day, Nadia. I don’t want to think about someone who isn’t thinking about me, too. So, tell me now, so I can erase what happened out of my brain if I have to. Do you want me to think about you? Or do you want me to act like nothing ever happened and go back to being acquaintances? I need your input.”

“This is a lot, Abel. A lot. I wasn’t supposed to touch you. Ever. I broke a very important rule and I’ve been struggling

with it.”

Interesting concept about the rule-breaking. She wasn't the only one who violated the code.

“But what do you want to do about it, Nadia? Do you want to forget about it and ignore the chemistry between us? It might make things awkward for work but it's just one more event. right? I can disappear from your life after that, and you don't have to worry about it.”

“It's not just one more event, Abel. This is your industry, too. You don't want to be involved in rumors immediately upon your debut. I don't want that for you, you're better than that.”

“What if I left the industry? What if I said I don't want to be a cover model and never posed for another picture again?” I forgot she didn't know the modeling thing was just a cover. I couldn't tell her, but I was interested in her response to this question.

“They posted pictures of us in the event social media group, Abel. They were mocking you for being with me. It was a private moment between us and someone splashed it all over social media. Doesn't that bother you?”

“Nope.” Not even a little bit. I wasn't ashamed to be seen with Nadia, and we were just kissing in the photo. Nothing else. Nothing dirty, or indecent, or anything to be ashamed about, really. “Just answer the question, Nadia. Do you want me to stop thinking about you?”

“I think about you all the time. I'm so confused. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I mean I know what I'm supposed to do, but I don't want to. Does that make sense?”

More so than she even realized.

“That’s all I need, Nadia. You just keep thinking. And when you come to a point where you want to talk to me about it, I’ll be here. I can be a little more patient now that I know you’re thinking about me, too. I know you’re fighting a deadline, so I won’t pressure you. Just remember, next time you tell someone you’re going to call them, maybe make sure you don’t leave them hanging.”

“I’ll see you in Texas, Abel.”

“See you in Texas, Nadia.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NADIA

Packing for Texas was a nightmare. My mind was a mess because of my deadline, which I met by the skin of my teeth. Thankfully I got my draft off to my editor before the signing, so I wouldn't have to worry about finishing when I got home. But did anyone appreciate how hard it was to write a romance novel when your head and heart are consumed by thoughts of someone? Like, how do I write a love story when my own love life was such a jumble of conflicting emotions?

At least when I had no one in my life it was a complete fantasy from start to finish. Everything went how I planned it because the story was all in my head. It was damn near impossible to write a love story with two made-up characters when all I could think about was Abel. And I kept popping the two of us in the story where it didn't belong.

Let's not forget the ten thousand words I wrote in a fever one night, that I had to delete in entirety the next morning because it ended up being a long-winded love letter to the real-life man, and not anything to do with the book I was actually writing.

Plot twist, romance author can't handle her own love life. The readers would have a field day.

And the signing itself. Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem was a signing where MC authors and organized crime authors got together to sell books. I barely fit into it with my romantic suspense. Like, I don't even know how I got invited to this signing—but my indie days were over. Now I went where the publisher sent me and this was where they were sending me.

Not that I was complaining. There were some very big names at this event, and I would definitely be having some fan-girl moments. But imposter syndrome takes over the best of us, and it didn't matter how I got there, I would still be feeling like I didn't belong the entire weekend.

It was also the first time I would be seeing Abel since Louisville and I was sweating bullets. What was going to happen? Would he be happy to see me? Or would he be cold and distant because of the way I acted after Louisville? He hadn't tried to call me since the last time we spoke, and I was too nervous to initiate conversation regardless of what he'd said. I still didn't know what I was doing with him. I still didn't know if he actually had feelings for me. Abel Mick made me question everything about myself, and I hated that he had that kind of power over me.

Traveling by myself always made me nervous, and flying sent my anxiety skyrocketing, but I was so occupied with thoughts about Abel I didn't get a chance to worry about all the things that could go wrong, and before I knew it, a whole day of traveling was done, and I was checking into the event hotel.

But of course, my room wasn't ready. The concierge had me wheel my luggage next to a sectioned-off area by the check-in desk where other luggage was also waiting.

Apparently, a bunch of us were trying to check in early and the staff just hadn't been able to do the room turnover as quickly as they hoped. It wasn't a big deal, this kind of thing happened, especially with high-attendance events.

I was getting ready to settle into one of the cushy chairs in the vast lobby area to wait when my phone dinged. Luckily, I'd remembered to turn airplane mode off after I got off my flight. I'd forgotten to do that before and Devon had my ass about it.

Speak of the Devil.

"Hey Devon, are you here yet? My room isn't ready so I'm waiting in the lobby."

"Yeah, I got checked in a couple of hours ago."

Really? "You're lucky, there's a bunch of us waiting. I got my draft sent to edits yesterday before I left so I don't have to work on it right now. I was just going to read a book on my phone unless you needed me for something."

"Girl, don't wait down there by yourself. Want to get a peek at the event room? It's huge. I'm in here checking out the layout. No one's allowed in here yet because the tables are still being arranged but if you hurry and you're quiet about it, I'll let you peek."

I wasn't really interested in seeing the ballroom, I mean, once you've seen one you've seen them all. A signing room was a signing room until you put the authors and readers in it. That's when it got interesting. But Devon sounded like he was in a good mood, and it had been a while since he'd been anything but distant with me, so I figured I'd humor him and see what he was up to. He gave me directions on which way to go, still on the first floor, and I slung my tote strap over my

shoulder and took off down the first hallway. The bag was heavy on my arm, I'd have to clean it out after I got home from the weekend.

Down the hallway past the elevator and take a left. That's what Devon had said, but the hallway past the elevator looked like an employee passage. There wasn't anyone walking down that way and I got the distinct feeling I wasn't supposed to be there. Normally hotel corridors had carpet, but this was way past the lobby with all tile floors and deep grooves that must have been from wheel marks of carts being rolled over it endlessly.

I turned my head to look over my shoulder, briefly considering turning around when I heard a noise to my left. I didn't get a chance to see what it was before lightning flashed in front of my eyes and electricity flooded my entire body. Every nerve went AWOL, and I lost control of my body. My tote bag slipped off my shoulder and fell to the floor. I watched it in slow motion as convulsions racked through me. I didn't get a chance to scream before my legs went out from under me, a fat strip of tape was slapped over my mouth, and a dark cloth covered my head.

I couldn't have kicked if I wanted to as my body was lifted in the air by two sets of hands and carried straight down a hallway, then into another room. The only reason I knew that through the haze of my existence, was because they cracked my ankles on the doorframe and then slammed the door shut in a hurry. Starbursts of light exploded against the dark confines of my head covering and I cried out from the pain in my legs. The tape on my mouth blocked most of the sound.

“Shit lady, we're sorry. We didn't mean to hurt you. We just need you to be quiet and still for a bit.”

There was some generalized cussing as they paused, probably debating where to put me. My head hurt.

“Dammit Keith, make a little more noise, why don’t you?” One of the people, a man, snarled into the darkness as I was dumped unceremoniously on my butt against a wall. My hands were pulled behind my back and something was wrapped around my wrists to keep me from moving my arms. I couldn’t really tell what it was, but most likely a zip tie from the feeling of the thin material against my wrist. It wasn’t super tight, but I definitely wasn’t getting my hands out of it.

“Shut the fuck up, Aaron. And don’t say my name, stupid. Now she knows who you are.”

Now she knows who you both are, you dumbasses. Was I supposed to be scared right now? I was. I mean my body was frozen, partially from fear and partially from whatever they used to incapacitate me. The fear was there, for sure, but also a little irritation. Like...they were rough and crude, but they also seemed stupid.

Definitely not mastermind material.

The tape on my mouth wasn’t that tight, but I didn’t dare make a sound. They slapped it on so fast they didn’t bother making sure it was stuck down very well. With a little wiggling, I had the whole thing hanging on by one little piece and thus rendered it useless. But I kept my head still and my mouth shut, taking short, shallow breaths as best I could. I had to be smart here. Without knowing why they took me, I had to be observant and get as much information as possible. This would be easier to accomplish if they thought I couldn’t move or make noise. Dumbasses. All I had to rely on was my hearing, considering I had a bag on my head. The room

smelled like fresh paint. Strong enough to permeate the canvas over my face.

The men bickered back and forth for a moment, mostly just calling each other variations of the word “idiot” before there were three knocks on the door.

“Should we open it?”

“I don’t know, we locked it for a reason. I don’t think we should open it.”

“But he said he’d be here, didn’t he? I think we should open it. Look, we did what we were supposed to do, and we put her in here. I’m not sure what the plan is after this.”

The knocking got louder, then a cell phone rang and the first man spoke again.

“Yeah, we got her. Is that you at the door? Okay, geez I had to ask. Hold on.”

So there were two men and a third person at the door. That much I could figure. But as to why they had me tied up with my head in a bag, I didn’t know.

“You fucking idiots. You left her bag laying in the hallway. It’s a good thing I was right behind you fools because her shit was spread across the floor like a Goddamn roadmap. You might as well have a neon sign saying, “Kidnapped girl in here.”

The new guy’s voice was husky like he was trying to keep it lower for some reason.

“You coming down with a cold or something? You sound like you have a sore throat.” The first guy, Keith, I think his name was, said, “Don’t worry about what I’m doing. Just be

glad I was behind you to clean up. I have shit I have to do for a while, keep her in here and keep her quiet.”

There was something familiar about his voice, but I couldn't quite place it.

“What do you want us to do while you're gone?” the second guy, Aaron, asked.

“I don't give a shit what you do with her, just keep her quiet and alive. Rough her up if you want to, it's not my business. I'll be back in to wrap things up myself, later.” Then the door opened and shut again, and he was gone.

My blood ran cold at the implication of what the third man just said. He'd literally given them carte blanche to do whatever they wanted with me. I was a writer, my imagination was probably better than theirs at what that could possibly entail. I blinked back the tears that pooled in the corners of my eyes. Fear left a bitter taste on my tongue and I fought to keep the nausea down. I didn't know if it was because of my situation, or a side effect of being hit by a stun gun, but I was having trouble taking full breaths and my chest ached from the effort.

“What do you think he means by do whatever you want?” Keith asked. I was pretty sure he wasn't addressing me.

“I don't know, but what do you think he means by rough her up if we have to? I agreed to stash her here, not do to... other things. That's gross. I don't like it.” Aaron sounded scandalized by the thought.

“I don't either.”

I didn't dare say a word, but I was willing to bet everyone heard the sigh of relief I couldn't quite hide. The two in the room with me, the dumb ones, I could handle them. They were

stupid and not the type to rough anyone up. At least not on purpose, remembering my ankles against the doorframe. That other guy though, he sounded cold. And clearly the one in control of the situation. The worst part about it all was I still had no clue what I did to deserve this. What they wanted from me. What they hoped could be gained from locking me in a room. Was it ransom? I wasn't famous. Well, maybe just a little famous. But I wasn't ransom money famous. Did someone have a grudge? I know people were pissed that I wrote a romance novel without a happily-ever after-ending but that was hardly cause for a kidnapping. Maybe some heated exchanges in a social media reader group, but that was about it.

No matter how hard I thought about it I couldn't figure it out. And that was probably the scariest part of all.

I hadn't even been able to check into my room yet. There was no record of my even stepping foot in the hotel. Even if Abel came, he wouldn't know to look for me. Because if he did, I knew without a doubt he would find me.

But not if he didn't know I was missing until it was too late.

Sitting in silence wasn't going to do me any good. I had to do something, anything, to try to gain a little leverage with my attackers, who actually didn't seem like hardened criminals at all. From their conversation they didn't seem like the type to want to hurt me... maybe I could appeal to chivalry? Fuck it, it was a long shot, but I didn't have a lot of options. I'd written plot twists that reached further. *Here goes nothing*. Hunching over as much as I could with my hands behind my back I coughed, feeling the tape pull away even more and the cloth of the bag press against my mouth as I inhaled again.

Only silence greeted the action, so I couched again, letting out a little moan as I did.

“Hey lady, you okay?” I moved my head towards the sound, but obviously I couldn’t see anything with the bag on my head.

“Hey dumbass, she can’t answer you with that tape on her mouth.” That sounded like it might have been Aaron talking. “Hey, what are you doing? He’ll freak out if you do that.” A rush of cool air hit my face as the bag was removed from my head, taking the tape from my mouth with it. That little corner that had been hanging on let go with a snap and I winced at the sharp pain of it. I took my cue and coughed again, squeezing my eyes shut in mock pain and groaning. When I opened my eyes again a red-haired man stared down at me in concern. “Lady, what’s wrong?”

“My throat feels like it’s closing up. I think it might be a side effect from the stun gun.” I had no idea if that was a side effect of being zapped with a stun gun, but I was banking on them not knowing that either. I opened my eyes to see a second hovering next to the first man, this one with dark hair, buzzed close to his scalp. He looked scared.

“I think I need some water. Could I have a drink?” I whispered hopefully, trying to mimic a dry throat. The two men glanced at each other and then around the room. While they were preoccupied, I took the time to look as well. The room wasn’t very big and looked to be used as a storage area considering it was piled up with painting equipment, ladders, and other general construction debris. They must have taken me to an employee area. Come to think of it, both men were wearing blue jumpsuits like painting uniforms. Trying not to

get caught staring I got a peek of a business logo on the front of the coveralls.

They were part of the construction crew working on the hotel renovations? Weird.

“We don’t have any water here.” Buzzcut said. I was betting this was Keith. “Aaron, go out and get some from the vending machine.”

“That guy will kill us if we screw this up.” Aaron glanced towards the door and then at me again, a little worry showing on his face. I clenched my body, bent over, and groaned again; full theatrics. “Give me the key, Keith. I’ll go.” Keith reached into his pocket and pulled out an electronic door key, the same used for all the other rooms. My guess was they got the key to the room because they were working here, or at least pretending to work here. I hadn’t connected all the dots yet. I still didn’t know who the boss was or why I’d been taken. But I did know one thing—if they were willing to go get me water, then they’d have to let me drink it, and maybe I’d be able to con them into freeing my hands to let me do it.

It’s worth a shot, I thought to myself and the door clicked softly shut behind Aaron and I was left alone with Keith.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ABEL

I hated flying, it always put me in a shitty mood. It wasn't the being on the plane part that pissed me off, it was the getting to the airport early, going through security, and dealing with baggage claim and all the waiting... so much waiting.

It would have been more fun if Nadia and I had flown together, but the way the flights were booked Nadia would get in first. I got in a few hours after her and we had plans to connect at the hotel for dinner. We were going to have our talk if I had to sit her down and tie her to a chair.

Or a bed. That also sounded nice.

The hotel was huge, and I wanted to say it was nice, but large chunks of it were under construction, so maybe the better appraisal would be that it was *going to be* a really nice hotel, *someday*. The lobby was posh and polished, with lots of comfortable seating, but you could see entire hallways with walls covered in plastic and construction dust covering the floors. From what Nadia had told me previously, the fancy renovations were supposed to be finished months ago, but apparently running behind schedule.

The place was packed. There were people everywhere in various stages of coming and going. Some flopped in chairs, obviously tired from travel, some talking in excited groups,

meeting up together for the first time since the last event they'd attended. The lobby was crowded and loud, two of my least favorite things.

I pulled my phone out and texted Nadia, but she didn't answer. Just like she didn't answer when I texted her I'd gotten off the plane an hour earlier. Her phone was probably dead, or she was passed out napping in her room. I'd get checked in and try to get ahold of her later, it was still early in the afternoon after all and there wasn't an event planned for the evening. Actually, there was nothing scheduled until tomorrow, which was nice. Nadia and I could catch dinner together and I could finally get her alone so we could have a serious discussion. In bed. Without clothes.

I headed to the front desk and stood in line for check in behind six other people. It was going to take a minute, but I couldn't wait to get upstairs, get in the shower, and change out of my dusty travel clothes. It didn't matter if I'd been in the truck all day or sitting on a temperature-controlled plane flying—I always felt wrinkled and dirty after traveling.

I waited patiently, trying not to breathe in the heavy scent of cigarettes from the woman in front of me when a splash of color caught my eye. It was a red, hard-sided suitcase with white flowers and stickers all over it. There was only one person I knew with such a loud set of luggage, but why was her luggage sitting downstairs still? Did she not have a room yet?

I looked around but didn't see her sitting in any of the chairs or couches in the lobby. I picked up my phone and called instead of texted. It rang three times and went to voicemail.

Was her phone even on, or maybe it was dead? Devon and I had both nagged her about forgetting to charge her phone, and how important it was to be able to communicate, so why was she being so negligent?

I was looking at the floor when a familiar pair of blue loafers quickly passed by. Devon? What was he doing here so early? He wasn't supposed to fly in until zero dark thirty tomorrow morning. He came out of the elevator and looked to be in a hurry. The line I was in wasn't moving anyway, so I tried to flag him down.

"Hey, Devon, what's up, man?" Devon spun around; his customer service smile already fixed on his face until he saw me. Then the smile dropped like a load of bricks. And was that surprise on his face? I don't know why he'd be shocked to see me. I was right on time. He was the one who was early. Not that it mattered. I didn't give a shit about Devon's comings and goings. But I did care about Nadia's.

"Hey, have you seen Nadia? She was supposed to have checked in a few hours ago but I can't get her to answer her phone or text me back."

"Nads isn't here yet. Her flight got delayed so she's coming in later." Devon looked around nervously like he was trying to get out of the conversation as quickly as possible.

Her flight was delayed? But we left from the same airport. I would imagine if she didn't get to leave until after me, I would have run into her when I was flying out. That didn't sound right. I said as much to Devon.

"Look, I don't know what to tell you. Her flight got delayed and she won't be in until later. I just talked to her. Looks like she was answering my calls, not sure why she didn't answer yours. Trouble in paradise? Look, I don't care. I

have things to do. Why don't you get checked in and do what you need to do? She'll let one of us know when she's here. I have actual work stuff to take care of, so I have to go."

He dismissed me and walked away but stopped to scrape his shoe across the carpet.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked as he lifted his foot, grimaced at what he saw, and scraped his shoe across the lobby carpet again to dislodge it.

"I stepped in something earlier. Gross. These are Italian leather."

They were butt ugly is what they were, but he kept walking away from me, so I didn't get to vocalize my thoughts. I crouched down low and looked at the carpet as puzzle pieces clicked together in my mind. Right on the floor in front of me was a little round piece of candy with an S smashed flat by the bottom of Devon's shoe.

It was a skittle. A gaudy green piece of candy, the sour kind. I knew because they were the same kind I bought for Nadia on the way to Louisville. She ate half the package and then stuck them back in her monstrosity of a tote bag for later. She'd need a claw machine and a flashlight to ever find those damn things again. Weird that Nadia's favorite candy was stuck to the bottom of Devon's shoe. He must have been in a hurry to get away from me, not that I minded, but when I stood up again and looked, he was about to turn down a hallway about thirty feet away. Still not far enough away for me to miss how tight his pants were. So tight I could see the outline of a phone stuck in the back pocket of his tapered ankle jeans. Something about the size of that outline didn't sit right with me. Didn't Devon have a giant fucking tablet of a phone? It was almost the size of his damn head, which was why he kept

it in that little bag he carried around like rich chicks carried puppies.

Pulling my phone out of my own pocket I tried to close the distance between us as quickly as I could while staying out of sight. It wasn't hard, there were a shit ton of people in the lobby trying to check in, and Devon was in such a hurry to get to wherever he didn't look anywhere but in front of him. I don't know why I thought to do it, I didn't have a real reason. No concrete evidence or motive, just a nagging feeling in my gut. I punched the speed dial button for Nadia's number.

It rang once, no answer. I didn't expect there to be one. However, on the second ring, Devon stopped in his tracks in the middle of the hallway, grabbed a purple phone out of his back pocket and looked at the screen. I couldn't hear if it was ringing or if the volume was turned down and it just buzzed his ass cheeks by vibrating, but I recognized that fucking purple case. It rang on my end again and Devon grinned at the screen and just slid the phone back into his pocket. Then, without even looking to see if anyone was following him, he took a sharp left.

Oh, hell no, I couldn't lose him. That asshole had Nadia's phone, her favorite candy smeared on the bottom of his shoe, and he'd just lied to my fucking face about her whereabouts. No way was I letting this go. All my senses were tingling and the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up. I all but ran to catch up with him, not caring if he heard me. I succeeded in not bowling over any hotel guests, but when I turned the way he went I just found an empty hallway. It looked like most of it was shut down for construction, I wasn't sure anyone was even supposed to be there. There were a few other hallways that branched out to the right and left, but they weren't well lit and there wasn't a soul around. All the doors were closed and

there were wet paint signs everywhere. I had no idea where to go from there, but Devon couldn't have gotten far.

A faint beeping noise floated through the air a short distance in front of me. Followed by a soft "You motherfucker." I followed the noise down the hallway a bit and to the right to find a small alcove with a couple vending machines. A red-haired man in dark blue coveralls stood in front of one of the machines with a scowl on his face, rubbing a five-dollar bill across the edge of the machine trying to get the creases out. "You're going through this time." Then he cackled with satisfaction as the bills slid into the opening and disappeared. He punched a button and a bottle of water thumped to bottom towards the opening. He must not have heard me walk in because he jumped backward when he saw me, his face drained of color like he saw a damn ghost.

"Easy, buddy, I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing here, nobody is supposed to be down here." Yeah, okay, I could tell by the construction debris this probably wasn't guest services but why did he look so nervous about it?

"I'm actually looking for someone. Did a guy in tiny jeans pass by here a little bit ago? You wouldn't have been able to miss him, it would have been seconds ago. Ugly ass shoes, fast walking like he had a stick in his ass."

The man answered immediately. "No. I haven't seen anyone but you. Now you really should get out of here, it's restricted."

Goddamit. I'd have to turn around. I'd lost time going down the wrong hallway. I turned to go back the way I came when my toe kicked something on the tile floor sending it skittering into the vending machines and bouncing back

towards me. I looked down. On the floor was a little round piece of candy. As a matter of fact, there were a bunch of little pieces of candy, scattered haphazardly in the hallway. My eyes followed the trail to a little spot against the wall, dark against the dingy gray of the floor. It took a second for my eyes to recognize what I was looking at, but sure as shit it was a phone charging cord, kind of knotted up onto itself in a ball, but I could still make out the electrical tape wrapped around the end. I looked up to see the red headed guy staring down at the phone cord, his mouth open and jaw slack. He knew where it came from. That meant he knew where Nadia was.

We locked eyes and I knew in a second he was feeling brave, I recognized that look, I knew I was probably making the same face. He was looking for a fight, and any other time I would have gladly given it to him, but I wasn't fucking around when it came to Nadia, so before he could take a step towards me, I slid my hand behind my back to the holster hidden in my waistband and pulled my Ruger LCR out in one practiced move. He froze, arm mid swing and a look of terror on his face.

Smart man. To make my point clear I squeezed the grip a little so he could see the little red dot appear. He could see where that laser trace landed, but I bet he could guess it was centered on his forehead. Number one gun safety rule is, keep your hand off the trigger unless you're prepared to shoot. Well, my finger was on the trigger and ready to fucking party if he so much as twitched. I did not give a fuck—he was going to tell me where Nadia was.

“Look, don't shoot. I don't want any trouble.” His voice shook and his skin took on the color of milk.

“That’s great because I just have a few questions for you. See I lost something important to me, and I think you know where she is.”

“Oh, fuck me.”

“No, thank you. But we can definitely have a conversation instead.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NADIA

The room was empty and cold, which was odd for Texas. But it made sense since there was no furniture in the room or anything to take up space besides the two bodies that occupied it and some piles of painting equipment and supplies. I was still on my butt on the carpeted floor with my back against a wall, my wrists bound behind me. Pain radiated up my back, and I rolled my shoulders as best I could. My fingers tingled, the blood flow was restricted, and I didn't know how long I could stay in that position before real damage was done to my hands. I needed my hands to write. Then the absurdity of worrying about my hands hit me and I laughed. My hands were the least of my worries when I should be concerned about my life. Maybe the zapping I took scrambled my brains.

There were two knocks on the door this time before it opened, whomever was on the other side must have texted to make his presence known because Keith had his phone out but hustled to the door as soon as he heard the knock. I guessed Aaron had the only key. I kept my eyes down, trying to make myself as small as possible. I heard cloth moving as they moved across the room, like the sound of pant legs swishing together. I don't know why I thought of it. If I was in any other situation, I would have grabbed my notebook out of my bag to write it down.

But I wasn't in a normal situation. There was nothing normal about what was happening to me, and the traces of fear that had begun curling around my throat the minute I'd been grabbed and shoved in this room had turned to a choke collar as a familiar pair of shoes stopped on the carpet directly under my gaze.

"Why the fuck isn't her head covered? And where is her gag? And where the hell is Keith?"

They say the percentage of violent crimes committed by people who know their victim is higher than those committed by a stranger. I couldn't say the exact percentage, or where I even heard the statistic from, but it rang through my head as I stared eyeball to eyeball with Devon Crowley, my public relations assistant.

But he didn't look like the Devon I knew. The Devon that packed snacks in his purse and carried an extra phone charger because he knew I would forget mine. The Devon that asked for writing and editing tips and offered to beta read for me to help me work through my writer's block. Definitely not the Devon that handled my schedule, dealt with my fan mail, and made sure I made all my appearances and kept to my deadlines. Not the Devon who'd been with me since *The Pain of Loving You* hit it big, and my name ended up in every big box store across the country.

He was my *friend*. He'd even done a tampon run for me, for goodness sake. But this man wasn't my friend. This man had a stare cold as ice, and his usually sarcastic, smiling mouth was pressed in a tight grim line.

If you see your attacker's face, that usually means they're going to kill you.

My stomach dropped, and I squeezed my eyes shut, desperate to be anywhere else but here. Having my head uncovered, and seeing Devon's face, made everything so much more real. So much less a story. I couldn't disassociate. I couldn't hide from the truth.

"Devon, why?" I couldn't help but whisper. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Nadia," Devon hissed as he grabbed the hair hanging over my shoulder and yanked hard. Pain radiated from my hairline all the way down to my neck and I gasped. "I had a whole plan in place and that big idiot out there is ruining it."

What big idiot? Abel? Was Abel here?

An angry grunt grabbed Devon's attention, and he loosened his grip on my hair, just a little bit. I rolled my eyes to the side as much as I could without turning my head so my hair wouldn't pull further, but I could see Aaron frowning, the skin of his forehead wrinkled in displeasure.

"Hey man, this isn't what we agreed to. You said we were going to scare her a little bit. You didn't say anything about putting your hands on her like that. We didn't say yes to hurtin' nobody."

"Shut up. You took the money, so you're in it just as much as me. The plan was just to shake her up a little and scare her, but that was before I ran into Abel in the lobby, and he's looking for you." Devon looked down at me, his lip curled in disgust. "He was supposed to be the easy one to deal with. After all, that's why I hired him. Guy got let go from his last agency because he lost a charge under his watch, and that's why he had to resign and work for himself. No other agency will hire him, he's incompetent. I mean, if he was any good at

his job, you wouldn't be in this room right now and he wouldn't be pacing hallways trying to find out where you were." I just looked up at Devon, afraid to say anything to distract him from his villain monologuing. I still didn't know what his angle was, but if I let him go long enough, he would probably spill it.

"I can tell by the look on your face you're surprised, Nads." He said my nickname so easily, but instead of affection, this time his tone was clearly mocking me. "Spent a little too much time on your high horse to even notice anything going on around you, couldn't see the struggles of the little people."

Little people? I was almost afraid to ask, but the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Who are the little people?"

"I'm the little people, bitch." He all but screamed, the words bouncing off the walls with no furniture or wall hangings to absorb the noise. "I've been with you since the beginning, taking care of your shit, cleaning up your messes when you're too scatterbrained to even remember to eat or charge your phone. You're like a fucking toddler, Nadia. A child. And yet you hit it big with *The Pain of Loving You*. A book that didn't even have a happily ever after. You can't even call that a romance, Nadia. You lied to all of your readers."

I never noticed it before, but Devon had a vein in the side of his neck that turned purple the angrier he got. At the moment, it stood out boldly against his lightly tanned skin. Maybe it had always done that, but I'd never seen Devon angry before to notice. But Devon was angry now, and it sounded like he'd been angry for a long, long time.

“You know, I even thought I could be your editor. Hell, I took care of everything else for you. Why not make that linear move to editing your books and maybe I could get out from under the thumb of having to be your babysitter? But no, you couldn’t allow that, could you? It only took a five-page sample of my work for you to turn your nose in the air. So, I get stuck as your nanny, and you hit the bestseller list. Isn’t that a sonofabitch?”

“Devon, I didn’t know you wanted to be an editor.” I didn’t know. I had no clue; he’d never mentioned it.

“Of course, you didn’t. The publisher didn’t want you to be biased when you made your choice. It’s important for an author and editor to vibe well, and they didn’t want you to pick me just because you liked me.” Devon looked like he wanted to spit in the corner. The words *liked me* must have tasted horrible.

He wasn’t wrong, though. The author editor relationship was so important. The choice couldn’t be made lightly, and considering it was one of the few choices I had a say in one I signed with Wesley, I took it very seriously. And I remembered the sample edit I turned down very clearly. I’d left grammatical errors in there on purpose, including some words that could be spelled several ways but mean different things and some structure issues. It was clear he’d taken the sample pages through one pass of a digital editing software and barely even read the text. It was an easy decision to make, turning him down. The attention to detail, or lack thereof, was appalling. But I couldn’t exactly tell him that now.

Except the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I said something stupid. Again.

The slap across my face rocked my head back so hard it thumped against the wall, and I immediately tasted blood in my mouth. I'd bitten my tongue when my head snapped back. It wasn't terrible but it hurt, and my tongue started to swell immediately. I wished I had that water.

Two things happened then. Aaron yelled at Devon for hitting me. Devon turned to yell back at Aaron, and the door to the room opened with a bang, swinging so wide it hit the wall and bounced back. Keith walked in stiffly, with slow shuffling steps, until he was shoved to the side by a big hand and Abel strode into the room, a gun in his hand and murder on his face. I'd never been so happy to see someone so angry in my life. Until his eyes landed on me, huddled on the floor with my hands behind my back.

I didn't think he could get angrier. Even I was frightened.

"Who fucking hit you?" His threatening growl filled every corner and crevice of the room.

Nobody spoke, but I glanced over at Devon, who still held my hair in his hand.

"I'll fucking kill you. Let go." Devon, eyes wide, dropped my hair like it had caught fire.

"Where'd you get a gun?" Devon stared, fixated on the weapon in Abel's hands, like that was his primed concern at the moment, and not that his big plans had been foiled.

"Shut up and be still or I'll shoot you in the stomach and walk backwards to the front desk to report it so you bleed out before we get back." Devon shut up.

"Are you okay, baby?" I nodded, trying not to catch the warm fuzzies because he called me baby, but also feeling the

tears pricking my eyes because I was really scared, but Abel was saving me, and I could finally fucking breathe.

“My hands are tied and my arms hurt.” I tried not to sound pathetic, but even I could hear the unshed tears in my trembling voice. I was hoping he wouldn’t judge me. It had been a trying day.

“You.” He pointed the gun at Aaron. “Get her hands free, help her up and walk her over here to me. And you.” He pointed to Keith, who was just kind of watching sullenly until he saw Able was talking to him. Then he stood up straight and listened. “You take whatever was used to restrain her, and you do the same to him.”

Devon immediately tried to negotiate. “Don’t listen to him. There’s three of us and only one of him. He can’t shoot all of us.”

Keith replied by grabbing a plastic tube of zip ties from a pile in the corner and stalking over to Devon, who couldn’t move because Abel still had the gun trained on him. Aaron bent over me with a utility knife and slice through the plastic around my wrists. His hands were gentle as he helped me to my feet and walked me over to where Abel stood. Then he turned and spoke to Devon. “Yeah, the odds are even better if we know we won’t get shot at all. Also, you’re a dick.”

Abel nodded at Keith, satisfied with his answer. “I knew you guys were probably smarter than he was. How did he get you to do this?”

Keith looked embarrassed. “We’re working on the hotel restorations. He offered a lot of money to the both of us to help him pull off a prank on this author. It wasn’t supposed to be anything terrible. Just grab her and keep her here for a while, give her a scare. By the time we started working with

him it got a little darker, and less of a prank. We really needed the money, but I swear to God I didn't sign up to harm anybody."

Aaron nodded in agreement. I kind of felt sorry for them. They had been really nice to me through the whole ordeal, even though they were doing what Devon hired them to do. One thing didn't make sense, though. "Who tased me?"

Both sets of eyes went to Devon, who shrunk back against the wall, struggling against the bonds around his wrists.

"You what?" Abel roared, and a red ball of light, similar to a laser pointer, appeared in the space between Devon's eyes.

"We didn't tase her, we just carried her." Aaron almost bit his tongue trying to get the words out. I didn't blame him. Abel looked like he was going to shoot them all.

"I'm okay Abel. I'm okay." I put my hands on his arm, no pressure, just resting them there so he could feel me. So he could know I was okay. I still had so many questions, but the two extras in the room were clearly cartoon lackeys and I didn't really want Abel to unalive them.

"I think we can handle this from here on our own, don't you?" I don't know what came over me. It wasn't the time or the place, and it was wholly inappropriate.

But I leaned in and nuzzled my face in the crook of Abel's neck, leaving a little kiss there. Just a show of affection. A *thank you* for saving me.

He immediately turned the gun on the two men I was trying to help out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ABEL

“You guys beat it. Did he pay you yet?” Both men shook their heads. That was a negative, then. Typical. I wonder if Devon ever planned on paying them at all. His whole plan looked thrown together at the last minute, but I knew that couldn’t be true. After all, I was part of his plan, wasn’t I? And if that was the case, that meant Devon had been working at this for a long time. Even more pathetic that he was so bad at the whole villain thing. “Okay, here’s how I see it. This here is a personal problem between us three. You guys can either cut your losses and kick rocks right now, and don’t say shit to anyone on your way out the door, or you can hang out here and help us deal with the police when they get here.”

Devon, who’d been kneeling on the floor with his hands behind his back ever since the red-headed guy restrained him with the zip ties, scoffed at the two men. It was an oddly pretentious look, considering the position he was in. “You think you’re just going to walk out the door and get away without any repercussions? If I’m going down, you are, too.”

The two men looked nervous, which was good. Nervous men listened to the most alpha man in the room. That was obviously me, but maybe he needed a reminder. I crossed the floor in two seconds. The room wasn’t very big, and with one boot kicked Devon right in the kidney, knocking him onto his

side. As soon as his face hit the floor, I put the same boot on the back of his neck, not hard enough to crush it, but firm enough to keep his ass on the ground no matter how he wiggled. He wheezed and gagged like I'd broken something. I knew for a fact I hadn't. He was just very delicate.

“I think you forget the fucking position you're in, Devon. Right now, you're my bitch, and before you get hauled away, I have some questions I want answered. Then I'm going to give Nadia time to do whatever she wants to you. And I hope one of the things on that list is making you cry.” I didn't have to look back to know the two men had left the room. The sound of the door banging shut was answer enough. I had no doubt those two would beat it right out the door without a word to anyone. And if Devon tried to nail them for this job, Nadia and I would get a case of amnesia. Devon was the villain here; he was going to take the fall for all of it. But first we needed to find out *why*.

“Abel, I don't think he can breathe.” Nadia pointed to the floor, where Devon lay unmoving, his forehead pressed against the ground and his ass in the air while I held him in place with my foot. He could breathe just fine, but she looked worried about it, so I moved my leg and hauled him roughly back up to his knees by one arm. And just in case he thought about fighting with me, I reminded him who was holding the gun by keeping it pointed at his face. I had to look at Devon, because if I looked at Nadia, and saw that little trickle of blood leaking out of the corner of her mouth again, I was going to put a bullet in Devon anyway, and we'd both be off to jail.

“Start talking Devon.” I scooted closer to where Nadia was standing, still keeping my attention on Devon, but wanting to feel her body heat. Knowing she was alive and okay kept me calm, and my trigger finger less twitchy.

“Seriously. Where did you get the gun? Didn’t you just come here from the airport?” Devon’s posture changed, and I knew by the sag in his shoulders he was about all out of fight. I think he was finally realizing he was in a losing position and had no choice but to follow orders and engage. But seriously, that was the first thing he had to say?

“It’s my gun. I always carry. Just because you don’t have to have it concealed in Texas doesn’t mean I want to advertise it. And before you ask a stupid question, I did fly with it. I packed it in my checked luggage, all legal like and everything. You’re the one who hired me, dumbass. How did you think I was going to do my job without a weapon? Slap an attacker to death?”

“You were never going to meet an attacker, Abel. You were just a ruse to keep the publisher off my back while I pulled this off.”

“Pulled what off? And what are you talking about? When you talk about hiring Abel, I’m assuming you don’t mean as a cover model.” Oh man, here’s where it was going to get hairy. I should be the one to tell her.

“He hired me to be your bodyguard at signings while they tried to figure out who was sending you threatening fan mail.” I said the words without looking at her. I made it look like I was keeping my attention Devon, but in reality, he wasn’t going anywhere tied up like that, and I really just didn’t want to see the look on Nadia’s face when I admitted I’d been hiding that from her.

“Oh.”

Oh? That was it?

“You don’t sound mad that I was hiding that from you.” From my experience, sounding not mad was a sure-fire sign that a woman was pissed beyond measure. I finally turned my head to look at Nadia, who was staring at me with a strange look on her face. When our eyes met, she just shrugged.

“I mean, I knew what you did for a living. We talked about it a little bit back in Louisville, remember? Although I knew you worked in private protection before then, I just didn’t know you were doing it with me. All models have day jobs. It only makes sense that you do, too. All it took was an internet search to find out what you do now. It wasn’t a secret. And before you look at me like I’m a weirdo, think about it this way—I wasn’t about to get into a car and drive several hours out of state with a guy I didn’t at least do a cursory background search on. I’m scatterbrained. I’m not a complete idiot.”

She had me there.

Then, as if she just remembered something important, her head whipped around and her attention was once again on Devon. “Wait a minute, you said I got hate mail? Why? Because of *The Pain of Loving You*? Because of the ending? Are you serious?”

Devon had the balls to roll his eyes in disgust. “Yes, you did get hate mail. Except you never got to see it because Wesley decided they were going to handle checking your fan mail when it was always something I took care of for you. They’re the ones that made me hire Abel. Well, they made me hire someone. I picked you on purpose.” He grinned. I growled and took a step towards him. The smile fell off his face instantly.

“What’s the point of hiding hate mail from me?” Nadia was having trouble putting the pieces together, and I didn’t blame her, but I’d been working over the issue for a while now, and I was pretty sure I had it figured out.

“Devon was behind the hate mail, but before he could get any of it to you, the publisher found out about it. Well, they found out about the letters, but didn’t know who they were from. You were the one sending them, weren’t you, Devon?” He didn’t answer, just pressed his lips together and refused to say a word. I didn’t need him to. His silence said everything. “So here’s what happened, Nadia. Good old Devon here was trying to throw you off your game. Why? I don’t know yet. But he figured if he scared you enough, it would fuck up your mojo and you wouldn’t be able to write. If you can’t get your books out on time, you’re in breach of contract. If you break the contract, you lose your publishing deal. No deal. No fame. No money.”

Devon rolled his eyes and Nadia didn’t say anything, so I continued my Sherlock Holmes revelation. “When the publisher found out about the letters, he had to make it look like he was keeping them from you for your own protection, even though it was fucking with his plans. So it was the publisher’s idea to hire a bodyguard, right? I bet that really threw a wrench into your plans.”

Devon started laughing. It’s like he forgot I had a gun pointed at his head. He definitely looked too cocky for a guy on his knees in a storage room. “I hired you because you were easy to manipulate. I got your name from Larry Fry of Castle Security in Ann Arbor. He told me all about how you used to work for him until you fucked up a job he gave you. How you were supposed to protect an out-of-town guest, and you lost

her. How no one would hire you to work for them, so you had to go solo. Of course, I hired you. You're a grade A screw up."

Now it was my turn to have my mouth open in shock. *Fucking Larry Fry?* That was the story he was telling people? And how much of a piece of work was Devon, actually being proud of what he was saying.

Nadia's eyes flared and she said, "But that's not what happened at all." Both of us turned our attention to her. "Abel didn't get fired for screwing up a job. Larry Fry was working with that rich girl. Wasn't she trying to fake her death to get out of some criminal charges she was facing for financial fraud? The agency placed Abel as her bodyguard as a ruse while she dipped off the radar, but Abel didn't let her out of his site and when she tried to disappear, he brought her back to the agency. She ended up facing charges and getting a little jail time, didn't she?"

I was so fucking impressed with her. If we were in any other situation, I probably would have had a boner.

"She got a suspended sentence and Larry Fry got a slap on the wrist for obstruction of justice. I quit working for him because he was a douchebag, and I opened my own business. I do just fine with work. My clients come to me."

Devon gasped at the words coming out of Nadia's mouth. "How do you even know that?" He hired me and he didn't even do a background check on me? I bet he didn't even know I used to be a cop.

"Because, Devon, it was on the fucking news like two years ago. Also, it came up first thing in the search engine when I typed his name in. I did that look up before I went on a road trip with the man. You couldn't do that much before you hired him to be a patsy in your nefarious plot to traumatize,

kidnap, and... Wait... what were you going to do with me? You don't even have a weapon. Dingle berry and Dingle Dufus from earlier weren't going to do anything. What was your master plan?"

"I was going to leave you in here."

"Excuse me?" Nadia asked, like she didn't hear him the first time. I echoed her sentiments. I'd been thinking the same thing.

"I didn't want to kill you or anything, Jesus, Nads. I just wanted to fuck things up for you. You were never supposed to see me, but that got shot to shit when they took the bag off your head." My blood turned to acid when I heard him say he put a bag on her head. "I was just going to restrain you and leave you here overnight. Then the guys were going to remember they left something in the room, and 'find' you in here the next day. You'd be rescued, no one would know I was involved, and the trauma would surely fuck you up."

"You're mental." I wanted shoot him.

"And you're kind of an idiot," Nadia said.

I almost succeeded in not laughing, but when Nadia said that Devon looked like he'd just swallowed shit. "I mean, you screwed up in the beginning by getting caught sending hate mail. Which is stupid, because every author gets hate mail. For some of the dumbest stuff, too. It's part of the job."

In his defense, some of these letters were really fucked up, and I was glad she didn't see them. She didn't need that kind of imagery in her nightmares. This botched kidnapping was bad enough.

Nadia continued, pacing between Devon and me with her eyes towards the ground, lost in her own mind as she rattled

off the ways Devon was a dumbass. “I mean, this is why you didn’t get picked to be my editor, Devon. Seriously, a complete lack of attention to detail. No research, no context, no planning or forethought. I feel like I shouldn’t even be mad at you right now. You’re a Darwin Award contender.”

“You bitch.” Devon raged so hard, he almost knocked himself over. “This is exactly your problem. You say whatever’s on your mind without thinking about anyone else. There’s no one else in your little world besides you, is there? As long as you have caffeine, candy, and your notebooks, all’s well in Nadia land. Well, let me tell you something, the rest of us have to claw our way to success. We don’t get publishing deals that land in our lap. I’m so tired of cleaning up after you. I’m the one doing all the fucking work. I deserve the rewards.”

“How’s that working out for you?” Nadia laughed. I couldn’t believe she could be so nonchalant.

“Don’t go so easy on him, Nadia. Hey Devon, why don’t you tell her about the arsenic poisoning?” I raised one eyebrow at him in challenge. He clearly did not want to say anything about it, but I wouldn’t let him sit it out.

“Excuse me, what?” I sighed. She deserved to know.

“Devon had your lunch poisoned in Detroit. That’s why you were up hurling half the night. You only ate the cookies, and that’s likely why you only got a mild case of sickness. I snagged the lot of what was left over and sent it out for testing. Everything in the freaking box had traces of arsenic in it. If you’d eaten all of it, you’d have been in the hospital. You could’ve died.” I’d hesitated saying it, mostly because it made my blood run cold to think of Nadia dying at all, much less right in front of me, but it had to be said. I still didn’t know how he managed it, considering he wasn’t even there, and no

one else had gotten sick, but I knew it was him. Without a doubt.

“Arsenic poisoning? You had me poisoned? Because you were butthurt over an editing job you didn’t get? You whiny little bitch.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have died. She assured me she didn’t use that much.” Devon rolled his eyes, but then shut his mouth with a snap, realizing he’d said too much.

“Who’s she?” Nadia shrieked; all composure gone. “You had me poisoned, and you had someone help you, someone I *know*.” She gasped and whirled around. “I threw up in front of you because of him. You heard me blow up the bathroom multiple times.”

I nodded, dead serious. “I held your hair back while you prayed for God to take you home.”

“Oh, shut up.” Nadia slapped my arm. It’s like she couldn’t remember who she was supposed to be mad at.

“Look, I didn’t poison you. He did.” I gestured with my gun to Devon.

Nadia looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she walked over to Devon and slapped him right across the face with her open hand. He gasped, a fully feminine sound, and stared at her like she grew two heads. Nadia looked down at her hand, the palm getting redder by the second. Dissatisfied, she balled the hand into a fist and cracked Devon right under the chin, knocking him straight back until he was flat on his back with his knees still bent underneath him. He screamed in pain. I winced. It didn’t look good either.

I almost thought about moving him back into a kneeling position, but Nadia wasn't done with him. She straddled his chest, her legs on either side of him, and went to town on the guy with both fists, clocking the shit out of him while he cried and begged her to stop.

I was going to stop her, too. Probably. In a minute or two. But the door blasted open, and the cops swarmed in. Cops I hadn't even called yet. I could only imagine what they thought, busting into the room to see me with a gun, and Nadia straddling a man with his hands tied behind his back, punching his fucking lights out.

My job was pretty alright sometimes.

EPILOGUE

Nadia

Two weeks later

“It’s still hard to believe all that happened.” I snuggled into the crook of Abel’s arm as we settled in to binge-watch all the episodes of my favorite show I hadn’t been able to watch since I was on deadline. We were at his place because his apartment was nicer than mine. And by nicer, I meant cleaner since my house gets a little cluttered when I’m doing nothing but writing. He had all the fixings for a good session, sour gummy worms, gummy bears, licorice whips, and, of course, my sour skittles. And a couple of beers to wash it down.

“Look, I was there, and I still don’t believe it. Are you sure you aren’t mad at me? You know, for hiding the fact I was hired to be your bodyguard and pretending to be your cover model?”

I squeezed closer to him on the two-and-a-half-man chair, finally getting him to scootch his butt so I could lie across him with my legs laid over the armrests. Oh, I was soooo mad at him. Not. “Considering you saved me from the most Boris and Natasha kidnapping ever, I’ll give you a pass.” I yawned and

tried to cover it with my hand, but Abel caught me and kissed me right on the mouth instead. A quick little peck. He did that sometimes. It was like a pat on the butt for him. I didn't hate it. "Why? Were you faking everything?"

"What, like wanting to sleep with you? Is that what you're asking?" Pretty ballsy of him to say that while his hand was snaking inside my sweater to palm my boob. He bounced it in his hand like a water balloon. "You think I could fake that kind of erection? Woman, you had me on fire. Still do." The hand moved stealthily from one boob to the other, repeating the motion.

"If you faked it, I faked it." Covering my smile by shoving a gummy worm in my mouth and chewing.

"Nobody faked it," he roared, removing his hand from under my shirt and pinching my thigh with it. "Let's just get that out of the way right now. If you want me to prove it right now, I can." There was no need for that. I could feel just how much he wasn't faking it by the pressure underneath me from where I sat on his lap.

"Maybe later." I laughed and snuggled in tighter. Of course, there'd be later. Abel was insatiable. He'd spent every night with me since the day Devon took me. He was with me at the police station where we went through hours of questions, and we both gave our statements. He changed his flight so he could fly home with me, and he turned down his next job so he could stay with me until after the trial was over, just so I felt safe.

Not that I had anything to worry about with Devon. He wasn't going anywhere but prison.

"Weird how Keith and Aaron went right to the police and turned themselves in." Abel had given them a get-out-of-jail-

free card and they admitted to their crime, anyway. They were the ones who sent the police to the hotel to get us. They were probably worried someone was going to get shot.

“I don’t think it’s weird. Good people will always try to do the right thing. Now, I’m not saying those two were angels, but I think they were two guys who got mixed up in something bigger than they thought, and if they had known what it was ahead of time, they never would have agreed to help Devon. It’s a shame they’re in trouble now, too. Even though you said you didn’t want to press charges.”

It was true, they admitted engaging in criminal activity and kidnapping was a felony. But at least they were getting a reduced punishment for going to the cops in the first place. And I’d asked for leniency on their behalf. Whatever good that would do.

“Aside from everything Devon did, or tried to do, the real shocker to me was the arsenic poisoning. And we never would have thought it was anything other than food poisoning if you hadn’t had the food checked.”

Abel’s laugh rumbled underneath my back, and I knew he wasn’t laughing about the poison. He was laughing about Devon’s audacity. “Yeah, that dipshit tried really hard to tell me I was wrong when I tried to bring it up. He didn’t think I’d have it tested on my own. Literally, anyone can have an arsenic test done. It’s a freaking kit they mail you, just like those DNA result things. You send the tubes back, and they email you the results. Science is crazy.”

Yeah. Crazy.

“And the fact that he had Anna help him just blows my mind. I mean, I guess people will do anything for a little bit of money and clout these days. But Anna? I’ve known her for

years. I'd been attending her signing since I first started publishing. Hell, I fought the publisher to let me go to that dead-ass event." I shoved another handful of worms in my mouth and washed it down with a swig of beer. It wasn't the best flavor combination.

"From what I understand, and what she told the cops when they brought her in, was Devon not only paid her, but he promised to use his industry connections to save that dead ass event." Abel's hands were running up and down my arms now, light enough to send a little buzz of electricity zooming everywhere he touched.

"Well, it wasn't all bad. You got me out of the deal." Abel nuzzled his face into my neck and smiled. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it. A soft smile. A secret smile. I wish I had my notebook handy so I could write a description down to remember always. But if I reached for my notebook, I'd have to get off Abel's lap, and that didn't sound like fun. Plus, he was nosy, and he'd want to read what I wrote. I stayed where I was and hoped I remembered what I wanted to write later.

"That's not all. Wesley gave me an extension on my deadline. You know, for my trauma. That, and I signed a sweet new book deal for when this contract is finished. No rush, though, it's on my own time. I was thinking of releasing it for MMM next year since I missed the signing this year, what with me being in a storage room with a bag on my head."

"Is it a motorcycle, mobster, or mayhem book?" Abel asked, and I secretly liked that he remembered the theme of the signing he hadn't even got to attend either.

"Oh, it's mayhem for sure." I took another swig of beer. "Very pew pew."

“What’s it about?” He asked slowly. I was pretty sure he had an idea before I told him.

“It’s about this bodyguard who has to go undercover as a book cover model, and he has to save his client from a kidnapping.”

“Oh my God, Nadia, that’s the best. It’ll be a bestseller. Get rich and rub it in Devon’s face that he actually helped you write your next bestseller.” Abel laughed so hard I jiggled in his lap. He still had a boner. “Better yet, dedicate the book to Devon and send a copy to him in jail. Oh, that would be the tits.”

“I’ll do all of that and more. I have the perfect model in mind for the cover, too.” I didn’t move, didn’t dare breathe, waiting for Abel’s reaction.

“Shit, Nadia, no. You do not want me on the cover of your book.”

“Oh yes, I do. So does Wesley Prints. They think it’s a brilliant idea. I already asked Matteo if he wanted to do another shoot, and he can’t wait.”

“Bullshit, he said that. Matteo hates me. He made fun of my nipples.” Abel was really hurt over his nipples, but I had no idea what that was about.

“Come on, Abel, are you a can of cream of mushroom, or are you a bowl of beef stew?”

I shrieked as I was launched into the air. Abel followed me up out of the chair and slung me over his shoulder, fireman style. “I’ll show you beef stew, woman.” And he carried me straight down the hall and into his bedroom.

And the things we did after that had nothing at all to do with soup of any kind.

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Desiree is a snarky romance author from Northwest Ohio with a completely healthy addiction to anime and snacks. She also writes paranormal romance under the pen name D. Gemini.



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