



Until APRIL
UNTIL HER **BOOK SIX**

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AURORA ROSE
REYNOLDS

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Until APRIL

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Dedication

To every single woman in the world.

You are powerful. You are beautiful. You are enough.

Be unapologetic as you seek out happiness, because your story is your own.

Chapter 1

April

“AT NUMBER ONE for the eighth week in a row is ‘If I See You Again’ by The Fallen. I think I speak for every woman in the world when I say I wish that song was about me,” the female DJ says, and I quickly turn off the radio before the song begins but still hear the lyrics whisper through my mind, having memorized them without even trying.

When I see you again, I'll be the man you need.

When I hold you again, I promise to never let you go.

I left so much unsaid.

I should have told you what you meant to me.

Now I live each day with a hole in my heart.

If I see you again, I'll take my shot.

If I see you again, I'll lay all my cards on the table.

I grit my teeth as my fingers clench the steering wheel. It's been four years since I last saw Cohen Michel, with his dark hair, crystal-blue eyes, and lean body covered with ink. Still, it feels like yesterday. I need to get over him.

I *should* be over him, but he won't let me heal. His voice haunts me every time I turn on the radio, his image haunting me every time I look at the TV. I can't even go to the grocery store anymore without coming across him. I know Cohen is not the one for me, not after watching my sisters and cousins fall in love with men who'd fight tooth and nail to be by their sides. But even knowing that doesn't make it easier.

I pull into the driveway in front of my townhouse, shut down the engine, then groan when my cell phone rings. If I had any other job, I might ignore it, but as a realtor, every missed phone call could be thousands of dollars lost.

A few years ago, I decided I didn't want to work for anyone anymore, and since then, I've been building my empire brick

by brick. It hasn't been easy as a woman in an industry where men are the ones normally calling the shots, but I've learned quickly to not take no for an answer and to use every asset I have.

It's thrilling, making and closing deals, but it's also exhausting, working seven days a week from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night. Don't get me wrong—I have no problem working my ass off, because I have big plans that are just floating at the tips of my fingers. But there are days when I just want to stay home, put on PJs, and veg in front of the TV for hours.

Picking up my phone, I frown when I see it's my dad's cousin, Kenton, calling. It's not that I don't talk to him, but I can't recall a time that he's ever called me.

"Hey, Uncle Kenton," I answer as I exit my car, slamming the door with my hip while juggling my oversized leather handbag, reusable coffee mug, and cell.

"Hey, April, you doing okay?" he asks as I head up the walkway toward my front door.

"Yep, what's up?" I ask, too hungry for all the niceties.

"I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot." I stop at my front door and put my key in the lock, then push inside, taking a deep breath. There really is nothing like being home, especially after a long day.

"I'm not sure you remember my friend Kai, but his daughter already lives here and is going to Vanderbilt, and his oldest son, Maxim, is looking to move to the area and open a business," he says, and my heart does a strange little thump as a memory from when I was sixteen—sharing my first kiss with an eighteen-year-old Maxim in the middle of the dark woods when we we're supposed to be playing flashlight tag—floats through my mind. The first and only time I ever saw him, a kiss I must have replayed over and over in my head a million times after it happened.

"I..." I clear my throat. "I kind of remember him." I kick off my heels, then pick them up before heading up the stairs to

my first floor. “What do you need from me?”

“Maxim is coming into town next weekend and needs a realtor to set up a few viewings. He’s also trying to figure out if he should buy a club or bar that is on the market or build something from the ground up.”

“I might be able to help him with that. Do you mind sending me his information so I can reach out to him directly to find out what he’s looking for exactly?”

“Yeah, I’ll text it to you when we hang up.”

“Great.” I hear him take a deep breath. “Is there anything I need to know about this guy?” I ask, because a lot of time has passed since I saw him last, years ago.

“I gotta be honest with you. I’ve known Maxim his whole life. He was a good kid, and now he’s a good man, but that doesn’t mean he’s not intense.”

“Intense?” I repeat, dropping my bag on the kitchen island before heading up another set of stairs and right to my bedroom. I flip on the light, then hit the button on the remote to close the blinds before going into my closet and placing my heels in the only empty spot on the shelf.

“He’s a good guy.”

“You already said that.” I roll my eyes while wiggling out of my skirt.

“Just know that I’m only a phone call away if you two bump heads on anything.”

“Are you trying to scare me, or bring me a new client?” I smile while putting on a pair of my favorite sweats.

“Just be careful.” He sighs.

“Right.” I shake my head. “Send me his information. I can handle myself,” I assure him, padding out of my bedroom and back downstairs to the kitchen.

“I know you can,” he says thoughtfully as I open the door to the fridge and take out the chicken I left marinating in a mix of

orange juice and spices this morning. “Maybe I should be worried about him.”

“That would probably be wise. You should call and warn him now.”

“I might just do that.” He laughs before we say our goodbyes and hang up.

The thing is... I’m not joking. I’ve found that most men find me too gruff, too aggressive, too forward. They don’t know how to handle a woman who isn’t willing to lie down and accept whatever fate someone else chooses for them.

And I sure as hell am not going to make myself smaller just to make a man feel better about himself.

STANDING IN FRONT of the full-length mirror in my bathroom, I check my reflection to make sure I haven’t gone overboard, which I have a tendency to do on occasion. I love makeup, clothes, and shoes, so there are times I look like I’m ready for a night out on the town rather than a day of selling houses.

Today, I look the part of a professional, with my ankle-length black slacks, black tank, and a little pizzazz added by my blazer with its leather detailing. When my watch buzzes on my wrist, I flip it over and smile when I see it’s Harris confirming I’m picking him up at his house in two hours. It’s Wednesday, my favorite day of the week, the one day I get to spend with my part-time assistant and friend.

After sending him a thumbs-up emoji using my watch, I head for my closet to grab my black patent leather Louboutin heels and carry them downstairs. I drop them on the floor next to the island in the kitchen, then slip off my blazer, hanging it on the back of a chair at the bar, then press the button to turn on the coffee pot. Once I make myself eggs and toast, I hit the button to open the glass garage door in my living room and take my plate and coffee with me outside to eat on my screened-in porch.

Eight months ago, my sister May got a teaching job in a small town near our parents, so I decided that rather than

renting another apartment, I'd buy a townhouse. It didn't take me long to decide on my place after I settled on a location, but I did have to wait for my unit to be built, which was not exactly ideal. That said, it was worth the frustration. My twenty-two hundred square foot home is unique in lots of ways, but my favorite feature is the fact that, with the press of a button, a wall opens up in my living room, giving me indoor/outdoor living that looks kick-ass, especially with a view of the forest behind my place.

Settled at my outdoor table, I turn on the news for background noise while I eat my breakfast and scroll through emails on my phone. When I see that Maxim has written me back, I open it up and smile as I read his reply to the latest list of homes I sent him to look over.

April,

Though I appreciate your use of my entire budget, I have no desire to raise horses or cows on two hundred acres. I would also rather not be over thirty minutes from the nearest grocery store. What would happen if I needed to run out to pick up milk in the morning? I think you need to go back to the drawing board. We can talk about what you come up with next and catch up tomorrow evening over drinks.

Refusing to think about why the idea of coming face-to-face with him makes me nervous, I quickly email him back.

Maxim,

I would like to remind you that you didn't like any of the homes I previously sent you. I believe your exact words were "I don't want neighbors in case I decide to skinny dip or walk outside naked." In regards to purchasing milk, there is a Dollar General ten minutes from that estate, where you can easily buy milk, or if you did decide to keep the cows, you could go out in the morning and get it fresh from the source. You could even do that naked, if you so desired. All that said, I aim to please, so I will continue to search for the perfect house for you.

As for drinks, I'm not sure that will be possible. I'll let you know.

I press Send, then set my phone down and eat what's left of my breakfast before going back inside to dump my dishes in the dishwasher and finish getting ready for work.

Forty-five minutes later, I pull up and park in front of the assisted living housing unit Harris and his wife Molly moved into a year ago when they got married, then shut down the engine and grab my bag off the passenger seat. I get out and head up to his front door, and before I can even ring the bell, I hear a loud bark, then a moment later the shuffling of feet before the door opens.

"A-pril." Harris gives me his handsome smile, hugging me with one arm before opening the door to let me inside. Two years ago, I met Harris when I started working for his father's realtor office, and it didn't take us long to become fast friends. Before him, I had never met someone with Down Syndrome, but I learned quickly that people like him are more than just an extra chromosome and identifying facial features. He and his wife are two of the kindest people I have ever met in my life, and their positive outlook and determination to succeed despite having what most consider a disability only made me respect and love them more.

"Where's Molly?" I ask, petting Ox, their black lab, before stepping around him.

"I- am here." Molly comes around the corner, her smile as charming as her husband's. "What are y-ou and my husband doing today?" she asks. They both have difficulties with certain words because of the anatomical differences in their mouth area due to their bonus chromosome, but I understand them perfectly.

"Just going to show some houses." I follow the two of them into the kitchen and take a seat at the island. "Do you want to come with us?"

"No," she answers simply. "My mom is coming over w-ith groceries. She goin-g to help me cook."

“That’s fun.” I grin when her nose scrunches. “You don’t think so?”

“I... don’t like coo-king.”

“But you like eat-ing,” Harris says, smiling at her.

“So do you.”

“I’m a growing boy.” He holds his round belly, and she and I both laugh along with him, then he looks at the clock. “We need t-o leave.”

“You’re right.” I look at Molly. “If you want to escape, call my cell, and we’ll come over and rescue you from cooking,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Thank you.” She gives me a hug when I stand, then kisses and hugs her husband.

When we get out to my car, Harris gets into the passenger seat, and like he always does, he changes my music to his. “Are you trying to put me to sleep?” I whine playfully.

“Frank is classic.”

“Classically boring.” I sigh dramatically, enjoying his laughter. “Are you ready to sell some houses today?” I put my phone away after confirming which house our clients will be meeting with us first today.

“Yes, Molly wan-ts to go on vacation.”

“Oh yeah, where does she want to go?”

“The Bahamas.”

“Nice.” I turn to smile at him. “It’s beautiful there.”

“I... never went there before.”

“Well, let’s change that.” I press down on the gas, and he hoots, making me laugh.

“Shoot.” He whistles as we pull up in front of the first house on our list today. “This is nice.”

“It is,” I agree, pulling up the listing information on my phone and reading over it. When I see there is no one living at the address, I get out, and Harris follows me to the front door.

“All right, do you want to turn on the lights down here or upstairs?” I ask after using the code to let us inside.

“Down here,” he says, already walking down a long hallway.

I head upstairs and go through each room, double checking they're as they should be while flipping on the lights. I get downstairs just in time to meet our clients, then with Harris's help, we walk them through every room, take them out to admire the in-ground pool, and go over the cost associated with the neighborhood, which they don't balk at. Personally, I would never pay over seven thousand dollars a month for the use of a golf course. Then again, I would never buy a ten thousand square foot home, regardless of how beautiful it is, unless I was planning on filling each room with a child. And ten kids would be eight kids too many for me.

By the time we finish showing them around, they ask us to put in an offer for twenty thousand over the asking price. A year ago, that would have surprised me. Now, it's not even a little shocking. Homes are hard to come by, and buyers learn fairly quickly that if they love a house, they need to put in an offer, or it will be gone by morning.

Once I write it up, Harris and I take off to our next showing, and by the time the day comes to an end, we have three offers out to sellers, which means his trip to The Bahamas is even more possible than it was this morning. When I drop him off a few hours later, I can tell he's exhausted, so I walk him to his door, say a quick hello to Molly and her mom, then take off.

Unlike Harris, I have no one to get home to, I just have work to keep me occupied until I call it a night. And even though I tell myself that I'm not lonely I know, deep down, that I am.

Chapter 2

April

I WALK INTO Frank & More and stop in front of the receptionist, trying not to get annoyed with the pretty blonde behind the shiny counter when she doesn't even acknowledge my presence. As I listen to her talk to someone who is obviously a guy she hooked up with a few nights ago and not a client, I fight the urge to reach over and hang up the call. If I weren't here for a listing, I would do it. After what feels like minutes but is probably seconds, she tips her head back my way and covers the receiver, plastering a plastic smile on her face.

“Hi, can I help you?”

“I'm here to meet with Frank,” I tell her, and she looks down at the top of the desk.

“April Mayson?”

“Yes.”

“He said you could go on back when you got here,” she tells me, pointing to a set of glass double doors at the side of the counter.

“Thanks.” My heels click as I walk across the white tile floor and push through into Frank's office.

“April.” He stands to greet me as soon as I enter, giving me a slimy, sticky-sweet smile, and I return one of my own.

“Frank.” I take hold of his bicep and lean up on my heels to kiss his cheek.

“I was surprised to hear from you.” He takes a seat and leans back in his chair, linking his hands together before resting them over his stomach as he eyes my chest. “What can I do for you?”

“I have a client who is looking to purchase a bar or a club downtown, and I know that's your area of expertise.” I sit in

front of from him and cross one leg over the other, settling my large leather bag on the seat next to my hip.

“So you want my help.”

I don't want your help. I just didn't have a choice but to come to you for help, I think as he laughs and leans back farther in his chair.

“What's in it for me?”

“If you help me find the spot, I'll split my commission with you. My client is looking to pay cash, so there won't be a lot of red tape for us once we find the perfect place.”

“Who is this client?” His eyes fill with curiosity—a look that isn't surprising, given we are talking about millions of dollars.

“That's for me to know and you to find out if you agree to help me.”

“All right, I'll take you up on your offer.” He turns to his computer. “Tracy, who owns The Drop, spoke to me recently about selling his bar.”

“Really, did he say why?” I ask, knowing Tracy from my former bar-hopping days. He and his brother, Iggy, were both the reason I always gravitated to his bar. Well, that and the drinks were cheap, and the live music was always the best on the strip. I lost contact with the two of them when things between Cohen and I came to an end, which was unfortunate but necessary, since he started playing at their bar regularly.

“His girlfriend got knocked up. I imagine she's nagging him about all the hours he works.”

“Or maybe he's tired of working so much and wants to be around to raise his kid.” I don't bite my tongue. I hate when men blame shit on women or make it seem like a man is less of a man for wanting to be with his family, especially since it's the complete opposite.

“Right,” he grunts. “I'll call and talk to him and put you two in touch if he's interested.”

“That works for me.” I push out of my chair and grab my bag. “You have my cell.”

“I do.” He stands, and I feel his eyes on my ass as I walk away, which makes it really hard to stay professional and not flip him off over my shoulder.

I walk out of the building and head for my car, checking my phone when it beeps, and see a text from Maxim. Biting my lip, I open it up and shake my head at the audacity.

Maxim: About to jump into the shower and then head down to the bar. What time are you planning to meet me?

I start to tell him that I’m not meeting him because that isn’t something I agreed to do, and I didn’t agree, because every conversation I’ve had with him these last few days has felt a lot like foreplay. Before I can write him back, my cell rings. Not recognizing the number, I answer, holding my phone to my ear while digging my keys out of my bag.

“Hello?”

“April, it’s Tracy,” his familiar voice greets, and I smile.

“Hey.”

“Damn, girl, how have you been? It’s been fucking forever.”

“I know.” I open the door to my car and get in. “I’ve been good. I hear you’re better and that congratulations are in order.”

“Yeah,” he says softly, and I know just by his tone that he’s happy.

“So I guess, since you’re calling, you spoke with Frank?”

“Just got off the phone with him. He said you might have someone who’s interested in purchasing my bar.”

“I might,” I agree. “Are you interested in selling?”

“I am.” He sighs. “Iggy isn’t happy about us letting the bar go, but I know the right price will lessen the blow.”

“How is your brother?”

“Good, still Iggy. Forever single, with no desire to change that anytime soon.”

“I wish I could say I’m surprised, but I’m not.”

“Me neither.” He laughs. “Damn, it’s good to hear from you. It sucked that we lost you when shit went down between you and Cohen.”

“Yeah,” I agree but don’t say more, because really, what is there to say?

“Have you spoken to him? He’s in town.”

“I have zero desire to talk to him,” I tell him honestly, then change the subject. “So my client who might be interested in purchasing from you is in town for the week. Do you mind if I bring him by to check it out?”

“Of course not. Stop by tonight; I’ll be there, which doesn’t happen often nowadays. It would be good to catch up.”

“All right, I’ll talk to him and see if that works for him. Is this your cell?”

“Yep, and it hasn’t changed, which means you deleted my number.” He laughs.

“Sorry about that.”

“Right,” he mumbles. “Text me and let me know when you’re going to be here.”

“Will do.” I hang up with him, then pull up my text with Maxim.

Me: Drinks at The Drop. Meet you there at nine.

I press Send, then start the engine, put it in drive, and head toward home. When I arrive twenty minutes later, I read the text came through from him.

Maxim: See you then.

Logically, I know there is no reason those three words should make me nervous, but there is something about them that puts me on edge, which is ridiculous, because I haven’t

seen him since we were kids, and I imagine that both of us have changed a lot since then.

A few hours later I shut down the engine of my Corvette, and don't bother checking my reflection. I know my makeup is on point, from my smoky eye to my red lips, just like I know my silk camisole makes it seem like I'm more endowed than I actually am. My jeans accentuate my hips and long legs with tiny glimpses of skin through the ripped material.

I slip off my seatbelt and grab my purse from the passenger seat as I open the door. I set one high-heeled boot on the pavement, then turn in my seat and heft my booty out of my ride, using my hip to shut the door. I make my way across the dimly lit parking lot toward the back entrance of The Drop, where Tracy told me to enter from. When I hit the metal staircase, I carefully maneuver my way up using the railing so that my heels don't get caught in any of the holes lining the steps. At the door, I pound hard twice, and Iggy pushes the door open and drops his eyes to mine.

"April? Damn, girl. How is it possible you look even more fuckable now?" He grins, taking his appearance from slightly scary to straight-up attractive, which is why he has never had an issue getting women into his bed. The tattoos and bad-boy look reels them in, then one smile seals the deal.

"Iggy, still so charming." I roll my eyes, listening to him laugh, and he tugs me in for a tight hug.

"I missed you, girl." He lets me go and allows me to step past him into the dim hallway.

"Me too," I say, finding Tracy at the end of the hall with his plaid-covered arms crossed over his chest, his beard and hair longer than I remember. Where Iggy was always the bad boy, Tracy had that rugged guy-next-door look about him.

"Hey, you." He smiles, uncrossing his arms and walking toward me. As soon as I'm close, he hugs me, then leans back with a look that makes me tense.

"What?"

"Well." He clears his throat. "Cohen stopped by tonight."

My stomach drops, but I keep my expression neutral. “Okay.”

“I might have mentioned that I spoke to you... and that you were planning on coming by.”

“Did you?”

“He said he’s been trying to get ahold of you,” Iggy chimes in, and I look between both men.

“Is he here now?” I wait, every muscle in my body feeling tight.

“No, but he left his number, asked if I could give it to you.”

“I don’t need his number, and I don’t want to come across like a bitch, but I’m here for work.”

“Right,” Tracy says softly, looking over my shoulder at his brother. I don’t know what the look he gives him means, but I can guess they are both thinking I’m full of shit and still hung up on Cohen, which I’m not. I just don’t want anything to do with him. My past with him is right where it needs to be—firmly in my rearview mirror.

I glance at my watch and see it’s two minutes after nine. “I need to get out there and meet my client. We’ll have a drink sometime and catch up.”

“Sure,” Iggy says, while Tracy lifts his chin.

“It’s been good seeing you both.” I move around Tracy and head toward a closed door, feeling the thump of music as I get closer, the noise almost deafening as I push into the bar on the other side. The smell of fried food and stale alcohol making me feel almost nostalgic.

I don’t glance at the bar, as I walk across the dance floor, even though I could totally use a shot of tequila right about now. Scanning the area, I spot Maxim right off, sitting at a table in the back, half hidden by the shadows, with a glass of amber liquid in front of him. His appearance has changed over the years. Now, instead of an attractive boy, he’s a man with an air of authority and arrogance that is seriously appealing even from a distance.

As I get closer, I slow my steps, wanting to take a moment to study him, but his head turns in my direction, and our eyes lock. I might have been prepared for this, but I'm not prepared for the zap of electric heat I feel against my skin as a flicker of something that makes me warm flashes through his dark eyes. He leans forward, causing the light-gray button-down shirt he has on to stretch across his broad chest and thick arms, and he raises a brow—in a challenge?

Reminding myself that I deal with men I find good-looking all the time, I pull myself together and walk across the room, closing the space between us and watching him stand.

“April,” his deep voice rumbles, and a tingle slides down my spine and right between my legs. “Still beautiful.”

Okay, so this might be an issue.

“Maxim.” I get close and grab his hard bicep as he leans down to place a kiss on my cheek, the scent of him and the coarse scruff on his jaw sending my hormones into overdrive.

“Sit,” he orders, holding out a chair. Once my ass is firmly in the seat, he towers over me. “What would you like to drink?”

“Water please.”

“Be right back.” His hand slides across the top of my shoulders as he walks away, his touch burning my skin. I take a deep breath, then another as I watch him saunter to the bar, every woman in the place turning to check him out as he passes. Needing something to do, I pull out the file for the bar from my bag and start to look over the information Frank sent me. Not surprising, the bar makes a killing most months, with the overhead pretty low, considering the amount of employees on staff.

“Your water.” Maxim places a glass down in front of me before he takes his seat.

“Were you waiting long?” I pick up my glass and take a sip.

“Not long.” He places his arm on the back of the chair next to him while his thick fingers circle the mouth of his glass.

“So what do you think about this place?”

“It’s nice. Not really *my* style, but this is Nashville, not Vegas.”

“You’re right about that.” I shift on my seat, trying to remember if a man has ever made me this aware before, and my mind flashes back in time. At sixteen he made me nervous, but now I know how to handle a good-looking man. “I should tell you that if you purchase this place with plans to change the vibe, that will not go over well. People who live here and those that come into town are all about jeans, beer, and country music. Not fancy dresses and champagne.”

“I wouldn’t change anything.” He takes a drink from his glass, his eyes never leaving mine.

“That’s good.” I clear my throat and hand him over the information sheet from the folder. “The monthly income for this location looks great even during the slower months, and more and more events are happening in Nashville on a regular basis, so I’d say you’d be in the green within....” My sentence trails off when a small, cold hand lands on my shoulder, and Maxim comes out of his relaxed position.

Turning in my seat, I tip my head back and bite back a curse. If I were a superhero, Lexi would without a doubt be my archnemesis. I’ve known her for years, because her aunt, who is beyond talented, has designed every single one of my tattoos, but she hasn’t changed in that time. She is one of those women who is catty, loud, and annoying as hell, which is why she goes through friends faster than she goes through men. Life for her is a competition. She wants what other people have and still hasn’t figured out that’s exactly why she is so miserable.

“I thought that was you.” Lexi smiles at me before looking over the top of my head at Maxim, giving him a onceover that states clearly she likes what she sees. “Who’s your friend?”

“Not interested,” he says simply, and I fight back a smile as she laughs, tossing her long, lavender mixed with blond hair over her shoulder.

“Easy, big boy. Just curious about April’s new friend.” She looks back at me. “I haven’t seen you out much lately.”

“I’ve been busy with work.”

“Yeah, I heard you got into real estate. Good for you.” She looks at Maxim once more, and I can tell by the baffled expression she tries to hide that he’s not giving her the attention she is used to. Knowing her, she thought him telling her he wasn’t interested was actually his way of telling her he was. “Well, I’m going to take off. You guys have fun tonight.”

“You too.” I watch her walk away, then start to turn back to Maxim but freeze when I see Brock, Cohen’s brother, walk into the bar, looking exactly like I remember. Which is just like his twin brother. The only thing making them distinguishable is the scar that slices through Brock’s left brow.

“Shit.” I whisper under my breath because if Brock is here, then Cohen isn’t far behind.

“You wanna get out of here?” Maxim asks, touching the base of my neck, the warmth of his palm making me shiver, and I spin around to face him and the table not even having to think about that question.

“That sounds like a great idea.” I grab my bag, and as soon as I stand, he takes my hand and keeps me close as he cuts across the room to the main entrance.

“My car is around back.” I stop him when we get outside and attempt to wiggle my fingers free from his.

“Is it safe where it is?”

“Yes, or I hope so.”

“Then I’m driving.” He pulls a set of keys from his pocket and lets go of my hand so he can place his palm against my lower back and lead me to the curb, where a sleek silver car is parked. “Get in,” he orders as the driver and passenger doors swing up into the air. I look from him to his car, then let out a breath and climb into the seat.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he gets in behind the wheel, the car seeming like it was built just for him.

“My hotel.”

“The bar at your hotel.”

“We can start there.” He meets my gaze as he turns over the engine, and my body vibrates. I tell myself it’s from the rumble of the engine and not anticipation.

When we arrive at the Noelle Hotel, I notice there are tons of people gathered out front, all dressed in evening wear.

“There was a wedding here today,” he tells me as he pulls into the valet area, and a few minutes later, he walks around to help me out, then hands his keys over to a young guy, telling him to be careful. As we walk inside, I smile when I spot a bride and groom standing amongst their guests, waiting to get onto the elevator. “Bar’s this way.” He takes hold of my wrist and walks us past the reception area toward the bar, which is crowded. “What would you like to drink?”

“A glass of Pinot please,” I say, and he lets me go and—maybe not surprisingly—gets the attention of the pretty bartender within seconds of reaching the counter.

“Are you here with the bride or the groom?” I drag my attention off Maxim at that question, and with one look, I can tell the man who asked me that has already had too much to drink. Pink is staining the tip of his nose and cheeks, making him look like a little kid who’s been out in the cold too long.

“Neither, I’m here with a friend.” I don’t point out that I’m not dressed for a wedding.

“Cool. Do you and your friend want to come party with me and my friends?”

“She doesn’t.”

I look at Maxim as he slides my glass of wine into my hand and start to smile up at him, then notice his lips are pressed into a firm, straight line.

“Oh.” The guy looks between us. “That’s cool. Night.”

“Night,” I say as he walks off, then focus on the man at my side. “It’s a little crowded down here.”

“We’ll go to my room, if that’s okay with you?”

I look around, not sure that going up to his room is smart—actually I know it’s not—but there is really no place for us to sit down here. “All right, sure,” I agree after a moment and he takes my wrist and leads the way to a second elevator that is less crowded than the one near the front entrance of the hotel. We get inside alone, and my heart trips all over itself as he presses the button for his floor.

When we reach his room, he lets us inside, and I take a sip of wine, then slip off my shoes and take off my jacket, resting it on the back of the couch. The room is large enough for an entire family, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the square footage matched that of my house.

“This is really nice.”

He doesn’t even look around. His attention is solely focused on me, making me feel hot and anxious and very aware that I’m alone with a man I hardly know, with a bed just a room away. “It is.” He waits until I take a seat, then comes to sit next to me. “Who was the man at the bar?”

“I don’t know. Just some drunk guy here for the wedding.”

“Not him, the one who made you look like you saw a ghost.”

Realizing he’s talking about Brock, I shrug. “Just someone I used to know.” He lifts his chin ever so slightly, then takes a sip from his glass as he studies me.

“Are you hungry?” The question seems innocent enough, but the way he asks and is looking at me is anything but.

“No.”

“Do I make you nervous?”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “Are we playing twenty questions?”

“Do I?”

“No,” I lie.

“Then come here.” There is no denying the command in his tone or the way my pulse flutters from the heated look in his gaze.

“If I get any closer, I’ll be sitting in your lap,” I point out, glancing at the small space between us.

“Would that be a problem?” His challenge-filled eyes lock with mine. Acting braver than I feel, I carefully move closer to him.

“Better?”

“For now.” His hand comes up, and he wraps a strand of my hair around his finger. “You know, Kenton warned me away from you.”

“What?” I laugh, sure that I heard him wrong.

“He said I needed to keep things between us professional.”

“He didn’t.” I take a sip of wine, wondering if he can see my pulse racing.

“He did.” His finger trails down the side of my neck, and goose bumps break out across my skin. “Then again, it’s not the first time he warned me away from you.”

“He told you to stay away from me before?”

“Him and my dad both did.” He grins. “But you’re not sixteen anymore, and I sure as fuck am not a kid.”

He’s not wrong there. My eyes roam over him as I take another sip of wine. “You were my first kiss.”

“I guessed that.”

“Hey, don’t be rude.” I frown at him and he chuckles.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t a great fucking kiss.”

“Honestly I don’t even remember it,” I lie.

“You don’t?” His hand slides to wrap around the back of my neck and I bite my lip while my stomach dances and his eyes lock with mine.

“You still have the prettiest mouth I’ve ever seen.” His thumb slides forward along my jaw, then the pad of it snags on

my bottom lip. “Has anyone ever told you how pretty it is?”

“It’s been mentioned a time or two,” I say, and he makes a noise deep in the back of his throat right before he leans forward to nip my bottom lip almost punishingly, causing me to gasp and my core to clench.

“Finish your drink,” he orders, pulling away from me.

I do. In one gulp, I down the rest of my wine while he watches, and as soon as my glass is empty, he takes it from me, then leans forward to set it on the table, doing the same with his glass that was resting on the arm of the couch. When he leans back, he tugs me over to straddle his lap, resting my thighs on the outside of his. I rest my hands against his chest as his go to my ass, and I’m not sure if it’s the wine, but my flesh warms as he leans up to nip my bottom lip.

And just like that, the floodgates are open. He kisses me, and I kiss him back, the two of us dueling for power. When he tangles his hand in my hair at the back of my head and tugs, my neck arches, and he licks down it. My breath starts to come in short pants, and no matter what I do, it feels like I can’t get enough oxygen into my lungs.

“Maxim,” I whimper when his teeth and mouth lock onto my nipple through my shirt and bra.

“I like that,” he hisses, then suddenly we’re up and moving. Instinctively, my legs go around his waist, and his mouth finds mine. When we get to the bedroom, he drops me to the bed, his eyes roaming over my face. “Clothes off.”

I don’t hesitate. I strip out of my shirt and pants, then unhook my bra, and lift my hips to take off my panties as he tosses his shirt away. He takes a condom out of his pocket, tossing it onto the bed. When he gets his pants undone, I crawl to where he is, and he bites back a curse as I lick the head of his cock.

“That’s for another time.” He steps back, then smiles at me when I pout. “You’ll get it back, just not now.” He kicks off his pants, then he pushes me back onto the bed and spreads my legs. I expect him to crawl up between my thighs, so I’m not

prepared when his face lands between my legs and his hot tongue starts licking through the folds of my pussy, making my back arch up off the bed and a loud moan climb up the back of my throat.

I hold on to the bedding as he devours me and shudder as he thrusts two fingers inside, pumping them in sync with the suction he's using on my clit. Like a flash, I come, whimpering his name, and before I even come down from the high of my orgasm, he's there slamming into my still-pulsing pussy.

"Wrap your legs around me," he orders, and by some miracle, I get my limbs to work, wrap them around him, and hold on, then gasp when he flips us over so that I'm on top. "Ride me."

I look into his dark, heated eyes, then do as told; I ride him hard and fast, his hips pounding up into me on each down stroke. I'm not sure who is fucking who, but there is no other way to describe what this is. It's fast and messy, with flesh smacking against flesh, teeth gnashing, and hands roaming.

"I'm so close," I pant against his mouth when a ball of what can only be described as fire is lit in my lower belly and starts growing by the second.

"Then come." His thumb finds its way to my clit, circling, sending the fire into an inferno. As I come, he holds onto my hips and pounds up into me, then jerks me down so tight against him that it feels like we are one. I fall against him, breathing heavy, his chest moving as rapidly as mine as our hearts pound in sync. When I finally catch my breath, I try to sit up, knowing I need to put some space between us. It's one thing to sleep with someone, but there is an intimacy in cuddling after sex, and that is not what we are.

"Where are you going?" he asks, sounding relaxed but alert, his arms tightening around me.

"I should go find my bed."

"You're in a bed, and I'm not done with you," he mutters, keeping me where I am, and for the first time in maybe my

life, I don't argue.

I don't know if it's the two orgasms, the wine, or how right it feels being held by him, but I stay right where I am and fall asleep with him wrapped around me.

Chapter 3

April

WAKING SLOWLY, I blink my eyes open and bite my lip when the arm around my waist shifts slightly, causing the fingers attached to the large hand between my legs, that's cupping my pussy, to twitch. Even as sore and as tired as my body is after the way Maxim fucked me last night, it still reacts to his touch like it's begging for more.

I carefully move his hand and arm, then sit up and reach for my camisole before heading to the bathroom. I quickly take care of business, wash my hands and try to fix my hair, which is a useless task. Giving up after a couple of minutes I go back out to the main room using the light from the open bathroom door to find my clothes.

"Are you sneaking out on me?" a deep, sleepy voice asks as I pull my lace panties on, and I turn to look over my shoulder at Maxim, finding his shadowy figure sitting up in bed.

"I never sneak out. That's not my style." I smile at him before going back to what I was doing.

"Then where are you going?"

"Home." I grab my jeans as he flips on the lamp on the side table, and when my eyes adjust to the light, I take in the view of his toned chest and arms with the white sheet in total contrast against his tan skin and the black ink on his left arm.

"Come back to bed." The order should not make my pussy spasm, but, then again, every time he told me what to do last night, it paid off for me in a big way.

"I can't." I step into my jeans and jump as I pull them up over my hips. "I need to go home." I pull off my cami and toss it to the end of the bed so I can put on my bra, and his eyes drop to my chest. Lifting his hand to his mouth, he rubs his fingers across his lower lip while his eyes darken. "I need a shower and to maybe get an hour of sleep before I have to get

up and ready in time to show you the first house on our list today.”

“Or we can skip the house showing and spend the day right here in this bed.” He pats the space next to him.

“As tempting as that is, I can’t.” I grab my top and slip it on, then watch him stand, allowing the sheet to fall to the floor. I lick my lips as he walks toward me, then tip my head back when he takes hold of my chin with his pointer finger and thumb.

“I’ll go with you.” He places a kiss on my mouth that causes my insides to twist, then he lets me go and heads for the bathroom.

“Umm.” I shake my head while walking after him. “You can’t come home with me.”

“I can’t?” he asks, turning on the sink, and I stop at the bathroom door, watching him load up a toothbrush. “Why not?” He shoves it into his mouth, and I blink at him as I try to get my thoughts in order and come up with a reason.

“You’re my client.”

“Yeah, and...?” He spits and rinses his mouth.

“And...” And nothing. I’ve got nothing. I mean, that reason alone is stupid, since I slept with him last night. “Well, I mean...” Oh my God, I sound like one of my sisters.

“Get your shoes. It won’t take me long to get dressed.” He pats my ass as he walks past me, and I stare at him as he puts on a pair of boxers, and then grabs his jeans. “Babe, get dressed.”

With a sigh, I find my shoes and put them on, then sit on the bed. I watch him put on a pair of sneakers before he packs a smaller bag with a shaving kit, shoes, slacks, and another button-down, this one burgundy. Once he’s got all his stuff together, he picks up his keys, then lets me out of his room. And with his hand in the middle of my back, he leads me to the elevator, then out to the parking garage to his car.

Once he's seated behind the wheel and is backing out of his space, I touch his arm, and his eyes come to me. "I need to pick up my car from the bar."

"I got you." He rests his hand on my thigh, his touch so familiar yet foreign outside the moments we shared last night.

"Do you always rent such extravagant cars when you come to town?" I ask as he heads toward downtown through the quiet streets, the sound of his engine probably waking people as we pass by the apartments along the road.

"I didn't rent this. It's mine. I keep it at my sister's place so I'll have it when I'm here." He looks over at me when he stops at a red light. "You don't like it?"

"I didn't say that."

"Right." He smiles.

"It's just very... Vegas," I point out.

"What kind of car should I buy for Nashville? And do not say a pickup truck."

Laughing, I shake my head. "I can't see you in a pickup." I look him over. Even in jeans and a T-shirt, he still looks stylish. "Maybe a Benz Jeep, a Hummer, or a Cadillac."

"My mom has the Benz Jeep. It's a nice ride. What do you drive?"

"You'll see." I shrug, then ask, "If you keep your car at your sister's house, why don't you stay with her while you're here in town?"

He glances over at me, and jealousy fills the pit of my stomach, making me feel nauseous. The emotion is shocking, given the fact that I have no rights to him, but there is still no denying that's what I feel.

"Never mind." I don't need him to explain to me that he is a good-looking single man with an obviously high sex drive and enough skill to live up to the promise of him. "Turn right into the next alley." I grab my bag from the floor at my feet and dig inside for my keys. Once I have them in hand and he stops, I unhook my belt and open my door. "You can follow me to my

place.” He doesn’t say anything, so I get out but stop when he is there to meet me at the hood of his car.

“You okay?” He gets close, his hand shooting out to wrap around my hip, and I pull in a breath through my nose when he tugs me against his chest.

“Yeah, just tired, I think.”

“Are you okay to drive?”

“I don’t live very far from here.”

“We’ll sleep when we get to your place.” He holds my chin as he leans down to brush his lips over mine, then leans back, his eyes roaming my face. “You sure you’re okay to drive?”

“Yeah,” I say, and he lifts his chin, then walks me to my car and opens the door. “Nice ride.”

“Thanks.” I smile up at him, then settle into my seat and turn on the engine. His gaze moves to the windshield, his brows dragging together, and I follow his eyes, noticing then that there is a white piece of paper stuck under my wiper. He pulls it out and opens it up, his jaw ticking as he hands it over to me. I read the messy writing with Cohen’s number, then ball up the piece of paper and toss it into my cup holder.

“A fan of yours?”

“An ex of mine,” I tell him, and he lifts his chin, not looking any happier as he takes a step back.

“Meet you at your place.”

“All right,” I agree, and he shuts my door. I watch him in my rearview mirror as he gets into his car, then turn around.

I back out and lead the way to my place, the drive only taking about fifteen minutes, since there is not really any traffic on the road. When I pull into my driveway, he parks behind me, then meets me at my door with his bag in hand. I let us both inside and pull off my shoes, taking them upstairs with me while he leaves his by the front door near my coatrack.

“This is cool.” He walks to the garage door, the early morning light allowing him to see outside.

“It’s the reason I bought this place.” I yawn as he turns to face me. “The bedrooms are upstairs.”

“Lead the way.” He walks toward me with a soft look on his face, then follows me upstairs to the second floor, where we walk past my two spare rooms, a guest bath, and the laundry room.

When we get to my bedroom, I flip on the light, then carry my shoes to my closet, putting them where they belong. I walk out, finding him stripping out of his clothes, and stop in the doorway. I have never had a man in my house before; even when my sister May and I were living together, I never brought a man home. “What are you thinking?”

“It’s weird having you here,” I tell him honestly, going to my dresser to grab a nightgown and a pair of panties. “I’ll be right back.” I go into my bathroom, strip out of my clothes, brush my teeth, and wash away the leftover makeup still on my face.

With my eyes feeling heavy, I open the door and find the room mostly dark, proving that men are capable of figuring out just about any remote without help. I make my way around to the side of the bed I always sleep on and gasp as the duvet is tossed back and a hand grabs mine, pulling me into bed.

“Sleep,” he commands, curling his big body around mine. His lips touch my temple, his arm curls around my waist, his hand going between my legs to cup me, the position the exact one I woke up to with him earlier. I want to tell him that I won’t be able to sleep with him crowding me, but honestly, exhaustion takes over, and my eyes drift closed before I can even open my mouth.

SITTING IN MY robe at the kitchen island, my hair still wet from my shower, I take a bite of my everything bagel and chew as I watch a shirtless Maxim talk on the phone outside. When he stops at the rail with his back to me, his muscles flex as he

leans into it, causing the dimple just above the waistband of his boxers to become more noticeable.

I can honestly say it's a good thing he doesn't want a house where his neighbors can see him like he is now. Lord knows the women would be swooning, and the husbands would probably charge his front door with pitchforks and demand he leave the neighborhood. After I swallow, I pick up my coffee, taking a sip, then grab my phone when it starts to ring.

"Hey, Mom," I answer when I see it's her, then pull my phone away from my ear when she screeches excitedly.

"Are you home right now?"

"I am. What's up?"

"Oh my God, oh my God."

"Oh my God, what?" I take my now-empty plate around the island, sure she's going to tell me that another one of my sisters or cousins is pregnant, something that seems to be happening at an alarming rate.

"Turn on the radio." She shouts the name of the station, and I frown down at my plate.

"Why?"

"Because Cohen is on the radio right now, talking about you."

"He's *what*?" My brows drag together.

"He's talking about you. About how you are the one who got away."

"You're kidding me." I let my head fall back to my shoulders. "Mom, I'm not going to listen to that, and you shouldn't either."

"It's so sweet, honey." She turns up the volume of the radio, and soon, a woman's voice is filling my ear.

"So you're telling me this girl you wrote an entire album about is refusing to even talk to you?" the woman prompts.

“I didn’t do right by her,” Cohen says, his voice sounding just as I remember it.

“Okay, I get that, but I think everyone would agree with me that she should at least hear you out. I mean, where is the harm in that?” she asks.

“That’s what I’m saying,” a man who sounds like Troy, Cohen’s best friend, says with a chuckle that grates on my nerves.

“So who is she?” the woman questions.

“I’m not going to put her name out there,” Cohen replies, which is something I’m thankful for, because the last thing I need is drama from this situation.

“Her name is a month,” Troy says, and my jaw tightens. Apparently, he’s still a dick—not surprising.

“Oh, a month, that’s fun! There are only a couple of months that people name their kids after,” the interviewer singsongs.

“Not in her family,” Brock inserts, laughing, and so do the rest of the guys.

“Mom, please, turn it off,” I order, unwilling to listen to more, and the background noise dies down, but I can tell she’s listening to it. “Do I need to remind you that you didn’t even like Cohen when he and I were seeing each other?”

“It’s not that I didn’t like him. I just... well, I thought you could do better.”

“And you don’t think I can do better than him now?” I turn around, then scream when I come face-to-face with Maxim.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?” Mom asks, worry clear in her tone.

“I’m fine.” I hold my hand to my chest. “Just got startled.”

“Sorry about that,” Maxim rumbles, and my mom gasps.

“Who’s that? Is someone there with you?”

“Mom—”

“It’s a guy. That was a guy!”

“Mom.” I laugh. “I need to get off the phone. I have to get ready for work.”

“You’re not going to tell me who that was?”

“No,” I say simply.

“You never tell me anything,” she pouts, and I laugh. “Fine, love you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you too, and no more listening to the radio.”

“Whatever,” she grumbles and hangs up.

I set down my phone and look at Maxim. “I’m going to go up and get dressed. Our first appointment is in an hour.”

“Something going on with your ex?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest while leaning his hips against the edge of the counter, his eyes studying mine intently.

“Not on my end.” I pick up my still half full coffee and head toward the stairs.

“Is he the same one who left his number on your windshield?” he asks, and I stop at the bottom step and meet his gaze over the banister.

“One and the same.”

“How long has it been since things between you two ended?” The question seems casual enough, but his body language is screaming that it’s not.

“Years.” I frown. “Are you going to let me get dressed so we can leave, or are we going to play a hundred and one questions?”

“Go on. I gotta make a phone call real quick.” He pushes away from the counter and takes his phone with him out the back door.

I watch him through the glass for a long moment, trying to figure out what the hell that was about. Then, with a sigh, I head upstairs to get ready, because even if I had all the time in the world, I would never be able to understand men.

Chapter 4

April

JUGGLING MY BAG, my coffee, and my shoes, I frown at Maxim when he steps in front of me. “We have to go,” I remind him as he takes my bag and coffee mug. “Really, we should have left twenty minutes ago.”

“I’m not the one who jumped me in the closet.” He heads for the stairs, and my mouth drops open.

“I did not jump you in the closet.” I quickly follow after him. “You’re the one who came in there and attacked me,” I say, and he looks at me over his shoulder, his eyes darkening the way they had when he found me standing in my bra and panties amongst my shoes, bags, and clothes.

“Right, I forgot.” He turns away from me, but I catch his smile, and my own lips tip up, but I quickly wipe my grin away when we get to the front door where I stop to put on my shoes. After we get outside, I lock up, then blink when he takes my keys from my hand.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m driving.”

“Yeah, you’re driving your car.” I try to get my keys from him, but he holds them up above his head. I don’t even attempt to jump up and get them, because even in my heels, I’m short as hell, so jumping around like an idiot would be pointless.

“Come on, or we’re going to be late.” His doors slide up, and I let out a breath and stomp over to his car. I fall into the seat without grace, snap my seatbelt into place, then cross my arms over my chest, his chuckle only serving to annoy me more.

“Where are we going?” I turn my glare on him, and he relaxes back in his seat like he has all day. With a growl, I reach into my bag he placed at my feet, grab the file folder I put together, and pull out the listing for the first one, plugging

the address into my phone. Once the directions pop up, I hand him my cell, then shove everything back in my bag and turn to look out the window once more. Without another word, he backs out of my driveway, then shoots off down my street and heads for the highway. Not seeming bothered at all that I'm bothered which is also annoying.

Thankfully the car ride is short and when we arrive at the house, I notice a blue BMW convertible parked in the driveway and shake my head. "I wonder if another realtor is doing a showing right now,"

"Maybe the owners are still here," he says, and I shake my head.

"No, no one lives here. The owners recently moved to Iowa." I check the time. "We're not that late, so if there was a showing before us, the clients must really like the house if they're still here."

"It looks like a great house."

"It is a great house," I agree, handing him over a copy of the information sheet and going into realtor mode in an instant. "It's four thousand square feet, all one level, sits on two acres, with a pool, pool house, and a private lot in one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Brentwood. Plus, it was all recently remodeled and doesn't kill your budget."

"Maybe we should go in before they have a chance to put in an offer."

"You really like it?" I look at the white house with its stone walkway and red door. It's cute—maybe too cute for a guy like him.

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be my house," I point out while grabbing my bag, then shift around to try to figure out how to open the door but stop when his hand wraps around the back of my neck.

"Didn't take you very long to get over being pissed at me." His gaze roams over my face.

“Right now, you’re my client, not the guy I slept with who annoyed me this morning.” I attempt to pull away from him, and his fingers give my neck a squeeze.

“Your attitude runs as hot as your pussy, babe.” He uses his hold on me to drag me closer, and my belly dips as his mouth gets close to mine. “And you have a really fucking smart mouth.” He nips my bottom lip, then soothes the sting with his tongue before he kisses me wet and deep. When he pulls away, my lashes flutter open, and I meet his dark gaze, my mind a whirlwind of emotions—lust, excitement, confusion, and anxiousness being the four most recognizable.

I haven’t had a moment to really think since I walked up to him at the bar last night, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. “We should go in.” I lick my lips.

“I need you to let go of me in order for us to do that.” I release him quickly, and he presses a button, and both doors slide up. I get out and meet him at the hood, then we head up to the walkway. I see the lockbox for the key on the mat, so I open the door and walk inside. The lights are off, and the house is quiet, which seems odd, but every realtor has their own set of rules for a showing. Or maybe the clients took off and whoever is here is in the process of locking everything down.

“Hello,” I call out as I flip on lights, my heels seeming eerily loud as I walk across the cool white marble tile toward the dark kitchen. I flip on the light, then go to the stack of realtor cards on the island to see who might be in the house, and Meghan Dame’s card is on the top of the pile. She’s a realtor I’ve hung out with in the past at a couple of events, a cute brunette who is pretty new to town and totally reminded me of one of my sisters every time I’ve seen her.

“Hello,” I call out again, hearing nothing in response, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Maybe they’re in the pool house,” Maxim says, walking to the double glass doors looking out across the pool.

“Maybe.” I go to him, then watch him frown when he tries the door and it’s locked from the inside. “We can still check,” I

say, and he lifts his chin, opening the door. We head outside and walk around the edge of the water to the pool house, finding it locked, but I can see the room inside through the glass, and it's empty. "Weird."

When we get back inside, I can't quite shake the feeling that something is wrong, and if it weren't for Maxim, I don't know that I wouldn't just turn around and leave. "Let's check the rooms."

I nod, and we head down the hall, finding all the doors open, all staged to perfection—an office, a playroom, a boy's bedroom, and a girl's room. "The master is probably on the other side of the house."

He places me slightly behind him as we head back through the kitchen, a large entertainment room, and down another long hall. I continue to yell out hello, getting no response each time, which is only serving to freak me out even more.

When we get to the only closed door in the hall, my heart pounds against my ribcage, and Maxim tips his head down to meet my gaze. "Hello," he calls out as he taps the door, and when no one replies, he places his fingers on the handle and pushes in. Because he is mostly blocking the doorway, all I can see is the corner of the bed, but that's all I need to see.

"Meghan." I shove past Maxim, and my stomach roils. Blood—so much blood—and Meghan's naked, lifeless body sprawled out in the middle of the bed.

"Shit." Maxim pulls me out of the room, wrapping an arm around me while shutting the door.

"She's dead." I look up at him, and his jaw clenches as he palms the back of my head. "Who would do that to her?"

"I don't know, baby," he says gently, pressing my face against his chest as he moves us down the hall. Before I know it, we're outside, and a moment later, he's placing me in the car.

"We need to call the cops," I say, not realizing he's already got his phone in his hand.

“Kenton,” he says, looking at the house while holding his phone to his ear, and I frown. “I’m going to send you an address, and I need you to meet me and April here.” He wraps his hand around his hip and looks at his feet. “Girl’s dead in the house April was going to show me this morning. Yeah, calling the cops as soon as I hang up with you.” His eyes drop to me, and he scans my face, his jaw clenching. “Shook up but good. All right, see you then.” He drops his phone, presses some buttons, and puts it back to his ear, giving a brief description of the situation along with the address to who I’m guessing is a dispatcher for the police station.

“Why did you call my uncle?” I ask as soon as he hangs up, and he squats down in front of me, taking my hands in his, and I notice then that mine are shaking.

“I don’t know the cops here.” His eyes take hold of mine. “I wanna make sure we’re covered.”

“Make sure we’re covered?” My head jerks from side to side in confusion. “We didn’t do anything wrong. Why would we need to be covered?”

“I know that, baby, but that scene in there is fresh, and we walked through every room in that house.”

“It was fresh,” I repeat, and he lifts his chin ever so slightly. I swallow, holding his fingers even tighter, and close my eyes. Fresh, meaning she was *just* murdered; someone did that to her right before we showed up.

Oh my God. My stomach twists.

“As soon as the cops get here and get our statements, we’ll take off.” He lets go of one of my hands and touches my chin, and I open my eyes. “Just keep it together for a little longer, okay?” He lets me go and stands as someone turns up the driveway, and I watch a truck pull up, then two squad cars. As the men who were in the truck head into the house after putting on booties and gloves, two uniformed officers descend on us. I get out of the car, and Maxim wraps his arm around my waist, keeping me close to his side.

While we are giving our statement to the officers, Kenton shows up with one of his guys. Before long, the men all huddle together, talking quietly, and I go to sit in the car once again. With a headache coming on, I dig through my bag for Tylenol and take two while I watch a van pull up, and another group of people head into the house, carrying what looks like large briefcases and a camera.

“You doing okay, sweetheart?”

I look up at Kenton and feel my nose start to sting. I know I should be stronger right now, but I can’t even imagine how Meghan’s family and friends will feel when they find out what happened to her.

“Yeah,” I lie, and he rests his hand on top of my head, making me feel like a small child. “Do you want me to call your mom and dad?”

“No.” I look at my bag still at my feet. My phone has rung a few times, but I haven’t even bothered looking at it. “I’ll call them when I get home.”

He lifts his chin, then asks quietly, “Maxim said you called out her name. Did you know her?”

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “I mean, we weren’t really friends, but I have hung out with her at a couple of events. She was sweet.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” I say quietly, and his eyes soften, then he looks to the right as Maxim walks toward us, his concerned gaze locked on mine.

“We can take off. If the cops need anything else from us, they’ve got our information,” he assures, and relief washes over me. “Thanks for coming out.” He gives Kenton a one-arm hug, and when he lets him go, the two of them turn to look down at me.

“Call if you need anything,” Kenton says sternly.

“I’ll call.” He gives me a soft look, then pats Maxim on the shoulder before he walks off toward his truck.

“Ready?” Maxim asks a minute later when he’s behind the wheel.

“Yeah.” I put on my seatbelt as he starts up the engine and rest my temple against the window, the coolness of the glass helping to relieve a little of the ache in my head.

“You’ll be home soon.” His hand wraps around my thigh and stays there as he drives. I want to grab on to him, but I fight the urge.

When we get to my house, he parks behind my car once more, and as soon as the doors open, I get out and head up to my walkway. I let us into the house, take off my shoes, and carry them up to the second floor, dropping my bag on the kitchen island. “Can you please make sure to lock the door when you leave?” I ask over my shoulder, but I don’t wait for him to respond, don’t look at him. I take the stairs up to my room, where I strip out of my clothes and toss them in the laundry basket.

I open the glass door of the shower, turn on the pipe, and get in under the cold water, relishing the sting it causes before the water heats up. I close my eyes, and the image of Meghan’s naked, bloodied body causes hot tears to fill my eyes.

I have never been someone to live my life in what-ifs, but I can’t help but wonder if we could have saved her had we just been on time. Maybe, just maybe, that wouldn’t have happened to her.

Cool air hits my back, and a moment later, strong arms wrap around me from behind. Without thinking, I turn in Maxim’s embrace, bury my face against his solid chest, and cling to him as I cry, not caring if my tears make me seem weak.

“I need to get you out of here,” he says gently when the water starts to cool, and I let him lead me out of the shower. I bite my lip as he wraps a towel around his hips, then grabs another and begins drying me off.

“Thanks.” I take the towel from him and wrap it around myself, then head into my closet to get dressed. Wearing sweats and a baggie T-shirt, I walk through my room, noticing

that Maxim's bag that was in the chair in the corner of the room is now gone. Digging my nails into my palm I try to ignore the heaviness in my stomach as I head downstairs.

When I hit the bottom step, I spy him in the kitchen, wearing his jeans and T-shirt, his hair still damp from the shower. His gaze meets mine, and I shift on my feet. I'm not used to feeling vulnerable around men, and it doesn't help that we hardly know each other. "I should probably call my parents and some of the other realtors I work with so they hear about what happened from me and not on the news."

"No problem. I'm gonna head out in a minute."

"Oh... okay, cool." I duck my head so he can't see how disappointed I am and walk to my bag. "Thank you for everything." I glance up quickly after I grab my phone. "I'll let you know about what time and where we should meet tomorrow."

"April."

"Yeah," I reply, not bothering to look at him as I head for the couch.

"Look at me." There is no confusing the frustration in his tone, and I stop and slowly turn to face him. "I need to run to the hotel to get my suitcase. I'm coming right back."

"Oh." My heart feels funny inside my chest as he walks toward me.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily."

I start to lie and tell him that I wasn't trying to get rid of him, but he captures my chin and rests his thumb against my lips while his other hand wraps around my hip.

"I shouldn't be gone more than forty minutes."

"Okay." I relax into his touch.

"You gonna be all right while I'm gone?"

"Yeah." I nod, and he touches his lips to mine in a sweet, soft kiss that makes my nose tingle.

“Be back, and I have my cell on if you need me.” He lets me go, then heads for the stairs.

I watch him until he’s out of sight, and hear the front door open and shut. I take a seat on the couch with my phone and call my mom, who happens to be with my dad. I explain everything to the two of them, and they immediately say they are going to come over, so it takes some time to convince them it’s not necessary and reassure them that I’m okay, just shook up.

When I get off the phone with them, I make a couple of very uncomfortable phone calls to people who I know worked with Meghan, and they are just as stunned by what happened as I am. By the time I hang up with my last call, I notice a multitude of social media messages popping up on my phone along with text messages.

“What the...?” My phone starts to ring in my hand with an unknown number, and I put it to my ear. “Hello.”

“Is this April Mayson?” a woman asks.

“It is.”

“You know it’s like totally bitchy of you to not talk to Cohen, right?” she sasses, and I sit up straight.

“Excuse me?”

“All he wants to do is talk to you. You should at least hear him out.”

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?” I snap.

“No.”

“Right.” I hang up and ignore my phone when it starts ringing once more, then go to my social media and read through some of the messages. Most of them are from women, and a few men, who are pissed at me for not talking to Cohen. Feeling anger curl up in the pit of my stomach, I jump off the couch, grab my car keys from my bag, and storm downstairs to the front door. When I get out to my car, I fling the door open, lean inside to grab the crumpled piece of paper that’s still in my cup holder, and smooth it out on the hood of my car.

“What are you doing?” Maxim asks, making me jump as I start to dial the number, and I glare at him.

“Stop scaring me.” I look from him to his car, wondering how it’s possible that I didn’t hear him pull up.

“Sure. Now, who are you calling?”

“My ex,” I tell him as my phone rings with a number that I don’t recognize, and I press Ignore on the call.

“Why?” He gets close, his brows drawn together tightly, making him look menacing.

“Because he went on the radio this morning, and now I have random people—mostly women—messaging and calling my phone. And some of them threatened to do some not-so-nice things if they see me out,” I say, going back to plugging in the cell number, which is taking forever, because messages and calls keep popping up on my screen. Getting frustrated, I turn my phone on silent, then glare at Maxim when he takes my cell from me. “I need that!”

“You’re not calling him.”

“Oh, yes, I am,” I assure him, and he shakes his head, taking the paper from me.

“Calling him is not going to solve this issue, babe.”

“You’re right.” I snatch the paper out of his hand—or most of it, anyway. “It won’t solve anything, but I’m pretty sure I will feel better after telling him what a dick he is,” I rant, then look past him when I catch a familiar-looking Jeep pull into a parking space a little ways down from my house. “Oh my God.”

“What?” He turns to look, but I grab his arm.

“I need you to hide.”

“What?”

“I need you to hide,” I repeat, looking around for somewhere to put him and notice the garbage can next to my garage door.

“Not happening,” he growls, and my stomach sinks.

“Honey,” Mom calls out, with my dad following behind her, carrying a large brown bag.

“Thank you for coming over to check the security system. I really appreciate that,” I say loud enough for my parents to hear as I look up at Maxim and hold out my hand.

His gaze drops to it, his expression looking a mixture of pissed and entertained. “Not fucking happening.” He takes the hand that I’m holding out and laces his fingers with mine.

Oh shit.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mayson.” He turns to greet my parents as they get closer. “It’s nice seeing you both again.”

“Oh Lord,” I breathe.

“Again?” Dad frowns while my mom looks up at him with wide-eyed wonder.

“My parents are good friends with Autumn and Kenton. We met years ago when my family was in town visiting them.”

“Your father.... Wait, I know you.” Dad snaps his fingers. “You’re Kai’s kid.”

“I don’t think he’s a kid anymore, sweetheart.” Mom laughs.

“Mayhem,” Dad says, looking proud.

“Maxim,” he corrects with a laugh.

“That’s right.” Dad reaches out to smack his arm.

“Kill me now,” I whisper, and Maxim’s eyes drop down to me as he smiles a seriously attractive smile. Forcing my eyes off his, I look at the bag my dad is holding and feel my expression soften. “You brought me Louie’s?”

“We figured you could use some of your favorite comfort food.” Mom steps toward me so she can give me a hug. “And since we brought extra for you to have leftovers, we have enough for all of us.” She looks at Maxim. “You’re joining us, right?”

“Of course he is,” Dad answers for him, and my heart starts to pound.

“What were you doing out here?” Mom asks, looking at my outfit as she takes my arm and turns for the house.

“Nothing.”

“She’s getting calls from women who are pissed about the fact that she ghosted her ex,” Maxim tells them, and I glare at him over my shoulder as we head upstairs. “They should know what’s going on.”

“Women are calling you?” Mom asks.

“It’s not a big deal.” I shake my head, not wanting her to worry.

“It’s a big fucking deal,” Maxim says, then adds, “Not only could one of these chicks end up being psycho enough to come after you in person, but I’ve only seen you with one phone, which means these idiots got what also happens to be your work number.”

My nose scrunches. I didn’t think about that, and that is an issue, since going through the process of getting a number and making sure that all my clients are updated is going to be a pain.

“How did they find out who you are? And how in the world did they get your phone number?” Mom asks, picking up my cell phone when Maxim sets it down on the counter.

“Women are more efficient at getting information than the CIA and the FBI combined,” Dad says.

“You’re not wrong,” I agree, knowing that if you give me even a couple of details about someone, I can figure out where they live, their number, where they work, and who they are dating.

“Really?” Mom asks.

“It’s not that hard. Everything nowadays is on social media.” I take a seat at the island in the kitchen.

“Maybe you should call Cohen so he knows what’s going on,” Mom suggests, handing me my phone, and I groan when I see all the new calls and texts.

“She doesn’t need to speak to him,” Maxim says, and Dad gives him an approving look.

“I don’t think that’s your call.” Mom plants her hands on her hips, and I roll my lips together to keep from laughing. My mom is sweet, but she is also a woman who will never let a man steamroll her or her girls, no matter who that man is.

“Babe,” Dad says, and she turns to him.

“Yes?” she snaps at him.

“Her talking to him isn’t going to solve anything. If anything, that might make the situation worse.”

“Maybe not, if he tells everyone to leave her alone,” she argues, and Dad gives her a look that I can tell means *Really?*

“Fine, no talking to him,” she gives in. “So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, but I obviously need to change my number.” I toss my phone down, then look at Maxim, trying not to overthink the fact that since he came into my life *yesterday*, drama has started swirling around my life.

Fuck!

Chapter 5

April

I WAKE UP and know instantly that Maxim is not in bed with me. I sit up and look around my room, finding the bathroom door open and the light off. I check the time on the clock and groan when I see it's already nine. Normally, I'm up by now, especially on the weekend, when I make the most money.

Grabbing my cell, I look at the blank screen, and all my frustration from yesterday comes back. Last night while my parents were over, I was able to call and get a new phone number, which stopped all the excessive texts and calls. It also made it impossible for my clients to get ahold of me. Using my Notes app, I quickly type up a generic message that includes an apology along with my new phone number, then send it out to almost everyone on my contact list.

Tossing back the white duvet on my bed, I get up and head for the bathroom. I might have gotten a late start, but there is still time for me to get some work done. After doing my makeup, hair, and getting dressed, I carry my heels with me downstairs to the empty kitchen, then look out on the back deck, not seeing Maxim there either.

Not sure where he is, I make myself a cup of coffee and sip it while I turn on my computer and load up my website. Figuring it's where my number was retrieved, I delete it off the site, then leave only my e-mail for people to contact me. I don't know how long it's going to take before this whole thing with Cohen blows over, but I'm hoping that when he leaves to go on tour, the theatrics will go with him.

As I'm closing down my computer and getting ready to call Harris to check in with him, I hear the front door open, and a moment later, feet hit the stairs. When Maxim appears at the top of the steps, my heart does a funny little thump, not only from the sight of him but what he has in his hands.

“Morning, babe.” He walks to where I’m standing at the island, and I tip my head back to him when he gets close. He smiles before he touches his mouth to mine. “Did you sleep all right?” He hands me a beautiful bouquet of colorful flowers, then sets two grocery bags on the counter. “April.”

“You got me flowers.” I look up at him, my throat burning like I’m about to cry. *This is seriously getting ridiculous.*

“They reminded me of you.” He tips his head to the side. “You okay?” I’m absolutely not okay. No man but my father has ever bought me flowers, and my dad has only gotten me flowers when I’ve accomplished something. “Did something happen?” His eyes scan mine, his expression turning suspicious, and I shake my head.

“I…” I clear my throat. “I don’t have a vase.”

“You don’t have a vase.” His brows dart together.

“No.”

“All right, that’s an easy enough problem to solve.” He opens the cabinet where I keep my cups and pulls down one of my tall Yeti tumblers that has flowers printed on it. “Will this one work?”

“Yeah,” I say softly, and he hands it to me.

“So what’s the plan for the day?” He starts to take groceries out of the shopping bags he brought in while I carefully unwrap the flowers.

“When you came in, I was about to call Harris to confirm all the houses we have scheduled for today are still available.”

“If you’re not up to showing me houses today, I’m good with that,” he says as I grab a pair of scissors out of the drawer.

“You’re not here for long,” I remind him—and myself—and my stomach twists. This time next week, he will be back in Vegas where he lives, and I will be on my own once more. I start to cut the stems off the flowers so they will fit in the cup. “I think we had three houses scheduled for today and two we didn’t go see yesterday.”

“All right, we can check them out, and after have dinner with my sister Melanie.”

Wait, what?

“Dinner with your sister?” I stop to look at him, and he leans his hip against the counter.

“She called when I was at the store. Her schedule is normally pretty crazy between work and school, but she has time to meet up tonight.”

“I doubt she wants me intruding on her time with her brother.”

“She’s the one who told me to invite you.”

“Oh.” I lick my lips, feeling caught off guard and somewhat confused about what is happening between us. I’ve never been in a situation like this one, and honestly I don’t know what to do.

“You good with that?”

“Sure.” I place a few more cut flowers in the cup, wondering how fucking cliché it would be to ask him what the heck is happening here.

“All right.” He grabs the tray of eggs he unpacked and turns to the stove. “You want scrambled eggs?”

“That sounds good.” I finish putting together my flowers, then I take a seat at the counter and call Harris while Maxim makes us breakfast. After getting our schedule set up for the day, I hang up, eat breakfast, then head out to see some houses with the man who has completely invaded my life.

WITH MAXIM DRIVING, I go through my emails, deleting the ones from Cohen’s fans, then forward the ones from potential clients to Harris. He can send out a copy-and-paste generic email to them, asking things like when they plan on moving, if they’ve been preapproved, and what they are looking for. With so many people moving to Tennessee from all over the US, it’s always easier to weed out those who are just curious before putting in the work of making contact and looking for homes.

“This is nice,” Maxim says, and I lift my head and look out the windshield as we turn down a paved tree-lined driveway toward a large two-story stucco home with huge black paned windows.

“It is, and it’s very LA.” I drop my phone to my lap and pick up the information sheet. “There were no pictures of the inside on the listing, but the description sounded intriguing.”

“Intriguing?” He looks over at me with a small smile tipping up his lips.

“Apparently, the owner is some big-time architect. The realtor describes this house as a modern piece of art. It’s also on three acres with a pool and guesthouse; plus, the comps in the area are fantastic.”

“I love it when you talk realtor to me,” he says, and I laugh as he pulls around the circular driveway to park. When the doors open, we get out, and he comes around to meet me. I lead the way to the front door and open the coded box attached to the door handle to retrieve the key, letting us inside and pushing away the unease that’s left over from yesterday.

“This is beautiful.” I close the door behind us and turn on the lights for the entryway—not that I need to, with all the natural light coming in from the windows.

“It is,” he agrees as I follow him over to a sitting room off the entry that has a white plush rug covering part of the dark floor under the couch, built-in shelves lining one wall, and a black stone fireplace taking up another. Across the entryway is a spacious home office, and down a short hall is the kitchen done in all white, with bright pops of color here and there. “My mom would love this kitchen.”

“Does your mom like to cook?” I ask, walking around the gigantic island, opening and closing drawers and cabinets.

“She loves baking. She usually makes Dad cook.”

“Do they live in Vegas near you?”

“Part time. They go back and forth between Vegas and Hawaii, depending on what Dad has going on for work.”

“How do they feel about you moving here?” We walk down a hallway and into the master bedroom, which is absolutely spectacular, especially with the view of trees out of the floor-to-ceiling windows taking up one wall.

“They’re good. My guess is they will end up getting a place out here, since this is where Melanie and I will be living.”

“That will be nice.” I gasp when I enter the walk-in closet that is unlike any I’ve ever seen in my life. “The architect of this house must be a woman, because this is heaven.” I walk along the rows and rows of shoes and bags and the glass-fronted closed cabinets with clothes neatly hung or folded on shelves, listening to him laugh.

By the time we’re finished walking the entire property, including the back yard and pool house, I’m positive this is the house for him. It’s masculine and unique with more than enough privacy. Really, if I had a few million dollars, it would be the house I would buy for myself.

“If we don’t find something better than this today, I think I’ll have you write up an offer,” he says as I lock up the front door, and I turn to him and smile.

“The closet won you over, didn’t it?”

“No, the man cave did.”

“That’s supposed to be the guesthouse,” I point out, and he shrugs.

“It has a bar, a pool table, and leather furniture. It’s a man cave.” He opens the doors to his car, and I get in and buckle up. “Where to next?”

I pull up the information for our next appointment and scan the listing. “It’s just down the street. The realtor who has this house has that one as well, and again there are no photos besides one of the outside. It also sits on three acres, has a pool, no guesthouse though, but it is seven hundred thousand less.”

Less than five minutes later, we pull up to the house, this one very similar to the previous listing, so much so that I wonder if the same person designed it. Like last time, I let us

inside and instantly know why there are no photos of this place.

“Well, this is—” I pause, trying to figure out the right word for the multicolor-painted walls and artisan-tiled monstrosity that is the entryway. “—fun?”

“Fun is one way to describe this.” He looks around, seeming fully disgusted.

“On the plus side, paint isn’t that expensive.”

“It would need a lot of paint.” He bypasses the front room and heads right to the kitchen that is nice—minus the excessive amount of beach-life-themed signs, containers, and knickknacks.

“This is beautiful.” I step out the backdoor and look over the yard and the pool that was built to look like a sandy beach.

“Do you think they like the ocean?” He comes to stand next to me, and I smile up at him.

“Noticing a theme, huh?”

“It’s a little hard not to.”

“Remember, it’s seven hundred *thousand* less than the other house,” I remind him as we head back inside.

“It should be much less than that,” he grouches, not even taking the time to check out the extra bedrooms before going to the master. As soon as we enter, I come to a dead stop. The coral-pink king-sized bed in the middle of the room looks like an open clam shell, and someone took the time to paint an entire underwater ocean scene around the room, including a mermaid couple in an embrace, swimming up toward the ceiling, which is painted like the sky.

“Jesus, what the fuck is this?”

“A masterpiece,” I say, and he looks over at me as I press my lips together to keep from laughing. “How long do you think it took them to paint all this?”

“The question is *why* would they waste their time painting this?” He watches me walk over to one of the walls and lean in

to get a better look at one of the fish that doesn't just look like Nemo but is him with his one tiny fin.

"The detail really is impressive."

"This place is out."

"We haven't even seen all of it yet." I turn to face him.

"I've seen enough to know I don't want it."

"Maybe the closet is awesome."

"I don't care." He leaves the room.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" I follow after him as he heads for the front door.

"I need to get out of here before you try to convince me that paying less for this place would be worth it."

"It would be worth it in the long run." I turn to lock up, then gasp when he spins me around and kisses me swiftly.

"Put in an offer on the other house, full asking, no contingencies," he orders, holding me close.

"Will do," I say breathlessly, and he touches his mouth to mine once more, then lets me go.

When we get back in the car, I call the realtor for the house, and he lets me know there are already two offers on the table but that the owner is waiting until the end of the day to make a decision. When I relay that information to Maxim, I can tell by the look he gives me that there is no way he's going to let the house get away. So as soon as we get back to my house, I draft up an offer for fifty thousand over asking price and send it off.

Ten minutes later, I get a phone call from the realtor, letting me know the offer was accepted by his clients.

Chapter 6

April

STANDING IN MY closet, wearing nothing but a pair of barely there lace panties and my bra, I look through my clothes, trying to decide what I should wear to dinner tonight. Normally, I wouldn't overthink something as ridiculous as my outfit, but this situation is not normal, and if I'm honest with myself, I'm nervous as hell about meeting Melanie.

I take my favorite red dress off its hanger and hold it up in front of me, and my nose scrunches. The short bodycon dress is hot—probably too hot for dinner with Maxim's sister. With a sigh, I toss it to the growing pile on the floor, then scream when I catch Maxim's reflection in the mirror.

"Stop doing that to me." I spin around to face him, holding my hand over my heart, and he leans into the doorjamb, crossing his arms over his chest, looking hot as hell in his navy slacks and white button-down with the top two buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up, showing off his muscular forearms.

"I just came to see if you're about ready to go."

"Obviously not." I wave my hands up and down my body. "I'm trying to figure out what to wear."

"I like the dress you just had."

"I'm sure you do," I say, and he grins, his eyes leisurely roaming over my chest, waist, and legs. "Can you please go? You're distracting me."

"Right." He comes to where I'm standing to drop a soft kiss on my lips. "I'll be downstairs waiting."

"Be there in ten minutes," I promise, and he lifts his chin before disappearing out of sight.

I slide through my dresses, then remember an outfit I bought a couple of months back but haven't had a chance to wear yet. Taking off my bra, I find a set of nipple pasties and put them on, then take the emerald-green tailored crop top off

its hanger, put it on over my head, and zip up the side. I then grab the high-waisted matching wide-leg trousers and pull them on along with my nude heels.

Dressed, I look myself over in the mirror. With the high waist of the pants, only a little skin is showing, and the top is surprisingly sophisticated. Still, I feel sexy, which is a win. I grab my beige clutch off the shelf and slip off my heels so I can carry them downstairs with me. I might be an expert in walking in six-inch heels, but navigating my slick wooden steps in them is never a good idea.

I reach the kitchen and smile when I see my flowers, then frown when I don't see Maxim inside or out on the deck. Figuring he is downstairs I grab my cards, phone, and lip gloss out of my bag, placing them in my clutch before I make my way down to the first floor. After I slip on my heels, I open the front door, hearing Maxim speaking to someone. Curious, I step outside, and through the dark, I see him standing next to the driver side door of a running black SUV with dark-tinted windows, talking to a good-looking man with obvious Polynesian descent and a very scary expression.

The man spots me first, since Maxim's back is to me, and I see his dark beard move as he says something, probably telling Maxim that I'm outside. He turns my way, his expression unreadable, then he taps the open edge of the window, and the driver takes that as his cue to drive off.

"Who was that?" I ask as the SUV disappears around the corner.

"You look beautiful." He walks toward me, and I step back when he reaches out for my hand.

"Who was that?" I repeat, narrowing my eyes on his.

"A friend of mine." He pulls his car keys from his pocket, and I see the doors slide up out the corner of my eye. "No one for you to worry about."

"No one for me to worry about?" I rest my hand on my hip. "What does that even mean?"

“It means he’s not someone you need to think about. Are you ready to go?”

“So I shouldn’t think about the scary guy in the very suspicious SUV you were just talking to in the dark?”

“Gene will be happy to know you find him intimidating.”

“Gene?”

His jaw shifts, and I can tell he doesn’t want to elaborate.

“He works security for my family and me.”

I blink, sure that I heard him wrong, because normal people do not have security. “He works security for you and your family?”

He doesn’t answer, just lifts his chin in an affirmative.

“Why do you need security?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure having a reason to have security is.” I sigh, then shake my head, because he’s giving me nothing, and his body language is screaming that’s not going to change. “Am I in danger?”

“Never,” he says firmly, and I study him for a long moment, trying to figure out what to do.

It’s obvious he doesn’t trust me enough to tell me why he and his family need security, which lets me know where we stand. Then again, maybe that’s what I needed. Maybe I needed a reason to stop thinking this is some kind of fairy tale, a reminder that we don’t know each other, that sex doesn’t mean more than two people finding pleasure in each other. Heck, for all I know, he gives flowers to every woman he sleeps with, and his family is used to having random women in his life, so they don’t think it’s a big deal to invite them to dinner.

“Right, we should go.” I tuck my bag under my arm and go to the door to lock up before I get into his car. When he gets in, I can feel his eyes on me, so I turn my head his way, hold his gaze, and wait for him to say something. He doesn’t.

Instead, he sighs, starts the engine, and backs out of my driveway.

It doesn't take long to make it downtown to the restaurant, something I'm grateful for, because the normal easy silence between us is thick enough to choke on. After he parks in one of the parking garages near Jeff Ruby's—the upscale restaurant Melanie made reservations at—we both get out. Like normal, he waits for me to meet him near the trunk, but this time I walk past him, digging in my bag to prevent him from taking my hand. But that only lasts about a minute, because with a curse, he takes my clutch and wraps his fingers around my wrist.

I glare at him as he leads me across the street and get even more annoyed when he doesn't even acknowledge the fact that the lasers I'm shooting at him are actually making his head explode in my mind. When we reach the restaurant, he opens the door but keeps hold of me as we walk inside like I'm going to run off.

As if. I don't sneak, and I don't run.

“Hi, how can I help you?” the very handsome man behind the podium asks, eyeing Maxim with appreciation before acknowledging my presence with an easy smile.

“We have a reservation under Kauwe,” Maxim says, tightening his hold on me when I wiggle my fingers.

“It looks like your table is ready.” The maître d looks between the two of us, then grabs some menus and heads into the restaurant that is absolutely gorgeous. A large bar takes up the center of the room with chandeliers spaced sporadically throughout the ceiling, and a backlit wall of glass shelves holding bottles of liquor on one side brings a warm glow to the space.

When we get to our table, Maxim holds out my chair, and I sit, then take the menu. I need a drink, preferably something with a whole lot of alcohol.

“Are you not speaking to me now?” Maxim asks, scooting his chair closer to mine, and I look at him over the menu in my

hand.

“If you want to talk, I’m all ears.” I wait for him to say something, but of course he doesn’t.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I hear a feminine voice say and turn just in time to watch a beautiful woman with long blonde hair sashay toward our table, wearing a cream bodycon dress in almost the same style as the one I thought was too hot for tonight. I don’t remember Maxim’s sister from when I was sixteen, but I know it has to be her.

“When are you not late?” Maxim pushes out of his chair so he can give her a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

“Don’t piss me off,” she tells him, and I scoot my chair back and stand just in time for her to turn my direction. “April.” She smiles, giving me a one-armed hug. “I love your outfit, your hair, makeup, and—” She drops her eyes to my feet. “—your shoes.”

“Thanks.” I laugh as she takes a seat, and I do the same.

“I don’t know about you two, but I need a drink. It has been a fucking day.” She grabs one of the menus from the table and flips it open. “I really hope they don’t skimp on the alcohol at this place.” She looks at me. “Have you ever been here before?”

“No.” I relax, comfortable in her presence, something that doesn’t happen often. Normally, it takes me awhile to warm up to people, but I know instantly that she is someone I would want to spend time with.

“Me neither, but it was the first place that came up when I googled the nicest restaurants in Nashville. I really hope they live up to the hype, because I’m also seriously hungry,” she says, and I can’t help but to laugh as I pick up my own menu and return to my search for something to drink.

A second later, our waitress comes over to introduce herself, then she leads us through the menu and some of the best drinks. When she walks away, Melanie and I have both ordered specialty drinks, while Maxim has gone with a glass of whiskey.

“So how did house hunting go today?”

I look at Maxim at that question and wait for him to share the news that he found a home to purchase.

“I found a place, and the offer was accepted. Now we just have to wait for a final closing date,” he tells her, and she grins.

“That’s great news. Is it close to my place?”

“Not far.” He shrugs.

“Have you told Malo, Mom, and Dad?”

“Not yet, they were traveling today.”

“When are they not traveling?” She rolls her eyes, then looks at me. “If he hasn’t told you, our parents are still grossly in love and can’t stand being away from each other for more than a couple of days, and our baby brother is Mom’s favorite child, so he’s always wherever she is.”

“He hasn’t told me.” I glance at him, then focus back on her. “Then again, he hasn’t told me much.” And that is not an exaggeration. Then again, I haven’t shared much about myself either.

“Oh, it sounds like there’s a story there.” She leans back to accept her drink when our waitress comes over, and I do the same so she can set mine down. “Well, if you have any questions, feel free to ask me. Unlike the men in my family, I’m an open book.” She holds up her glass toward me.

“Thanks.” I tap my glass to hers, then look over at Maxim and catch him scowling. “So your brother mentioned you’re in school.”

“I am. I work as an RN at Vanderbilt, and I’m going to school part time to get my APRN.”

“That’s pretty intense.”

“It is. Then again, I love what I do. Even with the stress, it’s worth it.” She looks between Maxim and me. “How do you feel about my brother owning a strip club?” she asks as I’m

taking a sip of the lavender martini I ordered, and I start to choke.

“Jesus, Mel, what the fuck?” Maxim hands me his napkin and rubs my back.

“Oh Lord, please tell me that you’ve already told her this.”

“He hasn’t.” I shake my head as I turn to him.

“Seriously?” she asks him, and I raise a brow.

“I was waiting to tell you,” he says, then his eyes go over the top of my head, and his eyes narrow. I turn to see who or what has caught his attention and notice a petite, very cute brunette walking toward us and a table of women all with their eyes on us.

“April?” she asks, looking directly at me, and Maxim gets even closer to me.

“Yes.” I wait, praying she isn’t one of the people still sending me ridiculous emails and messages on social media.

“I thought that was you.” She smiles sweetly, then holds out her hand. “It’s me, Vanessa.” She looks around my table, seeming suddenly uncomfortable when I don’t react to her name. “We met a couple of times years ago. I’m Brock’s fiancée.” She twitches her fingers, the stone in her ring glittering brightly.

“Vanessa.” I shake her hand, having a difficult time placing her. But during the time that I was with Cohen, there was always a sea of women hanging around him and the band, and Brock tended to have a different girlfriend every week.

“You don’t remember me?” She laughs. “I get it. I just wanted to come over to say hi.”

“Sorry, that time in my life is a little bit of a blur,” I reply as our waitress comes over, probably to take our dinner orders.

“That’s understandable. When you’re around the guys, things always seem to blur.” She smiles, then shifts on her feet. “Well...” She looks at the waitress. “I’ll let you get back to your dinner. It was nice seeing you again.”

“You too.” I watch her walk away, then turn back to the table.

“Who’s Brock?” Melanie questions, catching my eye.

“The brother of a guy I used to see,” I tell her, and she gives me an “Aw, I understand” look, then focuses on the waitress. After we give our orders, Maxim’s hand touches my lower back, and I turn to him.

“I gotta make a call.” He stands, then looks at his sister. “Please try not to tell her anything that is going to cause her to run.”

“If she runs, that’s on you, my friend.” She gives him a smug look, and I hide my smile behind my glass when he sighs. With him gone, she raises a brow at me. “So tell me honestly—do you have an issue with the fact that he owns a strip club?”

“No, not even a little.” I take another sip of my drink, and she finishes off hers, then notice Maxim standing near the bar, talking on the phone, oblivious to the woman sitting a few feet away with her friend, her eyes on him. Her friend obviously encouraging her to make a move and talk to him.

“Would you like another?” our waitress asks, coming over, and I pull my attention off him, feeling oddly relieved.

“Yes, please.” Melanie looks at my drink. “She’ll have another one too, and we’ll have two shots of tequila.”

“Great, be right back.” She smiles, then takes off.

“Tequila?” I raise a brow at her, and she shrugs.

“I don’t have work tomorrow, and it’s my first real day off in two months.”

“I guess we’re drinking tequila tonight, then.” I laugh, then push back from the table and stand. “Before that though, I’m going to go use the restroom.”

“I’ll be here,” she says, and I head across the room. When I reach the restroom, a couple of girls are inside, so I wait until one of the stalls is free. When I’m finished I come out to wash my hands, and a redhead that was at the table with Vanessa is

at the sink, leaning in and fixing her lipstick. Her eyes come to me in the mirror, and there is something about the look in her gaze that puts me on guard.

“With all the talk about you, I thought you’d be—” Her eyes roam over me. “—hotter.”

“Did you?” I raise a brow. “It’s the boobs, right?” I look down at my chest, which is half the size of hers. “I knew I should have gotten a boob job.”

“That wouldn’t help. You’re so—” Her lip curls. “Plain.”

“Ouch.” I shake off my hands over the sink, then grab a paper towel and lean with my hip against the edge of the counter. “Anything else you wanna tell me before I take off?” I ask, taking pleasure in the fact that me not feeding into her is obviously pissing her off, judging by the way her cheeks are starting to darken.

“Cohen doesn’t love you.” She makes a kiss face to her reflection, then puts the cap on her lipstick and places it in her bag. “This whole thing with you and the album is just a publicity stunt.”

That wouldn’t even surprise me a little. Still, it annoys me that she assumes her statement would bother me. “How long have you been sleeping with him?”

“Pardon?”

“With Cohen, how long have you been sleeping with him? That’s why you’re doing this, right? Because you think I’m actually going to go running back to him and you’re going to get left behind?”

“He loves me.” She rolls her eyes.

“I hope for your sake that’s true, because the Cohen I knew only ever loved himself, so a word of advice?” I toss my paper towel in the trash. “Run while you can and save yourself the hurt you’re going to feel when he lets you down.”

I open the door, finding Maxim standing outside with his back to the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. If I didn’t know better, I’d think his stance was relaxed, but the way his

muscles are bunched under his shirt and his jaw tight, I can tell he's been out here holding himself in check.

"You okay?" He meets my gaze, then looks behind me.

"Great," I say as he places his hand in the center of my back to lead me across the room. "Everything go okay with your phone call?"

"What did the redhead say to you?" he asks, ignoring my question.

Figures.

"How do you know she said anything?"

"She was watching you from the moment we sat at our table, then I watched her follow you into the restroom. I figured she's either sleeping with your ex or wants to be sleeping with him, which means you're enemy number one."

"You're good at reading people," I tell him, glancing at the table where Vanessa and her friends are sitting, and the three of them watch us walk by. If I had to guess, they have all been hanging out with Cohen and his band, and none of them want some chick coming in and fucking things up for them.

"I own a strip club; I know women, know how territorial they can get," he murmurs as we get closer to the table. I don't respond, even though I really want to ask him if he's slept with any of the women at his club, giving them a reason to fight over him. It's none of my business, and there is no way in hell I would ever let him think I'm jealous, because I'm not.

Okay... I'm mostly not.

"Thanks," I tell him when he holds out my chair for me to take a seat.

"Why do you have that look on your face?" Melanie asks her brother before looking at me. "And why do you look annoyed? Please tell me that you two are not fighting."

"No one is fighting," I assure her as she hands me a shot of tequila.

"What is that?" Maxim asks her, and she grins at him.

“Tequila.”

“Fuck.” He jerks his fingers through his hair. “I’m not taking care of your ass if you get fucked up.”

“Yeah, you are.” She holds her glass out to me.

“I’m not.” He takes a sip of his whiskey.

“What about your girlfriend? Are you taking care of her if she gets messed up?”

“He’s not my man,” I tell her, and his hand lands possessively on my thigh, his fingers squeezing—not enough to hurt, but definitely enough to get my attention.

“Pretty sure you’ve been claimed,” she mutters, then takes her shot, and I turn to meet her brother’s gaze and shoot back mine.

Between the hold he has on me and the burn from the tequila, my breath catches. I set down my glass and cover his hand, attempting to get him to let go. He doesn’t, and I don’t know what the look he’s giving me means, but then again, it doesn’t take a genius to guess he’s not happy.

Which is too damn bad for him.

Chapter 7

April

“I LOVE YOUR sister.” I sigh happily, waving at Melanie, who is standing in the open doorway of her house.

“Go back inside, Melanie!” Maxim leans across me to yell at her out the passenger side window.

“I’m saying goodnight!” she shouts at her brother, then her eyes come to me, and she holds up her pinky to her mouth and thumb to her ear. “Call me.”

“I’ll call you. We’ll have lunch,” I yell back, and she stumbles slightly to the side, and Maxim lets out a string of curses before getting out of the car once again.

“Okay, but don’t forget.”

“I won’t.” I cross my fingers over my chest, watching Maxim stomp up the steps toward her.

“Night, new best friend,” she singsongs loudly, waving over the top of her brother’s head.

“Night,” I shout back as he pushes her into the house and pulls the door closed, then he waits a second, probably to see if she’s going to come back out, which is something she’s done twice now.

After a moment, he walks back to the car, looking annoyed, then he gets in behind the wheel and rests his hand on the back of my headrest so he can back out of her driveway.

“You’re very cranky tonight,” I point out, and he turns to glare at me.

“You and my sister are not allowed to hang out again.”

I laugh, resting my head back against my seat.

“I’m serious.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” I smile, closing my eyes, which is not wise, because my head starts to spin. I roll down the

window, needing some air, and his hand lands on my thigh.

“Are you going to be sick?”

“No,” I tell him, hoping I’m right, because his car probably costs a billion dollars, and I don’t even want to think about what it would cost to get it detailed. Worse, the scent of puke would probably never come out completely.

“How drunk are you?”

“Somewhere between feeling good and knowing I’m going to have a hangover tomorrow.” I smile when he chuckles.

“I told you two that tequila was no good.”

“Tequila is always good, and with everything that has happened since I met you, I needed tequila.”

“What’s happened since you met me?” He sounds genuinely curious, and I turn my head to look out the window.

“Drama.” I sigh. “So much drama has happened since I met you.” I close my eyes, and with the wind coming in through the window, I’m able to keep them closed.

“Put your arm around my shoulder, baby,” Maxim says, and I blink my eyes open and find that he’s parked in the driveway of my house.

“I can walk,” I assure him, and he gives me a skeptical look. “Trust me. I’m not that drunk.” I get out, then laugh when I stumble into him. “Okay, I’m a lot drunk, but I’m all right.” I let him help me to the door, and he lets us inside. I take off my shoes like I always do but don’t trust myself not to tip over if I try to pick them up. I leave them where they are and start up the steps, holding onto the handrail and attempting to look like I’m not completely wasted. When we get to the kitchen, I grab a huge glass and fill it with water from the fridge, downing most of it before filling it back up and carrying it toward the stairs.

“I’ll take that.” He removes the cup from my hand when I end up splashing some over the side and onto the floor.

“I need a shower,” I tell him, and he shakes his head at me.

“You need to sleep.”

“Yes, but I also need a shower. It will help sober me up.” I head up the steps and across the landing to my bedroom, where I flip on the lights. As I strip out of my clothes, I hear the shower come on, and then a moment later, he comes out and watches as I bite my lip and attempt to take off the patches covering my nipples.

“Let me help.” He walks to where I’m wearing nothing but a simple piece of lace, and he pushes my hands out of the way and ushers me back to sit on the edge of my bed. When he kneels in front of me, I can’t help but admire the thickness of his hair and his handsome face drawn in concentration as he carefully pulls off the first patch and places a soft kiss against my nipple. Lifting my hands I run my fingers through his hair, and his dark eyes lift to meet mine.

“I shouldn’t like you as much as I do.”

“You shouldn’t?”

“No.” My fingers trace the edge of his scruffy jaw, and I frown when his lips tip up. “Why are you smiling?”

“Because you finally admitted you like me.” He pulls off the second patch, then leans in and sucks my nipple into his mouth, biting the tip and letting it go with a pop. “Which means we’re finally fucking making progress.”

His hands go under my ass, and he squeezes both my cheeks hard enough to leave fingerprints, then hooks his fingers in the string of my panties and pulls them down. With my pussy aching for his touch, I lift my hips off the bed and bite my lip as he drags them the rest of the way off, tossing them aside, then pushes my knees apart. My heart speeds up when he settles between my legs, then leans back just enough to unbutton his shirt, slip it off his shoulders, and toss it to the chair in the corner of my room.

“Don’t want it getting wet.” His smile is roguish as his rough palms smooth up my thighs, then move up to my waist before he cups both my breasts. My nipples that are already hard tighten further, and my breath hitches when he catches

both between his fingers and tugs. “Have I told you how fucking sexy you are?”

His gaze meets mine as he leans in and bites my lower belly, the sting of pain and his face so close to exactly where I need him, causing my core to clench. When his hands move down to wrap around my waist and his thumb finds my clit, my hips move back. “Be still.”

“I can’t when you do that.” My voice is raspy to my own ears.

“Try.” His mouth latches onto my pussy, his tongue sliding inside me like he can’t get enough of my taste. I dig my fingers into his hair, my body shaking from the sensation of his scruff on my inner thighs, his mouth working me over, and his thumb circling my clit.

Just when I’m sure I won’t be able to take any more, he slides two fingers inside me, hooking them against my G-spot, tapping until I fall over the edge. My eyes close, and stars dance behind my closed lids while my core tightens around his thick fingers.

“Come down here,” he orders, biting my thigh before I even have a chance to fully recover, and I open my eyes just in time to watch him lean back, unzip his pants, and slide a condom down his length. “I want that pussy, April.”

I lick my lips and slide off the bed onto his lap, and he holds out his thick, long cock while leaning back on his heels. As he moves the head up and down between my slit, I wrap my fingers around his shoulders, then watch as he lifts his hips and slides into me inch by slow inch. “Maxim.” My head falls back on my shoulders. I’ve never had better than him, bigger than him, stronger than him.

“Give me all of it.” He wraps his hand around my back, urging me farther down his length, this position opening me up and leaving me at his mercy. Without a choice, I take all of him, my breath hitching when he bumps my cervix, only to lean back on his heels, then push forward and do it again. “Give me your mouth.”

Righting my head, I dig my nails into his skin, and I place my mouth against his. The first swipe of his tongue against my lips is sweet, then his teeth nip my bottom lip, and I lose it. I kiss him back, pulling his bottom, then top lip into my mouth, both of us panting. He fucks me hard, using me in the best possible way.

“I’m so close,” I breathe against his mouth, his body and mine shaking as we work toward completion, then he hooks one of my legs under his arm, spreading me open even farther, sending him impossibly deeper. His tongue delves back between my lips, and I cling to him as I climb closer and closer toward an orgasm that I know is going to completely wreck me. Then again, every single orgasm he’s given me has felt life-altering.

“Fuck.” He pulls my hips down as he thrusts up, the pain and pleasure almost too much to handle, especially when my core begins to pulse around his length, and he groans like he’s in heaven and hell.

I erupt in a plethora of emotions and sensations, moaning his name, my fingers and toes tingling, my legs shaking, and my pussy throbbing. His hips jerk, then he slows his movements, lets my leg fall back to the ground, and wraps his arms around me, pulling me down until there is no space between us. He holds me close as he pulses inside of me.

My head falls to his shoulder as our chests rise and fall between us, our hearts pounding so hard you’d think they were trying to reach each other. Exhausted, I wrap my arms around his shoulders as his forehead rests in the crook of my neck. His breath causes goose bumps to spread across my damp skin and a chill to slide down my spine.

“When I think my legs can move, I’ll find a way to get us off the floor,” he says, sounding relaxed, and I laugh, turning my head his way. He leans back to look at me, and the soft look in his eyes makes my heart flutter and anxiousness fill the pit of my stomach. I shouldn’t be in so deep with him, especially when I don’t know him or really anything about him. “Don’t, not when I’m inside you.” He lifts his hand and smooths my hair back away from my face.

“Don’t what?” I smile to hide how freaked out it makes me that he can read me. Then I carefully get my shaky legs under me and stand up, holding out my hand.

He looks at it for a long moment, then sighs and gets up without my help. I don’t wrap my arms around my middle like I want; I don’t want to admit I feel vulnerable. Instead, I head to the bathroom like nothing is amiss and walk right into the shower, since the water has been on. Leaning my head back, I let the warm water soak my hair, then a moment later, he gets in with me.

Without a word said between us, we both wash up, then get out and dry off. Dressed in a sleep tank and a pair of panties, I turn out the lights, then crawl into bed with him. As soon as I’m under the covers, I hold my breath and wait for him to wrap his arms around me and hold me like he’s done since the night we saw each other for the first time since I was sixteen, only it doesn’t happen.

Something ugly curls up in the pit of my stomach—disappointment in myself, maybe? I don’t know how long I lie there awake, but I see light coming in around the edges of my blackout curtains long before I fall asleep.

Hearing my name and feeling a hand heavy on my shoulder, I wake with a start and sit up, almost bopping Maxim in the nose with my forehead. “Stop scaring me.” I fall back to the bed and rest my hand over my pounding heart, cursing tequila when my head pounds.

“Sorry,” he says, and I focus on him—or try to, but it’s difficult with how dark my room is, even with a little light coming in from around the windows. Feeling the strange vibe in the room, I sit up and turn on the lamp on my side of my bed and see he is fully dressed, wearing slacks and a button-down shirt. His shoes are off, probably downstairs near the front door, his hair styled messily and his fancy watch on his wrist. The watch he only puts on when he’s leaving the house.

“You’re leaving.” It’s a statement not a question, and a sinking feeling settles inside me.

“Got a call about an hour ago that I’m needed back in Vegas. I didn’t want to wake you but didn’t like the idea of leaving without you knowing I was going.”

“Oh.” My nose stings, and I curse my stupid voice, because I sound as upset as I feel. I knew this would happen, knew he would leave. I thought I did a good job of protecting myself from the inevitable, but I obviously didn’t. I drag my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around my shins as I try to come up with something to say.

“I should only be gone a couple of days,” he says softly, resting his hand on my knee before moving it to my cheek. “You going to be okay?”

“Absolutely.” The lie slides off my tongue with ease.

“We’ll talk when I get back.” I want to ask about what; I want to ask why, but I don’t. I tuck those questions away, swallow them down, even though it feels like glass cutting me open.

“Have a safe trip, and I’ll let you know when I find out what your closing date is on your house,” I say, because I need the reminder that even if I wanted this to be more, it’s not. He’s a client. Nothing more than a client and a few days of really, really amazing sex.

He stares at me for a long moment, then curses under his breath, slides his hand still on my cheek back into my hair, forces my head back, then covers my mouth with his. The kiss is not sweet; it’s punishing and claiming. A reminder.

When he rips his mouth away, his face is an inch from mine when he growls, “We’ll talk when I get back.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t. I’m too stunned.

“Nod if you understand.”

I swallow and nod, and then without another word, he lets me go and prowls from my room. I stare at the open door for a long time, trying to figure out what just happened, but my mind is completely blank of everything but the fact that my lips are tingling.

Chapter 8

April

I GLANCE AT the photo of a beautiful charcuterie board on my phone, then down at the one I put together and sigh. Even with all the same items as the picture, mine looks nothing like it. The meat rose I made actually looks like a pile of meatballs, all my cheese is cut wonky, and the nuts and crackers have decided to do their own thing.

“Well, all that really matters is how it tastes,” I mutter when the doorbell rings. After quickly washing my hands, I head downstairs and smile when I open the door to my sisters July and May, my friend Matt, and his husband Kirk, who are both realtors.

“I love you. I hate the drive out here,” July greets, giving me a one-arm hug before walking past and kicking off her shoes.

“I had to listen to that the whole way.” May rolls her eyes, making me laugh while following July inside.

“The traffic is atrocious,” Kirk agrees before smiling at me and kissing my cheek. “Hey, pretty girl.”

“Hey.” I give his shoulder a squeeze, then look at Matt and laugh when he picks me up off the ground.

“I’ve missed you.” He drops me to my feet, then kisses my cheek.

“Me too.” I shut the door once he clears it, then we all head up to my kitchen.

“Oh, look how pretty,” Kirk, ever the nice guy, says as he stops at the board I made, snagging a piece of cheese and tossing it into his mouth.

“It looks nothing like the photo I tried to copy,” I inform him as Matt goes to the fridge to pull out a bottle of white wine I had chilling, then to the drawer where I keep my wine bottle opener.

“Who cares how it looks,” July says as she takes a seat at the island next to May, who reaches around her for some of the grapes on the board.

“Exactly my thoughts.” Matt comes to stand next to me and opens the bottle, then begins filling the glasses I set out for each of us.

“So where is the guy Mom told us about?” May asks, obviously not remembering him, and although I’m thankful for that small reprieve, I inwardly groan, wishing it were actually possible for my mom to keep things to herself.

“He’s in Vegas,” I state simply, hoping that will end the conversation before it can begin.

“What guy is this? You never told me about a guy,” Matt says, and I sigh.

“He’s just a client.”

“You say that, but you have a weird look on your face,” July points out, and I look between her and everyone else, finding them all studying me closely now.

“Mom said you two were obviously together,” May adds.

“We’re not.” I take the glass of wine Matt hands to me. “Or I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, and I think about deflecting, but the truth is, I could use some advice, since I’ve never been in a situation like this before.

“It’s complicated,” I answer, then explain everything that happened while he was here, then about the kiss and him saying we will talk when he gets back. When I finish, everyone’s completely quiet and looking at me with wide eyes.

“Well, it sounds to me like you’re his,” July says with a smirk.

“I’d say so too,” Kirk agrees.

“I haven’t heard from him once since he left the day before yesterday, and you’d think if he really is interested that he would call to check in or at the least send a text. Heck, even an

email would be better than complete silence,” I say, feeling the same sense of disappointment I felt at sixteen when I never heard from him after the kiss we shared.

“Have you reached out to him?” Matt asks, and I shake my head and leave out that I have written him about a dozen texts, then deleted each of them. Nothing I wrote ever seemed right. And honestly, it makes me uncomfortable putting myself out there, being the one to make a move first. Or any move at all really.

“So you don’t even know if something happened to him? He could be in the hospital right now,” May says, and I gasp.

“Don’t say that.” I press my hand to my stomach.

“It’s true. He could be.” She shrugs.

“Stop saying that,” I demand, and she smirks.

“There is only one way to find out that he’s not.” She nudges my phone toward me, and I stare at it like it’s a snake ready to strike.

“Answer me this,” Kirk says softly, and I focus on him. “Do you like him?”

“Yes,” I admit the truth out loud—and to myself for the first time. “A lot actually.”

“Then maybe you should give him a call,” Matt adds gently, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “Not every guy is like Cohen. There are some good ones out there.” He looks at his husband with softness in his eyes.

“I can attest to that.” July catches my gaze, and I smile at her, because she is not wrong. Wes, her husband, is one of the best, and I love the way he loves my sister.

“All right, I’m going to call him.” I start to reach for my phone but stop when someone knocks on the door downstairs.

“I thought it was just us for dinner tonight,” Matt says.

“It is.” I look at my sisters. “No one else was coming, right?”

“No, everyone was busy,” May replies, and I shrug and head for the stairs, hearing everyone follow behind me.

When I reach the bottom step, I see the outline of a large man standing on the other side of the door. Opening it, my heart drops into my stomach, and I brace my hand on the doorjamb to keep from falling over when I come face-to-face with Gene, the guy who does security for Maxim and his family.

A million reasons why he would be knocking on my door fill my mind, and not one of them is good. He looks at me, then the people behind me, and says something into the phone at his ear before pulling it away.

“Mr. Kauwe would like to speak with you.” He holds out a phone toward me, and I look down at it.

“What?”

“Mr. Kauwe would like to speak to you.” He lifts the phone closer to my face, then sighs when I don’t take it and puts it on speaker. “She can hear you,” he rumbles.

“April,” Maxim says, and I take the phone.

“Yes.”

“Do you have friends over?”

I frown, looking behind me at my sisters and my friends, all of whom are watching me and listening closely. “Yes?”

“Just friends?”

“I’m sorry. I must have hit my head, because I swear your security just knocked on my door, giving me heart palpitations, making me think you were dead and that he was here to give me the news. Instead, he’s handed me a phone, and now you’re asking who I have over and questioning if they are just friends.”

“You were worried?” he prompts quietly, and my nostrils flare. Of course he would focus on that part of my tirade.

“No,” I lie. “And even if I was, that is not the point, Maxim.”

“Right.” It sounds like he’s smiling. “I would have called you, but you changed your number and didn’t give me your new one. I asked Gene to stop by your place and get it for me, and he called to let me know there was a man holding you in your doorway.”

“You’re a snitch.” I look up at Gene and glare, which seems to have zero effect on him at all, and Maxim’s laughter fills the air. “This is not funny.”

“It’s a little funny,” July mumbles behind me, and I turn my glare on her, watching her shrug.

“I’ll let you get back to your company.”

“That’s it?” I ask in disbelief.

“Give Gene your number.”

“Seriously?”

“I miss you, your pussy, and the taste of you first thing in the morning,” he rumbles, and my nipples tighten along with my core, while either July or May whispers “Oh my” behind me. “I’ll talk to you later, baby. Be good.” He hangs up before I can even reply. My cheeks warm as I look up at Gene, noticing that up close he is seriously hot but also seriously scary, which is saying something, because men normally do not scare me.

“Before you hand that back to me, plug in your number,” Gene orders, and I want to say no, but I do *not* think that would be wise. Once I type in my new phone number, I hand him his phone back, and he dips his chin ever so slightly. “Have a good evening.”

“You too.” I watch him walk off, then turn to go back into the house and ignore the looks everyone is giving me.

“I think it’s safe to say you have nothing to worry about when it comes to Maxim,” Matt says as I stomp up the steps ahead of the group.

“I think he might be as crazy as Wes.” July laughs, and I bite the inside of my cheek, because I’m thinking she might be

right about that. I reach the kitchen and pick up my wine, taking a large sip.

“I still can’t believe you had to change your number after Cohen spoke about you on the radio,” Matt says, taking some cheese and crackers off the board. “Did he really think that move would have you running back to him?”

“I think that move would have won most women back,” July proclaims, then adds, “Our mom, who didn’t even like him, was swooning after she listened to him talk about how April was the woman who got away and the one he would do anything to win back.”

“He’s such a jerk,” May mutters, and I give her a look of agreement. Out of everyone here, she’s probably the only one who really knows about everything I went through with Cohen. About all the times he promised to change, promised he would make us a priority. About all the times he said he would slow down on the drinking and partying, stop hanging out with the band and all the groupies all the time.

I always felt like I was going crazy when I was with him. That’s how he made me feel—crazy. It was never him doing anything wrong; it was always me overreacting or being the jealous girlfriend. I hated feeling like that, feeling like I was just insecure, when the reality is he never did anything to make me feel differently.

Shaking off those thoughts, I go to the stove and lift the lid on the sauce for the chicken piccata I’m making for dinner.

“I think you should get a dog.” At that random statement from July, I turn and look over my shoulder.

“I’m not getting a dog.”

“Why not? You love animals, and this place needs another living being in it besides you.” She looks around. “Don’t you get lonely?” I want to tell her that I had never been really lonely before Maxim invaded my life, then left, but I don’t.

“I do not want the responsibility of a dog.”

“What about a cat, then? Yesterday, someone dropped off a cute little black kitten with green eyes. He’s really sweet.”

“No, no animals.” I shake my head and turn up the heat for the sauce, then check the potatoes that are now soft and ready to be drained and mashed.

“He’s healthy.” She keeps at it, which doesn’t surprise me. As a vet, she sees more than most and knows what can happen if you can’t find an animal a safe home.

“I want to travel. If I have an animal, I won’t be able to just get up and go whenever the mood strikes.”

“I’ll watch him for you,” Matt, the big softy, tells me as I grab a strainer for the potatoes. “I’m sure that Gus and Chuck wouldn’t mind some company every now and then.” He’s referring to his two miniature poodles who are going on about a hundred in dog years.

With a sigh, I look at my sister, then at Matt, and know that between the two of them, I’m going to end up the mother of a kitten by the end of the night. “I’ll think about it.”

“Awesome.” July smiles, and May giggles.

“Holy shit,” Kirk breathes, sounding distressed.

“What is it?” Matt asks him, going around the counter to stand behind him, then the color drains from his face as he looks over his shoulder at his phone in Kirk’s hand.

“What?” I look between the two of them, and the eyes look back at me are filled with concern.

“Charlotte was found murdered in one of her clients’ house this afternoon.” Kirk turns his phone around my way, and I read over the text he received. My heart starts to pound, and my palms start to sweat when I scan over the part that says cops on the scene mentioned that both her and Meghan’s murders were very similar.

“She was a realtor too?” July asks, having not read the text, and I nod. “Who would do that?”

“I don’t know.” Kirk shakes his head. “I know Meghan and Charlotte were friends. They hung out all the time.”

“You think they upset someone?” I ask, thinking killing someone is a little extreme.

“They could have,” Matt says as May comes around the counter and takes over what I was doing with the mashed potatoes. “I don’t know what is going on, but I do remember that not long ago there was that group of homeless people breaking into staged houses. And if a realtor came when they were there, they would attack them. One realtor ended up in a coma for a month after they beat him so badly.”

“I remember that,” I say, recalling how horrified I was at the time, worried, because if Harris was ever with me in that kind of situation, I don’t know that he would react very well.

“It could be something like that going on,” Matt agrees.

“Or it could be someone targeting women,” July says, and I look at my sister. “I hate to be the one to point that out, but I know you go into houses alone, so I think you need to think of the worst-case scenario. That way you are never caught off guard.”

“You’re right.” Matt adds, “Maybe you should hold off on showings until the cops have a better idea of what’s going on.”

“You know I can’t do that,” I point out the obvious, because like me, he knows that showings are how we make a large chunk of our money. “I’ll just change things up and arrive when my clients do, or I’ll wait in my car until they get there. I won’t go into any houses on my own.”

“And you know Kirk or I will be there at the drop of a hat if you ever need us.”

“I know,” I promise, letting out a deep breath and trying to wrap my mind around the fact that two women who I knew are now gone. And not just gone but brutally murdered and possibly by the same person. Worse, Meghan hasn’t even been laid to rest yet, since her family in Florida wanted her buried down there next to her dad who passed a few years back. Now, any acceptance or closure they’ve found is going to be erased when they hear about Charlotte.

“I hope they find out who’s responsible sooner rather than later,” Kirk says quietly, and all I can do is nod my agreement. A chill slides down my spine, and I try—*really* try—to remind

myself that I am a strong woman who is capable of taking care of herself.

That said, I really, really wish Maxim was here.

Chapter 9

April

SITTING IN MY chair on my back deck with my laptop forgotten in front of me, I listen to the quiet of the early morning while watching two white butterflies dance in the forest beyond my back porch. I take a sip of coffee, hoping the caffeine kicks in soon, because as it stands, I'm exhausted.

Last night after everyone left, I took a shower, spoke to Maxim for about one-point-five seconds before he got called away, then got into bed, where I ended up tossing and turning for what felt like hours. I don't know exactly what was keeping me up, but then again, it's not like there isn't a lot going on in my life all of a sudden.

I pick up my phone when it beeps and click on the text July sent, then close my eyes when I see the attached photo of an adorable little black kitty, his bright green eyes wide as he plays with a pink mouse toy. Shaking my head, I message her back.

Me: You win.

Less than a second later, she sends me a meme of a cute blonde jumping up and down, waving her hands in the air. With a laugh, I set my cell down, wondering if I've lost my mind. When my phone rings, I pick it up, expecting it to be my sister but smile when I see Harris is calling.

"Hey," I answer, putting the call on speaker.

"A-re you picking me up?" I look at the time on the clock hanging on the wall and silently curse.

"Yes." I quickly pick up my laptop and almost-empty coffee cup and take both inside. "I'm getting ready to leave my house now." I put my computer in my bag, then place my mug in the sink to wash later.

"We're going to be late."

“We’re not going to be late,” I assure him, knowing that being off schedule is one thing he cannot stand. “I’m putting on my shoes right now.”

“No, you’re no-t,” he grumbles, and I laugh as I head down the steps to my front door, carrying my bag and said shoes in my hand.

“I am! I promise.” I slip on my shoes, then jingle my keys near the mouthpiece of my phone so he can hear. “I’m walking out the door. I’ll be at your house in fifteen minutes tops.”

“O-kay.” He sighs, then hangs up. I start to walk out the front door but stop when I remember that today is garbage day, which means I need to haul the trash can from inside my garage down to the end of the driveway.

“Shit,” I curse, because now I really might be late. Opening my garage door, I flip on the light, then freeze when I see Maxim’s car is parked inside my single car garage. He must have placed it there before he left, and I had no idea, because I never use my garage unless it’s winter, since it’s such a pain to pull in and out of the cramped space.

“Well, I guess that means he was always planning on coming back,” I mumble to myself, then sigh when I see he moved my garbage can, making it completely impossible for me to get it out without seriously damaging his car.

Shutting the door and locking it, I pick up my phone, bag, and keys that I rested on the bench near the door, then head outside, finding Maxim’s number in my phone.

I press Call and listen to it ring as I get into my car, and my heart turns over in my chest when he answers, sounding half asleep. “Hey, babe.”

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” I tell him while starting my engine and backing out of my driveway.

“I’m not complaining. I miss the sound of your voice and was pissed we didn’t get a chance to really talk last night,” he says, actually sounding pissed, and my stomach dips. “Is everything okay?”

“Your car is in my garage.”

“Yeah, I pulled it in before I took off, since Gene was taking me to the airport.”

“Oh,” I say quietly, remembering how on edge I was when he told me he was leaving, how I was sure that was his way of ending whatever... whatever this is between us. And all along, he planned on coming back.

“Is that all? You called to tell me that my car is in the garage?”

“I couldn’t get the garbage can out for trash day,” I say stupidly, and he groans.

“Shit, sorry about that. I’ll take care of the trash when I get back home, unless you wanna move it, then the key is in that bowl of junk you got near your front door.”

“That’s all important stuff, not junk.” Okay, it is kind of junk, but whatever.

“All right, then it’s in that bowl of important stuff you got next to your door.” The smile in his voice makes me smile, and I bite my lip. “I miss you.”

“Ditto.” My hands tighten on the steering wheel when he laughs. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing, babe. We’ll get to that another time. Are you heading to work?”

“Yeah, I’m pulling into Harris’s complex now so I can pick him up.”

“All right, well, call me later. I’m gonna try to get a couple more hours of sleep.”

“Sure,” I agree, really, really wanting to ask when he will be back, but I don’t.

“Later, babe. Be good.” He hangs up as I pull into a parking spot, and I don’t even have a chance to shut down the engine before Harris is walking out to my car. The smile that is normally on his face is replaced with a deep frown.

“You’re l-ate,” he greets me, falling into the passenger seat.

“I know, and I’m sorry.” I don’t try to make an excuse, because really, if I had been paying attention to the time this morning, I would have been here when I was supposed to be.

“It’s okay.” He looks over at me and smiles.

I smile back, then ask, “Where is Molly?”

“W-ith her mom, shopping,” he says, and I know then that he was probably bored being home alone.

“That’s fun.” I reverse out of my parking spot.

“She wants to make dinner tonight.”

“Who, Molly’s mom does?”

“Yes,” he groans. “She still doesn’t trust us being on our own.”

Annoyance makes my nose scrunch. I know that it must be difficult having a child who needs extra care, but both Molly and Harris are very high functioning, and they have never given any indication that they cannot handle living alone. Really, they are more responsible than I was at twenty-one. “I’m sorry.”

“Hopeful-ly, it will change with time, or that’s what my mom keeps saying.” He sighs.

“Well, what if you tell her that you guys can’t have dinner tonight, and we go out to eat?”

“I’ll ask Molly.” He sounds happier than he has since he got into the car.

While he talks to Molly on the phone, who confirms she would like to have dinner out, I drive us to our first showing of the day. A potential new client who is looking to upgrade their loft downtown apartment to a larger home just outside of the city. When we arrive at the house, I park in front of the garage and stop Harris when he starts to get out, because there is no way I’m taking any chances.

“We’ll wait until Mr. Andrew gets here,” I tell him when he turns to look at me.

“Why?”

“We’re just changing things up,” I tell him, because the truth is, I don’t know how he will react if he finds out that two women have been murdered in homes they were showing.

“Okay.” He gives me a look that states clearly he doesn’t like it but doesn’t say more. “They’re here,” he says not even a minute later, when a black Mercedes with dark-tinted windows pulls into the driveway. I pull out the file folder I tucked between my seat and the middle console and grab my keys out of the ignition. When I open my door and get out, I slam it behind me, then meet the gaze of the man standing at the hood of the Mercedes, feeling red-hot anger fill the pit of my stomach.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I whisper-hiss, hearing Harris shut his door behind me.

“April.” Cohen gives me the smile that has melted a million panties and probably broken hundreds of hearts.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, and he looks between me and the house like it should be obvious. “Right, then you need to find a different agent.”

“I want you,” he says easily, coming toward me, looking exactly like what he is—a rock star. Piercing blue eyes, dark shaggy hair, and thick scuff along his jaw, wearing his ripped jeans with his worn-out shirt that is probably not, just bought at some high-end store and cost hundreds of dollars if not more. “I couldn’t get ahold of you any other way, and we need to talk.”

“No, thank you.” I turn to look at Harris. “We’re leaving.” I open my door, but before I can get into my car, Cohen is there, wrapping his hand around my bicep and stopping me.

“Five minutes, please.”

I tip my head back, and a sense of déjà vu washes over me as I meet his gaze. How many times did I give in to the plea in his tone and expression? How many times did I say okay and let him convince me that things would change? How many times were things between us good—until they weren’t anymore?

Too many. Way too many is the answer to all those questions.

“Let me go,” I hiss, when I really want to shout. The only thing keeping me from doing exactly that is the fact that Harris is here, and I don’t want to scare him.

“Please.” He releases me and raises his hand up between us. “I just want to talk.”

I want to say no. I really do. But I don’t want this to continue to happen. I don’t want to worry that he’s going to show up every time I have an appointment with a new client.

I turn to look at Harris over the roof of the car. “I’m going to talk to him for a minute. While I do that, do you want to find somewhere to make reservations for dinner tonight?”

“Are you going to be o-okay with him?” he asks as he looks between Cohen and me, obviously feeling the tension, and my face softens.

“I’ll be okay, and I won’t be more than a couple of minutes,” I say, and he nods and opens his door. When he’s inside, I step away from the car and cross my arms over my chest as I turn to face Cohen. “I have stuff to do today, so please make this quick.”

“You’re still the only woman I know who’s even more beautiful when she’s pissed,” he says quietly, his eyes roaming over my face like he’s trying to memorize it. “I’ve missed you, so fucking much. I...” He looks away for a moment, then runs his fingers through his hair. “Shit, I had a whole speech rehearsed for this moment, but now I’m at a loss for words.”

He clears his throat, and I raise a brow.

“It took me a long time to realize how badly I fucked up by letting you go, letting you walk away. I should have fought for you, for us, but I just couldn’t see past the band and my music. I’m sorry I hurt you. I hate that I hurt you, and I know I don’t deserve it, but I want another shot. I want the chance to prove to you that I’ve changed.”

“Thank you for the apology, but no.” I uncross my arms. “And if you really are sorry, you won’t talk about me during

anymore interviews or do this ever again.”

“No.” He zeroes in on that word, looking confused, probably because no one tells him no anymore. I’m sure he’s surrounded with people who jump when he says to do so. Only ever asking “how high?” “Is it the guy you’re seeing? The one Brock saw you leave The Drop with? The same one Vanessa saw you out at dinner with?”

“It has nothing to do with Maxim.” And that’s the truth, because even if Maxim wasn’t in the picture, I would not go backward. The chapter of my life that included Cohen has ended.

“Maxim.” He spits out his name, his lip curling.

“We’re done here.” I sigh, heading for my car.

“I’m not going to give up,” he calls out when I open my door. “That’s what you want me to say, right, that I’m not going to give up?”

I meet his gaze and shake my head. “This isn’t some weird mind-fuck, Cohen. I don’t want you to try to prove anything to me. I want you to leave me alone and to move on, because I have.” The words come out with ease, and I realize it’s the truth. Somehow without even realizing it was happening, I moved on, or maybe I had a long time ago but never realized it. “What we had ended a long time ago. Find someone who makes you happy, and put some effort into them.”

I slide into my seat, shut the door, start the engine, then slip on my seatbelt. I don’t even bother looking in his direction as I back out and then a moment later pull out onto the main road.

“W-ho was that guy?” Harris asks, and I glance over at him, finding his head turned so he can look out the back windshield.

“My ex.”

“So he didn’t want to see the house?” he asks, sounding deflated.

“No.” I laugh. “He didn’t want to see the house.” Or I don’t think he did.

“Darn, I was hoping I could tell Molly we were going on vacation.”

“The day is still young, and that wasn’t the only appointment we have on the schedule.”

“I guess you’re right.” He turns to face forward.

“Did you find somewhere for us to have dinner?”

“Molly wants to go out for hambur-gers.”

“Burgers it is then.” I press down on the gas, listening to the engine of my car purr.

“Are you okay?” Hearing the concern in his tone, I look over at him when I pull up to a stoplight.

“Absolutely.”

“Real-ly? You seemed upset when you saw that guy. Your ex.”

“I wasn’t upset. I was angry that he was there, that he took my choice to talk to him away from me. I didn’t want to see him. I don’t want to see him again.”

“I would be angry too,” he says softly. “Will you see him again?”

“I hope not,” I say quietly. I hope talking to him didn’t do more harm than good, and I really hope he heard what I said and didn’t take me turning him down as a challenge, because Lord knows I don’t need that right now.

SITTING ACROSS FROM Harris and Molly, I watch the two of them finish off the giant ice cream float they got to share with dinner.

“Brain freeze,” Molly cries, holding her head.

“Hold your tongue to the roof of your mouth.” I laugh when she sighs in relief.

“It was painful but worth it.” She grins at me.

“I bet it was.” I smile back, dunking my last fried pickle in ranch dressing before popping it into my mouth.

“We should probably get home,” Harris, ever the timekeeper, says as he looks at his watch, and Molly looks at my plate, then me.

“Are you finished?”

“Yep, if you two are.”

“We are.” She gathers her stuff. “My mom doesn’t want us downtown too late.”

“Your mom doesn’t make the r-ules for us,” Harris reminds her gently, and I’m proud of him for saying it in a way that isn’t mean but just a reminder, because I know there are times he gets frustrated. I imagine a lot of that has to do with the way he grew up. Where Molly’s mom is overprotective to the point of overbearing, Harris’s mom and dad wanted him to be as independent as possible, so they let him experience as much of life as he wanted and let him make mistakes.

“I know,” she agrees quietly, letting out a deep breath as she looks up at him and stands as I grab my purse.

“Thank you for taking us out tonight,” Harris says as we head out of the bar that happens to be Molly’s favorite on Main Street. Not because it is known for great drinks, music, and dancing, which it is, but because the hamburgers, french fries, and milkshakes are some of the best in town.

“You know I love spending time with you guys,” I say as we make our way through the now-crowded space, with the two of them walking ahead of me.

As we near the exit, I see it before it even happens. Two guys stumble holding drinks, and Harris bumps into one of them on accident, causing the guy closest to him to spill his drink down the front of his shirt.

“Are you okay?” I hurry to Harris’s side, and he nods.

“What the fuck, retard?” the guy with the beer soaked shirt says, and I spin on him, shoving my hands against his chest.

“What did you just say?” I ask as rage courses hot and fierce through my system.

“Get out of my face, bitch,” he slurs as his friend pulls him back, and a hand wraps around mine, which is balled into a fist.

“It’s okay, April. Take us home please,” Harris says, getting close to me.

“April,” Molly whispers, sounding distressed, and I break my stare-down with the guy but only after taking in every single detail about him.

“Let’s get you two home.” My voice sounds tight even to my own ears as I take Molly’s hand, and Harris lets me go. When we get outside, I’m thankful for the cool evening air, because I need it to help tamp down my temper. Especially when all I really want to do is go back into the bar, jump behind the counter, grab the biggest bottle of Jack there is, and knock that idiot over the head with it. I know it doesn’t make me a very good person, but there are times in life when being good is overrated and people need to learn a lesson.

We get to my car in half the time it took us to make it inside the bar, and after Harris and Molly are both buckled in, I head out of the parking lot and take them home, wondering if maybe Molly’s mom is right. Maybe this judgmental, cruel world is too ugly for souls like theirs. Maybe it’s best that they are protected and sheltered from it.

When I get to their building, I walk them to their door and make sure they are inside before I get back in my car and head home, my chest still feeling heavy with anger. I reach my house a few minutes later, pull into my driveway, shut down the engine, then stare at my front door. Knowing that nothing but silence will greet me once I get inside, I debate going to my parents’ house for the night. My mom still keeps a room set up for me and my sisters, and I could use some company.

Just when I start to place my hand on the key that is still in the ignition, my front door opens, and I blink, sure that I’m seeing things when Maxim leans against the doorjamb, his eyes meeting mine through the windshield. His head tips to the side, his expression going soft as my heart starts to beat out of control, then he pushes off the frame and starts toward my car.

I hold my breath as he gets closer, and my nose stings as he opens my door, reaching for me.

“You’re here,” I say like an idiot as he pulls me out of my car and wraps his arms around me.

“I told you I wouldn’t be gone long.” He kisses my neck, my jaw, then my lips when I tip my head back so I can see his face. When his eyes lock with mine, his fill with concern. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I admit, pulling my gaze off his so I can burrow into his chest and wrap my arms around his waist. “I had a bad day.”

His body against mine grows stiff while his hand slides up my back and into my hair, then his fingers wrap around the strands, and he tugs my head back so I have no choice but to look at him.

“What happened?” The worry mixed with anger in his voice and expression lets me know I should tread carefully.

“It was nothing really.” I place my hands against his chest, not sure how he will react to me telling him that Cohen showed up at my showing today or what happened at the bar, even though he doesn’t really know Harris or Molly.

“You look like you want to cry, so it has to be something.” The back of his fingers smooth along my cheek, then around the tip of my ear.

“People are just—” I press my lips together, then let out a breath. “—mean.”

“Someone was mean to you?” The frown he’s wearing deepens as his eyes roam my face.

“No, just some drunk idiot being an idiot.” I let out a breath. “I took Harris and Molly to dinner downtown tonight, and when we were leaving, Harris bumped into a guy, causing him to spill his beer down his shirt, and he called Harris a—” I cut myself off, because I can’t repeat that word. “Anyway, it was just upsetting.”

“I can see that,” he says, and even though I shouldn’t, I like that he looks as angry as I feel. “I wish I would have been there.”

“Me too,” I say without thinking, and he looks surprised. Clearing my throat, I take a step back from him, and he lets me go. “I need to get my bag.”

“I’ll get it.” He opens my door, grabbing my keys and purse, then places his hand against my lower back.

When we reach my front door, I remember he was here when I got here, and I didn’t let him inside. “Did I leave the door unlocked?”

“No, I have a key.”

“Of course you do.” I laugh, shaking my head, then slip off my shoes so I can carry them upstairs. “So did you get everything in Vegas taken care of?” I ask, even though I’m not sure what exactly it is he was doing there.

“No, that’s why I came back early—to convince you to go back with me in a few days.”

“What?” I stop and turn to face him as my heart pounds.

“I don’t like you being here and me being there,” he says easily as he places my bag on the counter in the kitchen, and I stare at him, swearing I hear the thud when my jaw lands on the floor. “We won’t be gone long. Maybe a week tops.”

“You want me to go back to Vegas with you?”

“I do.” He crosses his arms over his chest and leans his hip against my island. “Do you think you can get some time off in the next couple of days?”

Could I? Absolutely. But me flying to Vegas and staying with him in his home seems... well, it seems huge, like something people who’ve been together for months would do. “What’s the look on your face mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what the look means? You don’t know if you can get time off, or you don’t know if you want to come

home with me?”

“I’m getting a cat,” I tell him instead of asking him the question on the tip of my tongue, that being—*what the hell is going on between us?*

“You’re getting a cat?”

I lick my lips and nod. “My sister July is a vet. I don’t know if I told you that before.” He shakes his head. “Well, she is, and when she was over at dinner yesterday, she convinced me to adopt a kitten that was dropped off at her office.”

“All right, so we’ll take it with us.”

“What?”

“We’re flying private, and as far as I know, there aren’t any rules about taking animals across state lines.”

“You’re serious?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I wasn’t.”

I study him for a long moment, then bite my lip. Maybe this doesn’t need to be a big deal. Maybe I need to quit trying to put a label on us, just go with the flow, and stop trying to complicate things. Maybe I should just have fun and let whatever is going to happen, happen.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” He pushes away from the counter and prowls toward me, his eyes darkening as he gets closer. “That was easier than I thought it would be.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah.” He kisses me soft and sweet while one of his hands tangles in my hair, the other going down to cup my ass. “I thought I was going to have to do more to persuade you.”

“How did you plan on doing that?” I sound breathless even to my own ears.

“I didn’t really have a plan.” He kisses down my jaw, then nips my neck. “I just knew I wasn’t leaving without you.”

“You weren’t?” My heart feels too big for my chest.

“Fuck no, I’ve missed you these last couple of days,” he says, and my hands find their way to his shoulders, my fingers digging into his flesh.

“I’ve missed you too.” I laugh as he lifts me off the ground, then dumps me over his shoulder. “What are you doing?” I hold onto his waist as he carries me up the steps to the second floor.

“Going to show you just how much I missed you.” He squeezes my ass, and I close my eyes, hoping like hell this isn’t too good to be true.

Chapter 10

April

WITH THE SUN casting shards of light around the edge of the blinds in my bedroom, I lie awake, listening to the sound of Maxim's heart's steady beat. Having him back with me last night meant I slept like I haven't in days. I missed him more than I let myself realize. I missed waking up to him, being held by him, his presence in my space, and the way he makes me feel.

All that said, if I let myself think about the way I feel about him too long, I will freak myself out. Trust is not something that comes easy for me, especially when it comes to men. I can't even blame that mistrust on the men most important in my life, because all of them are shining examples of what men *should* be. Loving, loyal, dependable, and protective. It's the men outside of those closest to me, the ones I've dated, my girlfriends have fallen for, or just guys I know who have taught me to tread cautiously when it comes to allowing my heart's involvement in any type of relationship.

"What are you thinking about?" Maxim's sleepy voice drags me from my thoughts as he uses his hand on my hip to drag me deeper into his side.

"Nothing really." I slide my hand around his waist, hitching my thigh higher up on his hip, while I burrow my face into his warm skin.

"Liar." He squeezes my hip. "You're not talking yourself out of coming home with me, are you?"

"No." I tip my head back, and his chin dips to meet my gaze.

"That's good, since it would suck to have to kidnap you," he mumbles, making me laugh, and his eyes move to my mouth and his expression changes ever so slightly. "So fucking pretty."

My belly dips at the compliment, and without thinking, I move my hand to his jaw and lean up to kiss him. He slides his fingers behind my knee, using it to drag me over him to straddle his waist.

“Morning.” I smile down at him.

“Morning.” His palm glides up my back, into my hair, and I lower my face toward him, ignoring my cell phone when it rings. “Wanna get that?”

“No.” I brush my lips across his while rolling my hips into him. With nothing between us, neither of us having dressed last night after our shower, the head of his cock rubs against my clit, causing a mewl of pleasure to pass my lips. “We need a condom,” I pant against his mouth when he rocks up against me.

“Got tested when I got home. I’m clean.” His eyes lock with mine, and my heart starts to pound.

Before him, it had been months since I had been with anyone, and when I got my birth control replaced recently, they tested me for everything under the sun. But going without a condom is not something I have done with anyone. Ever.

“It’s okay. Let me get to my bag, and I’ll grab a condom.” He starts to move me, but I shake my head and dig my fingers into his pecs. “It’s okay, baby. I’ll wait for that, wait for you to trust me with all of you.” His thumb skims over my bottom lip. “I want more than your wet heat strangling my cock, or to know how good it feels to be bare inside you. I want you, all of you, even the pieces that you work so hard to protect.”

My throat burns. I stare into his eyes, and my fingers dig into his skin. “I want to trust you.” It’s not a lie. I do want to trust him. I want to give him the opportunity to earn my trust and to allow myself to be vulnerable with him. Instead of telling him all of that, I lick my lips, then lift up slightly, then hiss when the head of his cock bumps against my entrance.

“Fuck.” His expression becomes darker, and his hold on me tightens as I slide down his length. When I’m full of him and

there is no space left between us, I bury my face in his neck while his arms wrap around me tight. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I swallow down the overwhelming amount of emotions coursing through me and make sure I’m not going to do something ridiculous like cry before I lean back.

“Look at me, April.” The softly spoken order and his fingers on my jaw draw my gaze to his. “Fair warning.” He wraps his hands around my hips and uses his hold to rock me against him. “I want way more than just your pussy or the use of your body, and I always get what I want.” How a threat like that can sound so damn sweet is anyone’s guess, but my eyes slide closed, then open when he lifts his hips off the bed, making me whimper. “Ride me.”

Without a fight, I start out slow, taking my time, memorizing the way he feels, the way he’s looking at me, the soft touch of his hands in such contrast with the look in his eyes. He cups my breasts, his fingers tugging at my nipples before he sits up, locking his lips around one, then the other.

My fingers glide into his hair, and my head falls back on my shoulders as I start to pant for breath, sure I will never get enough air in my lungs. I ride him faster and harder, chasing the orgasm I feel right at the tips of my fingers. And I know he’s right there with me when he falls back to the bed, slides one hand between my legs, and circles my clit, the other delving into my hair, yanking me down so that our mouths are almost touching.

“Maxim,” I breathe against his lips, then gasp when he kisses me hard, thrusting up into me even harder. The ball of pleasure that has been slowly building and growing in my lower belly expands, then combusts, lighting me up from the inside out. I moan his name against his lips as I lose myself, listening to him groan, hips jerking and his hand in my hair tightening. With my core clenching around him, I tuck my face into his neck, holding on to him with every part of me, while he presses his forehead against my throat.

“I’m going to kill whoever that is,” he grumbles against my skin, and it registers that someone is ringing my doorbell. “Are

you expecting someone?"

"No." I somehow pull myself away from him and look at my cell phone when it starts to ring. "Can you reach that for me?" With his arm around me, he grabs my phone, handing it over. I frown when I see July is calling, then the doorbell goes off again. "It's my sister."

"Answer it," he says, keeping hold of me, and as I give him a look, he grins. Carefully, I get off him and fall to my hip at his side before I slide my finger across the screen.

"Hello," I answer, proud that I don't sound as breathless as I still feel.

"Are you home?"

"Yes."

"Oh." She sounds calmer than when I answered. "You're not answering the door."

"You're here?" I watch Maxim stand and head for the bathroom.

"Yes, come let me in."

"Give me five minutes." I hang up, then carefully roll off the bed and go into the bathroom to clean up. I go to my closet and put on a pair of sweats and a tank top. "I'm going to let my sister in."

"I'll be down once I get dressed." He brushes his lips across mine, then heads for the closet where he put his suitcase.

When I get down to the first floor, I open the door to not just my sister but her husband, Wes, who has a cat carrier in his grasp.

"Took you long enough," July says, then her eyes roam over me and narrow. "Do you have company?"

"Yes." I step back to let them inside. "And I didn't know you were coming over this morning."

"She wanted to bring you your cat before you changed your mind." Wes grins at me when his wife smacks his chest with the back of her hand.

“Well, thanks for the heads up. I still need to pick everything up for him.” I squat down and open the kennel when Wes sets it on the bench next to the door.

“You’re in luck, because I brought you almost everything you’re going to need,” my sister says as I hold out my hand in front of the dark cage.

After a moment, bright green eyes meet mine before a cold nose touches the tips of my fingers. “Hey, baby.” I run a single finger over the top of his tiny head, and he hops out and walks toward my touch, then rubs against my knee. Carefully, I pick him up, and my heart melts. “Hey, Binx.”

“Oh my God, he *is* totally Binx from....” Her words trail off before she can say *Hocus Pocus*, and I turn to see what caught her attention and find Maxim coming down the stairs, looking as gorgeous as ever in a pair of basketball shorts and a plain white tee.

“July, Wes, this is Maxim,” I introduce.

“What’s up, man?” he greets Wes with a handshake, then looks at my sister. “July?”

“That’s me.” Her eyes come to me and widen as he leans down to give her a one-armed hug.

“So this is the cat?” He comes to my side, and I nod. As I hold Binx out, he grabs him with ease. “He’s cute.”

“He is.” I look at my sister and Wes. “Have you two had breakfast yet?”

“No,” July says as Wes says, “Yes,” and I frown at the two of them. “I mean, we ate breakfast, but it was a while ago, so I’m hungry.”

“No, you’re nosy,” Wes corrects, and she rolls her eyes at her husband, then looks at me when I laugh and Maxim chuckles.

“I can help you set up everything for Binx.”

“All right.” I take my new kitten and head upstairs. When I reach the kitchen, Maxim places his hand against my lower back, and I look up at him.

“Pancakes okay?” he asks.

“Yes.”

He lifts his chin, then touches his lips to mine. “Go get him settled, and I’ll start cooking.”

“Thanks,” I say, and he looks at Wes, who is sitting at the island. I hear Maxim ask if he wants coffee while July and I head up to the third floor.

“Oh my God, it’s Maxim.” July spins on me after shutting my door when we get to my room.

“Yes.”

“Maxim—your first kiss, Maxim. Why didn’t you say that?”

“Because it’s not a big deal.” I place Binx on my bed, and he cautiously walks around, smelling the pillows and blankets.

“It’s a huge deal.” She plops down on the end of my bed. “And good Lord he’s hot, like a million times hotter than he was when we were kids, and he was hot back then.”

“I’m going to Vegas with him,” I tell her instead of confirming how hot he is, and her jaw drops.

“What?”

“He was here when I got home last night and said he came back early to convince me to go home with him, ’cause he still has work to do but missed me.”

“Holy shit.”

“I know.” I glance at the door.

“You really like him.” It’s a statement, not a question, and I nod.

“Well, then I’m really flipping happy for you.” Her face softens, then she yelps when Binx claws his way up the back of her shirt. Laughing, I grab him and tell him no. “He’s probably hungry. I brought the food I’ve been feeding him, but you’ll have to get more.” She frowns. “Wait, are you going to

leave him with Matt, or should I take him home with me until you get back?”

“Maxim said he could go with us, since we’re flying private.”

“Oh, look at how fancy you are, flying private.” She laughs as she stands and heads for the door, and I realize how pompous that sounded. Shaking my head, I pick up Binx and carry him out of the room.

When we reach the kitchen, July takes the food and bowls out of the bag she brought with her and fills one with water, the other with food, before placing them near the edge of the island. I set him down in front of them so he will know where they are, then watch him sniff it before wandering off.

“Everything all right?” Maxim asks, snagging me around the waist when I’m within reach, and I nod up at him.

“Yeah, I was telling July that I’m going to Vegas with you.”

“And I have to say, I’m actually happy you’re leaving for a few days, especially with the two murders,” July says, taking a seat by the island, and Maxim’s head swings her way.

“What?”

“There was another realtor found murdered the other day,” I tell him softly, going to the coffee pot to fix myself and my sister a cup of coffee.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“It slipped my mind after everything that happened yesterday.”

“Everything that happened yesterday?” he asks, and I press my lips together, scooting my sister her cup of coffee. “Besides what happened with Harris, what else happened?”

I take a sip from my mug, not really wanting to tell him, but also knowing the truth tends to always find its way to the surface, so I might as well put it all out on the table. “Cohen showed up at my first appointment yesterday.”

“You’re kidding me,” July hisses.

“What the fuck?” Maxim bites out.

“Who is Cohen?” Wes asks.

“Her ex,” July answers, her lip curling.

“The musician?” he asks for confirmation, and she nods.

Feeling Maxim’s eyes on me, I look up at me. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” I hop up on the counter next to my sink, where he is mixing a bowl of pancake batter. “He just wanted to talk, so we talked, then I took off.”

“He wanted to talk, so you talked?” he asks me with his jaw ticking, and Wes makes a whistling noise. I send him a dirty look, then focus on Maxim when he growls, “What did he say?”

“He told me how he felt, and I told him that I didn’t want to see him again. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“You and the women in your family really know how to bring the drama,” Wes mutters to my sister, who shrugs.

“You’re not helping.” I glare at them.

“Just saying you should give the guy a heads up, since you’re talking about murders and an ex who obviously showed up where he wasn’t supposed to. It’s not like there isn’t a history of fucked-up shit happening in your family.”

With no comeback, because he’s not wrong, I pull my eyes off him and look at Maxim. “It’s fine. Hopefully he listens to me and moves on.”

“Yeah, *hopefully* he does, or else I’m dealing with him next time,” he tells me, while the air in the room thickens with the anger rolling off him. I look at my sister and widen my eyes, and she gives me a knowing look in return.

Hearing my cell phone ring upstairs, I hop off the counter. “I’ll be right back.” I don’t want it to seem like I’m running away from the conversation, but I totally am.

In no way do I think it would be good for Cohen and Maxim to be in the same space, so I need to make sure that

never, ever happens. By the time I reach my room, the phone has stopped ringing and there is a missed call on the screen from Harris. I call him back and end up talking to him for a few minutes, making sure he and Molly are both okay after last night and letting him know I'm going to be out of town for a few days. Thankfully, he's happy to have a little break to spend some time with Molly, which makes me feel less guilty about taking off on such short notice.

When I get back downstairs, I'm relieved to see Maxim smiling as he talks with July and Wes about Vegas and them coming out to visit at some point. While we all chat, I help him finish making breakfast, then we sit around my table to eat. Thankfully, there's no more talk about my ex, murders, or anything else that could possibly send Maxim over the edge.

Chapter 11

April

LOOKING OUT THE window as the plane taxis toward a small building at a private airport just outside of Vegas, I glance over at Maxim when he squeezes my thigh. I watch him smile before he goes back to talking on the phone, something he did pretty much the entire four-hour flight while I slept and watched a movie.

One thing can be said about having money, and that is travel is a whole lot less stressful, but I have to admit I missed getting a coffee, a magazine, and junk food before getting on the plane. Not that the food and coffee that was served to us by the flight attendant was anything to complain about. My normal airline would never serve eggs Benedict. Really, I'd be lucky to get a pack of peanuts nowadays.

When the wheels roll to a stop, I unhook my belt and take off the sweater I wore over my tank top, the hot Vegas sun already heating up the interior of the cabin. It gets even worse when the flight attendant opens the door. Hearing a quiet meow, I look down at Binx's carrier and lean over to stick my finger through the bars and rub his nose.

"You did so good," I tell him, and he blinks at me, seeming a little dazed.

"Whatever your sister gave you for him worked." Maxim stands, and I tip my head back to look up at him. "He slept as much as you did."

"Plane rides always put me to sleep, and July said that might happen. I'm just glad he wasn't anxious the entire flight." I grab my purse and push up out of my seat while he picks up Binx's carrier. After a quick thank you and goodbye to the pilot and flight attendant, we head down the steps to the tarmac, where he takes my hand.

"Don't we need to get our bags?" I ask as we walk across the black asphalt toward a gray metal building.

“No, they’ll make sure they’re given to our driver.”

“Of course, how could I forget that our *driver* will get our bags?” I say sarcastically, and he looks down at me and grins. When we reach the building, he opens the door for us to go inside, and I see that—like the private terminal in Nashville—there is just one counter and a large seating area where a couple of men are hanging out. He doesn’t stop to talk to anyone, just walks us through and out the front doors toward a black Escalade with dark-tinted windows.

As we near the hood, the driver’s door opens, and an older gentleman wearing a suit gets out with a wide smile on his weathered face as he looks between us.

“I see you got what you went to Tennessee for,” he says, his eyes locked on Maxim, who squeezes my hand.

“I did,” Maxim confirms, then dips his chin my way. “This is Charles, an old family friend. Charles, I’d like you to meet April.”

“Nice to meet you, Charles.”

“You too, April.” He grins at me, then pats Maxim on the back. “You two get out of the sun, and I’ll grab your bags.”

“Thanks,” Maxim tells him, resting his hand on my lower back and urging me into the dark, cool interior of the car, then placing the carrier between the two captain seats. Once we’re all settled inside, the door is shut, making it almost pitch-black inside. Grabbing my phone out of my bag, I send off a quick text to my sisters and parents, letting them know we arrived safely.

“How far is your place?” I ask when Binx starts to meow loudly from between us while pawing the door of the carrier.

“About ten minutes or less. Do you want to hold him?”

“I don’t think that will go over well. He doesn’t even like being held in a unmoving vehicle, and it would suck if he distracted Charles while he was driving.”

“You’re right.” He glances over his shoulder when the trunk of the car is opened, and I turn to watch Charles as he loads

our bags inside. Or I should say *my* bags, since Maxim left most of his stuff at my house and only traveled with a small duffel.

“Are you heading straight home?” Charles asks a moment later, getting in behind the wheel.

“We are,” Maxim tells him, lifting my hand to his lips and kissing my knuckles.

“Do you come to Vegas often, April?” Charles glances back at me as he reverses out of the parking space.

“Not often, but I’ve been here a few times. It’s a great city.”

“It is, but so is Nashville. My wife and I went for a week a few months ago, and we had the best time. We’ve been talking about retiring there in a couple of years.”

“Not Florida?” I ask, because typically that’s where everyone wants to retire.

“My wife is not big on bugs, hurricanes, or humidity.”

“You’re forgetting gators,” I add, and he laughs.

“Yeah, she’s not a fan of those guys either.”

“Well, if you want, get my number from Maxim, and let me know what kind of home you’re looking for. I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” he says, and I watch out the window, expecting him to head toward the Strip, so I’m surprised when we bypass sign after sign for downtown and move away from the city.

“You live here?” I look over at Maxim when we arrive at a gated subdivision with families wandering the sidewalks in front of large homes that all look a lot alike, with white stucco siding and large yards.

“I do,” he tells me when Charles pulls into the driveway of a home that is beautifully landscaped in typical Vegas style, but it’s still nothing like the modern, hip home surrounded by woods he’s purchasing in Tennessee. “Not what you were expecting?”

“Not even a little,” I admit, unhooking my belt when Charles gets out. “I assumed you lived near the Strip.”

“When I first opened my club, I did, but I learned quickly that I needed to be as far away from the nightlife as I could get when I wasn’t working.”

“I guess that makes sense.” I open my door and get out, then reach for my suitcase that Charles is pulling up the walkway. “I don’t mind helping.”

“I do,” he says, and I sigh as Maxim rests his hand against my lower back, leading me up the sidewalk to the front door, then he uses his phone to let us inside. Stepping into the entryway, I look around and can see why he purchased this place. It’s beautiful, with lots of natural light, a curved staircase leading to the second floor, marble tile, and modern touches.

“Thanks for picking us up, Charles.” He rolls my bags over to the bottom of the stairs.

“Anytime, and if you need a ride anywhere while you’re in town, let me know,” he says, then looks at me. “It was nice meeting you, April. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around.”

“You will.” I wave at him when he leaves, and Maxim shuts the door, then places Binx’s crate on the ground. Squatting down, I open his door, and he comes right to me. Standing with him held against my chest, I smile as he rubs his head against my jaw while Maxim wraps his hands around my waist.

“Do you want me to give you two a tour?”

“Yes.” I lean in when he bends to touch his lips to mine. “I also need to go to the store to pick up some stuff for him.”

“I asked my housekeeper to get everything he needs, so it should all be in the kitchen.” He kisses me again. “We’ll set him up, then I’ll show you around.” He lets me go, and I follow him out to the kitchen, where there is in fact everything Binx will need, including a few toys. After putting down his food and water and placing his litter box in the laundry room,

we go on a tour of the house that ends when he gets a phone call that I can tell annoys him to take.

With him in his office, I make my way upstairs to the master bedroom that, like the rest of the house, looks staged with gorgeous furniture, bedding, and accessories. If there were not a few photos of Maxim and his family here and there around the house, I would have assumed this was a rental property for people looking to be close to Vegas but not too close to the glitz and glamor of downtown.

After hefting my suitcase up onto the end of the bed, I unzip it and open it up, stopping when I hear a thud. Figuring it's Binx, I go to the walk-in closet and spot him on one of the angled shelves, chewing on the lace of an old sneaker, the other foot lying on the floor. "You, sir, are a terror." I pick him up and hold him an inch from my face, smiling when he reaches out to tap my nose with his tiny paw. "No chewing on stuff." I kiss him on his nose before he can swipe me with his tiny yet very sharp claws, then put the shoe back in its place and grab a few hangers.

Carrying him out of the closet with me, I make sure to shut the door so he can't get back in there and place him on the bed next to my suitcase. After taking a moment to sniff around, he hops inside my bag, curls up on top of one of my shirts, and closes his eyes. "You're lucky you're so cute." I scratch behind his ear, and he opens one eye to look at me, then stretches out his legs and rests his jaw on his paws.

When I told July she won and that I would take Binx, I thought I might have been making a huge mistake. I had no idea how quickly I would fall in love with the little ball of fluff. Even with him constantly chewing things he shouldn't, ripping things up with his claws, and getting into stuff, I wouldn't want to give him up.

"Unpacking?" Maxim comes into the room, obviously finished with the phone call, his gaze moving from the suitcase on the bed to the one with all my toiletries on the floor next to his dresser.

“I just want to hang my stuff that I don’t want all wrinkled.” I tip my head to the side when he wraps his arms around my waist from behind and kisses the skin below my ear.

“I told you that you don’t need clothes at my house.” He nips my neck, making me smile, then he lets me go and walks around the side of the bed, laying crossways on it. Binx, seeing his second favorite person is now here, moves from my suitcase to lie on his chest and begins to purr loudly.

“What’s the plan for tonight?” I ask, working a hanger through the neck of my shirt while he pets the top of Binx’s head.

“I gotta go to the club for a few hours,” he says, and my stomach drops. I knew he had to work, but I guess I didn’t think he would have to work as soon as we got here. And even though I don’t consider myself an insecure person, the idea of him being around a bunch of naked women—some of who he might have slept with—doesn’t exactly make me feel good.

Back home, I could kind of forget that’s where he was spending his time when he was away. But here, I don’t think it will be that easy to do, especially being left alone with nothing but my own thoughts to keep me occupied.

“Do you want to come hang out with me there? We can order in food or wait until we get home to eat dinner—it just might be late.”

Stunned by his offer, my mouth opens but no words come out.

“You good with that?”

“You would be okay with me going with you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” His brows drag together as he focuses completely on me.

“Because you’re going to be working.”

“Yeah, and I can still work if you are there with me.”

“Okay,” I say quietly, and his eyes roam my face.

“I’ve never slept with any of the women who work for me.” He carefully sets Binx aside and gets off the bed.

“I never said you did,” I point out as he walks toward me.

“You didn’t have to say it. I saw it in your eyes that that’s what you were thinking when I told you I had to go to the club.”

“I wasn’t,” I lie, and he reaches out, grasping my chin between his thumb and index finger.

“You told me that you want to trust me.” His hand slides back, his fingers spearing through the hair at the side of my head, and my heart starts to go wild inside my chest. “In order for that to happen, you need to trust me with your concerns and to always be honest with you.” His gaze holds mine hostage. “If you have a question, ask it. If you’re worried, let me know and—” He dips his face close to mine. “—trust that I would never put you in a situation where you might be uncomfortable. And I sure as fuck would never put you in a position where you had to be around someone I’ve been with.”

Staring into his eyes, I’m not sure what to say or how to react to his words, but there is no denying the feeling of warmth that has filled my chest. It might be stupid of me to trust him, because he’s not been the most forthcoming with some potentially important information or the most talkative man on the planet. But I do believe him when he says he would never put me in a situation where I might be uncomfortable or around someone he’s been with. And as much as I don’t like comparing people, it’s so hard to remember that he’s nothing like the men I’ve dated in the past.

“April.” His hand in my hair tightens, and I come out of my thoughts and focus on his handsome face.

Since day one, there has been no games, no drama, and no trying to figure out what he’s thinking or where we stand. He’s given me every indication that he wants to be with me and that this is serious—without a whole bunch of words that are just words at the end of the day.

“Thank you.” I rest my hand against his chest, and his chin jerks back.

“What?”

“I know it might not seem like it, but I do trust you. I just...” My nose scrunches. “Well, it’s not always easy for me to remember that I can.”

“Don’t be sweet when I don’t have time to show you how much I like it,” he mutters, and a tingle slides down my spine right before his mouth lands on mine. As he kisses me, I lift up on my tiptoes and kiss him back, then before I’m ready for the kiss to end, he rips his mouth away and rests his forehead against mine.

Breathing heavy, I close my eyes, wondering how in the world it’s possible that every kiss we share feels just as overwhelming as the first time he kissed me all those years ago.

“Do you want to change, or are you good wearing that?”

“I think I’ll change,” I say, because even if he makes me feel secure, there is no way I’m going to walk into a club full of women who are probably all gorgeous, wearing a pair of cut-off jean shorts, a tank top, and sandals with my hair a mess and my makeup most likely half-melted off my face. And I’m definitely not going to do that on the arm of a man who—even after traveling—looks like he could be on the cover of one of those books May reads all the time.

“All right, while you change, I’ll be in my office.” He kisses my forehead, squeezes my hip, and touches his mouth to mine before heading out of the room.

After watching him disappear out of sight, I let out a long breath, then go back to my suitcase and pull out my black lace romper with scalloped and frayed-looking edges and thin, barely there straps and the heels I packed to wear with it. Resting my shoes on the floor and my outfit on the end of the bed, I grab my makeup case and head into the bathroom to get ready.

Chapter 12

April

SPEEDING DOWN THE highway with Maxim, who's driving a car that is even fancier than the one still parked in my garage in Tennessee, I glare at the windshield with my arms crossed over my chest. The weight of his palm on my bare upper thigh a reminder of the argument we had about my outfit before we left his house.

Three times I've tried to pull his hand away, and three times he's not let me, his statement from the first time I tried on replay in my mind. "*You might be pissed, but you're still mine.*" The possessive statement should not have the ability to piss me off and turn me on, but it did both.

I've never had a man lay claim to me before. I've never had a man make it clear that they don't want to share me, even with some faceless person who might see me and want me. It's a heady feeling and one under different circumstances I might appreciate.

That said, no man but my father has told me to put on more clothes since I was a teenager. I didn't appreciate it when my dad did it, and I sure as hell didn't like it much when Maxim did either.

When I walked into his office to tell him that I was ready to go, the heat in his gaze as his eyes swept over my body made my skin prickle and my thighs tighten. I've had men tell me I'm beautiful, give me looks that state clearly they are interested, but I've never had a man look at me like they want to possess me. I don't know what I expected him to say when he opened his mouth, but "Go change" definitely wasn't it.

My "Pardon?" wasn't warning enough for him, because he repeated his earlier statement, only adding, "Go change. You're not wearing that."

My first thought was to pick up something to throw at his head. My next was to tell him that I just wouldn't go with him

to his club if he didn't like the way I was dressed, but I figured that would be letting him win, so instead, I refused to change and headed to his garage without another word.

Now, with his hand on my thigh and his grip firm, I realize that might not have been the smartest thing I could have done. The excitement I felt earlier about seeing where he works is gone, replaced with aggravation. For the next few hours, he and I are going to be alone, and since we're not exactly on speaking terms—me being the one not speaking to him—that probably won't be very fun for me.

As we get closer to downtown, the lights get brighter, the signs get bigger, and before long, he's exiting the highway and turning onto one of the roads, his car fitting in perfectly amongst all the others that are just as exotic. When he turns down a back road, I sit up a little straighter, a neon sign of a woman standing under dripping blue lights is hard not to notice. Neither is the word **WET** in large letters that form at her feet every few seconds. A million and one questions form in my mind, and it sucks that I can't ask even one of them right now, not without breaking first. He turns into a dark alley on the side of the building and pulls into the almost empty lot, behind the only other car, a bright-yellow Lamborghini.

"Malo's here," he says, filling the silence for the first time, and I look over at him as he drives into a parking spot.

"Your brother?" The question is out before I can stop it, and he grins—grins at me, because he knows I was working hard at giving him the silent treatment. "Don't piss me off."

"I can't piss you off when you're already pissed at me, baby." His hand on my thigh slides farther between my legs, his fingers squeezing while his gaze wanders over my face to my chest, then down to where his hand is. I tighten my legs together to trap his hand and cover it with mine as heat pools between my thighs. My heart kicks into overdrive, and my breath catches when I feel his pinky run along the space between my skin and the delicate edge of my lace panties.

"So soft." He licks his bottom lip, then lifts his head, our eyes locking. "So pretty." His pinky does another swipe,

causing my hips to jerk in surprise as it hooks under the lace. “So oblivious to the effect you have on men.” Another swipe. “But I know. I know what they’re thinking. I know every dirty thought they have when they look at you.”

“I can’t control what people think,” I snap, then gasp when he swipes his pinky once more, this time brushing the lips of my sex.

“You’re right; you can’t, but whatever this shit is that now lives inside me is a monster *you* created. A monster you fed with your beauty, your attitude, your smiles, and the softness you work so hard to hide. You gave all that to me, so now it’s mine, and I don’t like sharing it with anyone.”

Oh my God, why do I like that so much?

“So be pissed I didn’t want anyone to see you looking so fucking gorgeous that you took my breath away the moment you entered my office, or call me possessive or jealous for wanting this just for me. Really, I don’t give a fuck what words you use,” he growls, making me shiver. “The only thing I know is you’re the only thing I’ve ever wanted just for me, so sharing you goes against every single instinct I have.”

“You could have just said all that to begin with instead of ordering me to go change like I’m a child.” His brows dart together, and I clear my throat. “I don’t really like being told what to do.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that.” His gaze searches mine, then drops to my mouth. My belly dips, and I lean forward, drawn to him like a moth to a flame, then jump when there are three loud bangs. His body covers mine as I jerk back, then my eyes fly to the window behind him and blink at a very attractive guy with long dark hair, standing outside the driver’s door.

“Are you two going to make out or come inside?” the guy asks, grinning at me through the window.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” Maxim tells me, removing his hand from between my legs, and I instantly miss his touch and also realize exactly how turned on he got me with just a few swipes of one finger.

“I heard that, and you know Mom would be pissed if you killed me,” who I’m guessing is Malo says, and I smile as Maxim shuts down the engine that was still running.

“Do not feed into him,” Maxim mutters, turning to look at me. “If you smile or laugh, he will think you think he’s funny, then he’ll never stop.”

“He’s a little funny,” I whisper, and he sighs, then his eyes go to my door and narrow. I turn to see what he’s looking at and notice Malo has moved to my side of the car. Just when he starts to reach for the handle, Maxim presses the lock button for the doors.

“Get the fuck away from her door,” Maxim orders.

“Aww, man, come on. Don’t be an idiot,” Malo says, looking across me to his brother.

“You’re not opening her door for her,” Maxim tells him, and I look at my guy, wondering if he bumped his head and I didn’t know about it.

“I’m a gentleman. Gentlemen open doors. You should know that. Mom taught it to both of us.”

“I’ll open her door for her,” Maxim bites out, and I shake my head and reach for the handle. “Do not open that.”

“Didn’t we just talk about you not telling me what to do?” I ask him, and his jaw clenches. “He’s your brother.”

“You have to get out at some point,” Malo taunts through the window. “Are you sure you like this guy, April? It’s obvious he’s a little off his rocker.” He rolls his finger around his ear.

“I’m going to kick his ass.”

“I heard that, and again, you know Mom wouldn’t be very happy with you if you did.”

“Is he always like this?” I ask Maxim, trying not to laugh.

“Since the day he was born, he’s been a fucking pain in the ass.”

“You’re just mad that Mom stopped paying so much attention to you when I was born,” Malo says, resting his elbows on the roof of the car and looking through the window, giving me puppy dog eyes. “He’s always been jealous of me. It’s sad, really.”

“You’re a troublemaker,” I tell him, seeing the twinkle in his eye that lets me know he likes annoying his brother—maybe a little too much.

“I just want to make sure you exit the vehicle safely.”

“Right.” I laugh, then look over at Maxim when he opens his door, and his eyes lock with mine.

“Climb over.”

“What?” I ask, sure that I heard him wrong, glancing from his seat to him.

“Climb over.” He holds out his hand to me, and I look down at it, then shake my head.

“I’m not climbing over.” I roll my eyes and hear his curse when I turn away and push my door open. Before I even have the chance to get both my feet on the ground, arms wrap around me and drag me the rest of the way out. I let out a yelp when I’m lifted off my feet, then groan when I’m shaken from side to side and squeezed way too tightly.

“Give her to me,” Maxim demands while his hands wrap around my hips. He pulls, but Malo doesn’t let go.

“Make me,” Malo heckles.

“Put her down,” Maxim orders while I’m tugged in the opposite direction of his brother.

“No.”

Feeling like a stuffed animal being fought over, I yell at the top of my lungs, “Oh my God, let me go!” Almost immediately, Malo releases his hold on me, but thankfully Maxim keeps his grip firm so I don’t end up on my face. After getting my feet under me, I look at Maxim’s brother and narrow my eyes on him.

“Oh shit,” he whispers, taking a step back.

“Babe,” Maxim says, sounding like he’s trying not to laugh.

Ignoring him, I take a step toward Malo and point at him. “If you ever manhandle me like that again, I will cut off your balls and proudly take them to your mother. Nod if you understand.”

“Totally,” he agrees, nodding, then he looks over my shoulder at Maxim with wide eyes.

“Don’t look at him. He’s not going to be able to save you,” I say, straightening my clothes and realizing that maybe my romper *is* a little short, since half my ass feels like it’s hanging out. After making sure everything is where it should be and all my bits and pieces are covered, I go to the car and reach in for my bag that is still sitting between the driver and passenger seats. After slamming the door closed, I turn around to face both guys. “Are we staying out here or going inside?”

“Inside,” Malo says quickly while Maxim grins.

“Then lead the way.” I wave my hand out from my body toward the door on the back of the building, and Malo hustles to walk in front of us.

“Fuck, I love your attitude, baby.” Maxim rests his hand against my lower back and kisses the side of my head while my heart goes into hyperdrive, pushing every drop of blood in my body to my toes. “Melanie is going to love this. I think you’re the first person to ever scare Malo.”

I laugh, because I think that’s what I’m supposed to do, but really all I can think about is the word love coming out of his mouth and how I want to hear him say it again and again. Only I want it to be *me* he loves, not a facet of my personality.

We reach the door that Malo is standing in front of, and he looks between the two of us with a strange look on his face, then pushes down the handle and pulls. As soon as it’s open, I expect to hear music, but instead I’m met with silence. We step into a dark hall and pass a few closed doors before Malo opens one to a set of stairs.

After following him up two flights, he opens another door, and I enter behind him and look around, finding that we are in an almost studio apartment minus the bed. A picture window behind a dark wood desk casts a blue light throughout the room, with a leather couch that looks worn in and extremely comfortable tucked against one wall. A small kitchen takes up the other half of the room with a tall table and stools acting as an island.

Glancing around, Maxim's statement about when he first opened his club and living in the city but learning quickly that he needed to be away from the nightlife makes a lot more sense. Especially if this is where he was living.

Walking to the table in the kitchen area, I set down my bag next to a stack of unopened mail and boxes, then make my way to the window, curious about the blue glow that seems to be the same color as the billboard sign outside the club. When I reach the glass, I look out to the club below and bite my lip. Around the entire perimeter of the room are different style bathrooms. One is a clear glass shower with white tile, another a glass claw-footed tub with antique-looking tiles on the floor. Each bathroom has a different vibe, each one with a woman putting on a show for the men seated on couches like the one in this office, while waitresses dressed in very skimpy robes or nighties walk around with trays of drinks. The lack of clothing makes it clear that this is a strip club, but it's unlike any club I have ever seen in my life.

I feel Maxim get close, and his hand rests on my lower back as a light comes on down to the right of us. Even with glass between us, the room seems to hum with energy, and a moment later, a woman wearing heels and a tight business skirt and jacket enters what looks like a modern bathroom designed in all black and grays through a door and closes it. As she proceeds to sensuously undress down to a black bra, thong, and garter belt attached to thigh highs, the men in the room seem to become hyperaware of every move she makes. Like they are there in her home with her, waiting for the moment they can join her in the shower when she turns it on.

“This place is amazing,” I say quietly, and Maxim’s hand still on my lower back presses in. “Did you come up with this idea?”

“I did.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” I tip my head back to meet his gaze. “What made you think to do this?”

“He was once a teenage boy,” Malo says from behind us, and I twist around so I can roll my eyes at him. “What? It’s true.” He pulls out one of the stools at the table in the kitchen area and starts looking through the stack of boxes and mail.

“For once, he’s not wrong,” Maxim says, and I start to look up at him and smile but jump when Malo yells, “Yes, they finally came!”

“Fuck me,” Maxim mutters when Malo pulls out a pair of what looks like black yoga leggings from a large envelope.

“I would like you both to feast your eyes on the first ever pair of Panic Pants.” He holds them up with a wide, proud smile on his face.

“Panic Pants?” I repeat, sure that I’m missing something.

“Yes, Panic Pants.” He looks down at them, wraps his finger through a red plastic loop, then tugs.

“What is that?” I cover my ears when a blaring, screeching noise fills the room.

“Panic Pants.” He grins.

“Jesus, turn them off,” Maxim orders over the annoying sound.

“All right, all right.” He fiddles with the pants for a few seconds before the sound thankfully comes to an end.

“What exactly are they for?” I ask, stepping toward him.

“For anyone who works out alone outdoors.” He looks from the pants to me. “Don’t look at me like I’m crazy.” He carefully folds them up as he continues speaking. “Let’s say you’re running in the woods and some dude comes out of nowhere to attack you. All you do is pull the cord, and *bam!*”

he shouts, pretending to pull an imaginary cord. “Just like that, you’ve startled them, and either they will run off or give you some time to get away. And I haven’t tested it, but I’m thinking that if you run into a bear or something, you could pull it, and it might startle them into leaving you alone.”

“That’s—” I try to think of the right word, because I’m both a mixture of surprised by how smart the idea is and doubtful that there is an actual market for something like Panic Pants. “—cool.”

“Right, and now that I have the first official pair, I can finally get my page set up and running on social media and submit these babies to the millionaires on *Shark Tank*.” He looks at his brother. “Mom is going to love this.”

“That’s doubtful,” Maxim mumbles just loud enough for me to hear, and I barely avoid smacking him in the chest for not being supportive of his brother, who is obviously proud of his invention.

“Well, I’m honored that I got to see them first. I hope they’re a hit.”

“I knew I liked you.” He smiles at me, then looks at Maxim. “Since you’re here, are you okay with me taking off for a bit?”

“Go for it.”

“Cool.” He looks at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to knock when I come back, just in case you’re both naked.”

“Thanks,” I say sarcastically.

“Anytime.” He picks up a set of keys and tucks his package under his arm before heading out the door, closing it behind himself.

“You know, you could be a little more supportive of your brother.”

“Babe, every week, he’s coming up with something new that he’s sure is going to make him rich. This week, it’s Panic Pants, and last week, it was Weight Shoes so you don’t have to do leg day at the gym—his words, not mine.” He shakes his head. “Our parents gave each of us kids a good chunk of

money when we graduated college, and where I used mine to open a business and Melanie used hers to buy a house and pay for more school, he's blown all his on stupid shit and is now trying to get it back by doing more stupid shit."

"I get what you're saying, but then again, who are you to say that Panic Pants or Weight Shoes won't take off? I mean, I doubt that anyone really thought the paperclip or sticky notes were genius ideas, and yet they've both probably sold billions of dollars' worth each." I go to the couch and kick off my shoes before taking a seat, finding it just as comfortable as I thought it would be.

"You sound like my mom."

"She is obviously smart." I lift one shoulder, then add, "Besides, he's not hurting anyone or out selling drugs, so what does it matter to you what he does with his time or his money?" I look up at him when he doesn't say anything and find him watching me with a warm look in his eyes. A look I swear I can feel seep into each and every cell of my body. A look I've seen on my dad's face when he looks at my mom. An identical one I catch from time to time on my sisters' and cousins' husbands' faces when they look at them.

"You're right." He starts to step toward me but stops when the phone on his desk rings. "I'm here to work."

"That you are." I tuck my feet underneath me, and his eyes roam over me from the top of my head to my black-painted toes before he closes the distance between us, wraps his hand around the back of my neck, and angles my head just like he wants it before he kisses me. The kiss isn't deep or wet, but it is hard and filled with an emotion I can't put my finger on.

When he pulls away, he touches his lips to my forehead, then mutters, "I'll give you a tour of the club once Malo gets back."

"Sounds good," I agree, and he lets me go with a smile, then heads to his desk.

For the next couple of hours while he works, I shop on my phone and try unsuccessfully to read one of the books May

suggested. When Malo shows back up, Maxim takes me on a very quick tour of the club before he orders us dinner. With my belly full, I doze on the couch, feeling his warm gaze on me while he works.

Never in my life have I felt more content just being in someone else's presence. But that does nothing to lessen the ball of unease that has been growing steadily in the pit of my stomach. Because I know that getting a man's attention is easy, but keeping it is something I've never been able to do.

Chapter 13

April

I LOOK UP the length of Maxim's body, and my core clenches at the sight of him with his muscles bunched and his face a mask of agonized pleasure. Rolling my tongue around the head of his cock, I slowly take him deep while using my hand to twist and slide down the rest of him that I can't fit into my mouth, and there's a lot. Using suction, I pull back up, and the sound of his groan vibrates through me and bounces off the walls of his bedroom.

"Jesus, baby, you're gonna kill me." His gaze locks with mine, and his jaw clenches tight as his fingers slide through my hair before he fists it in his hand. I whimper around him at the bite of pain, and he curses, "Fuck," in response. With his legs bent on either side of me and his hand in my hair, I work him faster and slide my hand down the bed, up my thigh, and freeze when he growls, "Do *not* touch yourself."

Oh God.

My eyes slide closed as I debate ignoring him and touching myself, knowing it won't take much to send me over the edge.

"You touch yourself—I won't touch you." His words have my eyes flying open and my hand landing on the bed before I even have time to think about the action. "You woke me up hard as fuck with that pretty mouth of yours wrapped around my cock, so right now is about me." He lifts his hips off the bed, which sends him deeper.

I pull back, releasing all but the head of his cock, sucking hard and flicking my tongue across the underside. His hand in my hair becomes even tighter before he releases me completely and grabs onto the headboard of his bed, his arm muscles flexing as he holds on. Seeing him so close to the edge and feeling the throb of his cock against my tongue, I slide back down his length and back up in quick succession.

Just when I think he's about to lose it, he pulls his hips back, forcing me to let him go, then the next thing I know, I'm flying through the air and landing on the bed on my belly. My hips are pulled up, and he's surging inside me with ease—a testament to how turned on I am.

“Yesss,” I cry out, my head flying back as I push up so I'm on all fours in front of him and he's pounding into me. With each stroke, his skin slaps against mine, sending a shiver of pleasure from where we are connected, to the tops of my thighs and my belly, and to the tips of my breasts. His arm bands around my waist, and he tugs me back so I'm kneeling in front of him. He slides one hand up to cup my breast, tugging my nipple, while the other moves down between my legs.

My breath catches at the first roll of his fingers, the sensation almost too much for me to handle with how on edge I am right now. “Fuck but I love how wet you get for me, love that sucking me off turned you on so much that you're dripping,” he growls against my ear, his warm breath making me shiver. He nips my earlobe, and my pussy pulses around his hard length. “I'm torn, baby.” He tweaks my nipple while rolling my clit. “I'm not sure if I should take us both to the edge over and over, or let you come so I can feel your pussy pulsing around my cock like it's trying to keep hold of it forever.”

My only response is to moan, because part of me wants him to put off the inevitable, while the other part of me wants to let go completely. I cover both his hands holding me with mine and let my head fall back to his shoulder, trusting him to take care of me either way.

His mouth latches onto my shoulder, and he bites before he sucks. Tingles shoot across my skin like lightning, my mind not sure where to focus. His fingers between my legs, his hand on my breast, or his mouth on the skin of my shoulder, then neck as he leaves open-mouthed kisses.

“Come,” his hot breath orders against my ear, and like he's in control of my body, the tightness in my lower belly that has been building releases. Turning my head toward him, his

mouth finds mine, and his tongue slides between my lips. I lose all sense of myself as I fall apart in his arms, completely consumed by him in every way possible. My body shakes, stars dance behind my closed eyelids, heat spreads across my skin like wildfire, then pure pleasure washes over me from my scalp to my toes.

“Jesus,” he groans, thrusting one last time before he stills completely—all except his cock, which throbs in tandem with my core that is clenching, wanting to keep him right where he is. His arms band even tighter around me.

After seconds or minutes, still panting and sweaty, I shiver from the fan circling above us, and he pulls out of me, then falls, taking me down to the bed with him. After dragging the cover up over the two of us, he adjusts me by grabbing behind my knee, forcing it over his hip and pulling my arm over his waist.

“Good morning.” I feel his lips touch the top of my head and smile against his bare chest, then close my eyes.

“Morning.”

“Just in case you were wondering, I won’t be pissed if you decide to wake me up like that every day.”

“Thanks for clarifying that. I wasn’t sure.” I laugh, then tip my head back to look up at him, that warmth in his eyes that was there yesterday still present.

“Are you ready for today?”

Today being the day I’m meeting his parents, who I don’t remember from when I was sixteen. But then again, the moment I locked eyes on him at Uncle Kenton’s house that day, everyone else kind of disappeared for me.

I bite my lip and drag in a long breath as his eyes roam over my face like he’s searching for even the smallest sign of distress.

“I’m ready. I mean, I’m a little nervous, because I’ve never done the whole meet-the-parents thing before, but I really like Melanie, and Malo is cool, so I’m guessing your parents are nice. So even if they hate me, they’ll pretend like they don’t.”

“You never met your ex’s parents?” He latches onto that, and I shake my head.

“No.” I roll toward him and rest the back of my hand under my chin. “Cohen’s dad wasn’t in his life, and his mom passed away from cancer before we met.” I watch his eyes follow his fingers as he tucks a chunk of my hair behind my ear. “Have you met any of your girlfriends’ parents before?”

“When I was sixteen, I met the girl I dated in high school’s parents once.” His grin turns devilish. “And that’s only because they didn’t trust me with their daughter.”

“I bet they didn’t.” I grin back, imagining that not much changed between then and the time I met him when he was eighteen.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have been the kind of kid I’d want my daughter to date.” He chuckles, then his expression gentles. “My mom is anxious to meet you.”

“Is she?” I tip my head to the side, trying to understand the look in his eyes. “Why?”

“Because I’ve never brought any woman I’ve dated around my family, and you won over Melanie, which Mom knows isn’t easy to do.”

“I think that had more to do with tequila than my winning personality.” I smile, and he shakes his head.

“With anyone else, I would say you’re right, but Melanie doesn’t like many people. She’s like my dad in that way. Their guard is always up until you prove you’re worthy of their trust.”

“I don’t think I did anything to prove I’m worthy of your sister’s trust.”

“It’s not anything you did. It’s just you being you.” He rolls toward me, forcing me to my back. “How about a shower and some breakfast?”

“Both those things sound good to me.” My belly dips as his mouth gets closer to mine, then I cringe when I hear what

sounds like something made of glass breaking downstairs. “Binx,” I groan, knowing it’s him up to no good.

“That cat is a menace.”

“I know. He’s lucky he’s so cute.” I press against his chest in a silent demand for him to get up off me. “I’ll go see what he broke this time.”

“No.” He kisses me swiftly. “I’ll go check on him and clean up whatever that was while you start the shower.”

“I can help.” I watch his arm muscles bunch and flex as he pushes away from me, and in one smooth move, he gets off the bed and grabs a pair of shorts. I move to get up, feeling him and me between my legs, and my nose scrunches. “I just need to clean myself up a bit.” He gives me a look that states clearly he’s pleased with himself for my current state, then comes back to the bed, looming over me.

“Just start the shower. I’ll be back.” He presses his lips against mine, and by the time my lashes flutter back open, he’s gone.

With a whole lot less finesse, I get out of bed and go to the bathroom to start the shower, but as the room steams up and time goes on, I wonder what is taking him so long. I slip one of his T-shirts over my head and head downstairs.

It takes me a minute to find him, and when I finally do, I shake my head. Binx somehow knocked one of the planters that was in the window off the ledge in the living room. Then deciding he didn’t create enough damage, he added to it, spreading dirt and pieces of the plant from one side of the room to the other—across the gray, almost-white tile floor.

“Don’t come in here without shoes,” Maxim orders, sensing me before he even looks over his shoulder to where I’m standing at the edge of the living room.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” he asks, placing the largest pieces of a black ceramic vase into a cardboard box.

“For my cat’s desire to destroy everything in your house.” I look around for the terrorist and find him sitting on the arm of the sofa, watching Maxim clean up the mess he made, his tail swishing from side to side. “I’ll buy you a new vase and plant and replace the chair he clawed up... and your shoes he chewed.”

“Babe.” That one word is filled with annoyance and what sounds like frustration. Probably because we’ve had this same conversation about a dozen times already, and he’s continued to tell me it’s not necessary.

Not wanting to argue with him, I go in search of the flip-flops I brought with me, figuring I will find a way to pay him back for all the damage that has been done without him knowing. Most likely in the form of a seriously nice housewarming gift after he closes on his place in Nashville. After tracking down my flip-flops next to the back door in the kitchen, I slip them on, then grab the broom and dustpan from the pantry and carry both with me back to the living room. As soon as I start across the tile floor, his eyes drop to my feet, and I barely avoid rolling my eyes at the grunting noise he makes.

“You are very naughty,” I tell Binx when he prances over to where I’m sweeping and brushes against my legs in a silent demand to pick him up. “Do you think they have cat behavior classes like they do for dogs?” I ask, only half joking as I pick him up and hold him against my chest, listening to his purr as he rubs his head against my jaw.

“That’s doubtful. Then again, if someone is willing to fork out a couple hundred dollars for it, my guess is there is another person willing to pretend they know what they’re doing.”

“Maybe I’ll ask July if she can recommend someone.” I smile when he laughs, then kiss the top of Binx’s head and place him on the couch. When I turn around, I find Maxim has taken over sweeping, so I wander over to the window, the ledge of it filled from one side to the other with plants in a multitude of different style planters. “You must have a green thumb. I can’t even keep a cactus alive.”

“Until this morning, I forgot there were even plants in here, so I’m guessing my housekeeper is the one with the green thumb.”

“You didn’t buy any of these?” I touch the leaf of one that is a pretty pale-pink with green veins.

“No, when I bought this place, I had a get together, and every single person who showed up had a plant, wine, or both.” He sighs. “I still have about two dozen bottles of wine in the pantry that will never get drank.”

“You could always give them out at Christmas to your neighbors.”

“That’s a good idea, but I don’t plan on being here at Christmas, baby.”

“You don’t?” I ask, and he stops sweeping to give me his full attention.

“I just put in an offer on a house in Nashville. As soon as I get a closing date, I’m moving there and either putting this place on the market or renting it out.”

“Oh.” I fiddle with the bottom edge of his T-shirt as his gaze bores into mine. “I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t know I was moving to Nashville?” His tone and the look in his eyes state clearly that I should not say that I didn’t know.

“I knew you were buying a house there, obviously. I just didn’t know you would be living there full time.”

“What the fuck?” he asks, and my head shakes back and forth.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He lets out a deep breath, then squats down with the dustpan and begins sweeping the pile of dirt and leaves into it.

“It obviously means something.” I wrap my arms around my stomach, and he stands, then walks to where the box is and

dumps the contents of the dustpan into it. “You can’t be pissed at me that I didn’t know.”

“I’m not pissed that you didn’t know. I’m pissed that you didn’t ask,” he says, picking up the box and carrying it out of the room without a backward glance.

WITH MY STOMACH tied up in knots I watch out the window, as we get farther away from Vegas, clear blue skies, Joshua trees mingled with shrubs, and rolling hills as far as the eye can see. The scenery is beautiful in its own way, but I already miss the greenery of Tennessee.

As we crest the top of a hill, I spot a house in the valley below.

No—not a house. A desert oasis surrounded by tall stucco walls. The multilevel mansion is all sharp angles, and from where we are above, I can see a pool that looks like glass and a hot tub with loungers partially hidden out of the sun under awnings. Multiple trees cast shadows across the green lawn.

“Is that your parents’ house?” I drag my attention off the view below and glance over at Maxim. I knew his parents had money, but their house has to be the biggest I’ve ever seen, and that is saying something.

“It is,” he says easily, and my fingers twitch with the urge to touch him. When he left me in the living room this morning, I stood there for a long time, trying to figure out what to do. But for the life of me, I couldn’t think of one thing to say to make things better, because he was right.

I didn’t ask what his plans were, probably because I didn’t want to know on the off chance they didn’t include me. It was stupid and immature and a dozen other things. I should have asked. I should have been brave enough to put myself out there, but I wasn’t, and now... now, with the tension between us, I don’t know what to do. So I’m pretending—like he has been since he walked into the bathroom while I was getting ready—that everything is okay. Like he wasn’t pissed earlier when he obviously was.

“Wow.” I shake my head as we drive down a winding hill toward the metal gate where I notice a sandy-colored Jeep with tinted windows parked just off the side of the road. As we get closer, the door to the Jeep opens, and a very attractive older gentleman gets out dressed in a pair of shorts and a linen button-down shirt, with a smile on his face aimed in our direction. He walks across the road as our car comes to a stop, and Maxim rolls down his window.

“What’s up, man?” Maxim reaches out the window to give him one of those complicated man handshakes that he returns with ease.

“Work as usual,” he says, then continues. “Your mom told me this morning you were bringing your girl by for a visit.”

“Yeah.” Maxim’s gaze comes to me for a moment and softens. “Baby, this is Aye. Aye, this is April,” he introduces us while his hand lands on my thigh and squeezes.

“Nice to meet you.” I lift my hand and wiggle my fingers, more than a little curious about why he’s sitting outside the gate in his Jeep instead of inside like a normal person.

“You too.” He smiles, then looks at Maxim. “Fair warning—Frank’s here.”

“Shit,” Maxim groans. “I thought he was out of town.”

“He came back early.” Aye laughs, then taps the edge of the window. “Have a good visit.” His gaze meets mine. “I’m sure I’ll see you around, April.”

“Yeah,” I say, not sure if he’s right, and he steps back with a lift of his chin, then pulls something out of his pocket, and the gate in front of us opens. A moment later, we are driving toward the house, which looks just as beautiful from the front, with wide steps that lead up to a covered front porch and double doors that from a distance seem to be about fifteen feet tall.

“Who’s Frank?” I ask as we head around the circular driveway to a covered parking area where there is a Benz Jeep and a convertible parked.

“My dad’s uncle.” He glances over at me. “You’ll love him, but he’s a little crazy at times.”

“And Aye?”

“A friend of the family.”

“A friend of the family who randomly sits outside your parents’ closed gate in his Jeep?” I raise a brow when he stops and looks at me.

“You caught that?”

“I’m not blind,” I point out the obvious.

“He works security for my dad and mom, has since before I was born.”

“Is your dad a drug dealer or something?” I laugh, but the question is one hundred percent serious, because I can think of no other reason someone would need private security for themselves and their kids, who are all grown. I don’t even think movie stars have private security. Then again, they might. What the hell do I know?

“No, but the situation is complicated.”

“Complicated, as in you don’t want to tell me about it, or complicated, as in you *can’t* tell me about it?” I ask.

He puts the car in park and turns to give me his full attention, his hand on my thigh somehow seeming heavier than before. “Complicated, as in there isn’t enough time to explain the situation properly right now.”

“Right,” I mutter, knowing he’s giving me the brush off and has no intention of ever telling me, since we’ve had a lot of quiet moments together, so he’s had plenty of time to explain things. Really thinking about it now, it’s comical that he was pissed that I didn’t ask questions, since when I do, I get no answers. I reach for my bag at my feet, then turn for the door, disappointment curling tight in my belly.

Without looking at him, I get out, placing my espadrille wedges down on the asphalt, hearing his door slam shut. Once I’m out of the car, I straighten my black linen shorts with their

folded hem, then make sure my cream tank top is tucked in as he comes around to meet me.

“We’ll talk when we get back home. I’ll explain things about my family then,” he says close to my ear as he rests his palm against my lower back so he can lead me toward the house.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him we don’t need to talk, but before the words are able to form, one side of the front doors opens, and a large, very round, very old man steps outside. I take in his slicked back gray hair, his bright-pink Hawaiian shirt, the layers of gold necklaces around his neck, and the gold-tipped cane in his hand, thinking he must be Frank.

“Maxim.” He laughs, walking toward us with his arms open wide. “Look at you, you slick motherfucker.”

“Hey, Uncle Frank.” Maxim captures my hand as we head up a short set of steps. “I thought you were out of town.”

“I was, but Miami isn’t what it used to be, so I decided to cut my visit short.” He pats Maxim’s shoulder once we are close, then his eyes wander over me. “Then again, if there had been women who looked like you there, I might have been more inclined to stay.” He winks.

“Jesus, Frank.” Maxim sighs, and I barely keep from laughing.

“I’m just fucking with you.” He pats Maxim’s shoulder again, then looks at me once more. “Unless you’re interested.”

“I’m not, but thank you.” I laugh.

“You can’t fault a man for trying.” He shrugs, then turns toward the door, saying over his shoulder, “Come on inside. There is a huge spread of food, and I was told not to touch anything until you two arrived.”

“Frank, I swear you want Myla to shoot you again,” a deep voice says, and I look around Frank at the man standing in the doorway with his arms crossed over his wide chest. With one look, I know instantly he’s Maxim’s dad. They both have the same build, sharp, attractive features, and dark hair, only his

dad's Hawaiian heritage is much more pronounced than his son's.

"Myla loves me," Frank says, then his gaze comes to me. "Don't worry, beautiful. She shot me on accident; she wasn't trying to kill me."

"Oh my God, why are you telling her that I shot you at all?" a woman shouts from inside the house before she rushes out onto the front porch dressed in an outfit similar to mine, with her blonde hair pushed back away from her very pretty face with a cool green-and-gold headband with lots of pearls sewn into the material.

"It came up in conversation," Frank defends, and she shakes her head at him while her cheeks get red with embarrassment or frustration, maybe both.

"Something like that doesn't just come up in conversation, Frank," she snaps.

"Maybe not normally, but it did right now," Frank tells her, and she tosses her arms out at her sides as I press my lips together, trying really hard to hold it together.

"Can you please pretend to be sane, at least until Maxim has had a chance to introduce us to his girlfriend?" she cries, and Maxim's dad wraps his hand around her hip and pulls her back into his front before leaning down to whisper something in her ear. Watching her eyes close as she nods, I feel my chest warm, because that is something my dad would do with my mom.

"Can I eat?" Frank asks, and her eyes fly open so she can glare at him. "Right." He holds up a hand. "I'll just wait for everyone in the kitchen then," he grumbles before heading into the house.

"Well now that that's done—" Maxim tightens his hold on my hand. "—Mom, Dad, I'd like you both to meet April. Baby, these are my parents, Myla and Kai." His mom and dad both focus on me, and my stomach seems to bottom out, which is stupid, since I have been in their presence for a couple of minutes. Then again, up until now, none of their attention was

on me. Really, I'm half tempted to shout for Frank to come back outside to distract them.

"It's nice to meet you both. I mean, it's nice to see you both again," I clarify, since we did meet, even if I don't remember it.

"I'm sorry about this, April." Myla sighs with her shoulders slumping. "Please know that we're not normally like this."

"We *are* normally like this," Kai says behind her, and I can't see the look she gives her husband when she spins around to face him, but I'm guessing she's silently telling him to be quiet, because that's what my mom would be doing right about now. "It's true, *makamae*. Crazyness seems to follow us wherever we go," he tells her softly as he reaches out to touch her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

"It really is okay," I cut in, not wanting her to be upset, and she turns back toward us slowly. "I grew up in a large family that is always doing or saying things that are embarrassing, so if anything, this introduction has made me feel right at home."

"Well then." Her eyes drop to her son's hand holding mine for a moment and soften before they meet mine once more. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," I say, and Maxim's hand gives mine a squeeze—probably because he asked if I wanted something to eat before we left his house and I said no. Something that wasn't a lie at the time, since I was pretty sure I would get sick if I did try to eat.

"Then come on in." She steps away from her husband and motions me with her hand to follow her inside. "I'll show you around, get you some food, then we can sit by the pool to chat if it's not too hot."

"That sounds great." I give her a smile and try to let go of Maxim, but instead, he holds my hand more firmly.

"We'll be in in just a second," he tells his parents, and I stiffen at his side.

"Sure." His mom smiles at us before she and his dad both disappear inside, leaving the door open.

Still unsure about this morning and annoyed with him, it takes a lot to act like all is well and that I don't want to kick him in the shin when I look up at him. "Wh—" I start but don't get the rest of the word out, because his mouth lands on mine in a hard kiss that feels like a punishment when he nips my bottom lip, and a reward when he soothes it with his tongue. My lips part of their own accord, and I kiss him back just as hard, just as wet, and just as deep without even thinking about denying him.

When he pulls back, I whimper in disappointment, and my lashes flutter open, finding his gaze on me, his shirt fisted in my grasp, one of his hands in my hair, and his other wrapped around my hip.

"It seems we both got a lot of shit to work on if this is going to work." He brushes his lips across my forehead, and my eyes slide closed. "We'll talk when we get back to my place. Okay?" he asks, and I nod with both hope and fear battling for supremacy in the middle of my chest.

Chapter 14

Maxim

I TAKE A sip of whiskey, the fingers of my hand resting on the back of April's chair skimming the soft skin of her bare shoulder in a sweeping motion. The fan above the table my family she and I are sitting around casts a cool breeze down on us while the setting sun turns the sky a mixture of magenta and deep blue over the sand-covered hills behind my parents' house.

I didn't plan on us being here for dinner tonight. I figured we'd leave early, head back to my place, order in food, and hang while we sorted shit out between us... before moving on to something that would be a lot more fun. That plan went out the window when my mom decided Dad would grill, and April would help her in the kitchen with preparing the sides. Something she didn't have to convince April to do.

It didn't surprise me that my mom wanted more time with April, since not only is she the first woman I've ever been serious enough about to bring home, but she also misses having another girl around. With Melanie now going to school again on top of working, she doesn't have a lot of time off, so even when Mom and Dad make the time to go to Nashville, they don't see much of her.

"How are things with the club?" Dad asks from my side, and I pull my attention off Uncle Frank, who's been entertaining the girls with stories about his latest trip to Florida and the gated community he stayed at during his visit. A place that sounds about as drama filled as a daytime soap opera, with more sex than a college campus.

"All right." I meet his gaze and shrug one shoulder. "Still trying to find the right person to run it so I don't have to fly back here every week once I get settled in Nashville."

"What about your brother?"

“Everyone loves him there, but I’m not sure he’s ready for the responsibility of running the club full time.”

“He’s been helping you out for a while now. Maybe put the offer on the table and let him be the one to decide if he’s ready or not.” He takes a swig from his beer, then meets my gaze. “I know you two don’t always see eye-to-eye on everything, but he’s your brother and the one person you know would do right by you.”

“I’ll talk to him and see where his head’s at.” I lift my glass and take a drink. The truth is that even as immature as Malo is at times, he’s the only person I’d trust to not let easy money get in the way of his better judgment. Which is my biggest concern when handing over most of the responsibility of Wet to someone else.

A lot of people would not have an issue taking a cut from the drug dealers or pimps who are constantly approaching Wet, asking to deal out of the club or to plant girls who are willing to do a whole lot more than just dance and show their bodies. Both those things are things I’m not down with, especially knowing what a slippery slope it can be once you head down that road. And knowing exactly what my dad went through to make sure his hands were clean, there is no way I’d put myself, family, or business in a situation like that.

Hearing April laugh, I come out of my thoughts and turn just in time to catch her smile. Like she feels me watching, her head turns my way and her face softens. Fuck, she’s pretty when her expression is soft with a smile, which is completely different than her normal beautiful.

“You about ready to go?” I slide my hand up to wrap around the back of her neck and smooth my thumb up and down her spine.

“Whenever you are,” she says quietly, resting her hand on my thigh, and I pull her toward me so I can kiss the side of her head before looking over at my mom, who I catch watching us.

“Don’t tell me that you’re going to leave,” Mom says with a pout before looking at April. “Don’t you want to stay?”

“I—”

“We can’t baby,” I cut her off before Mom can guilt her into us staying longer. “Binx is at the house, and he’s been there alone most of the day.” Plus, we really need to have a conversation to clear the air and make sure we are both on the same page.

“Oh yeah.” She looks at my mom and bites her bottom lip—something I’ve notice her do when she’s caught off guard, nervous, annoyed, or trying to keep from saying something she really wants to say. “My cat is kind of a terrorist when he’s left alone.” Her nose scrunches. “Really, he’s like that even when he’s not left alone. He’s destroyed a chair, a vase, and a pair of shoes since we’ve been here, so it’s probably not wise to leave him on his own too long.”

“Well then, maybe we can get together again before you go back to Nashville,” Mom says, sounding hopeful. “I could pick you up, and we could go shopping, then maybe grab lunch.”

“I’d love that,” April replies as I stand so I can pull out her chair, and Dad gets up to do the same with Mom as Uncle Frank scoots back from the table. “I’ve never been shopping in Vegas, but I’ve heard there are some really great outlet malls around.”

“Are you kidding? You’ve never been shopping here?”

“Not really. I mean, I’ve hit up some of the high-end stores on the strip, but I feel like those don’t count, since I only ever end the day with one item,” she says, and Mom laughs.

“Well, there are lots of outlet malls and cute little boutiques around here we could go to,” Mom offers while following us into the house. “I can’t do tomorrow because I’m supposed to be helping Malo with something, but the day after, we could leave early and spend the day out, if that works for you.”

“Do we have plans?” April asks when we stop at the front door, her head tipped back to me, and I shake my head. “Good,” she says just soft enough for me to hear before she

turns to where my mom is now standing with my dad's arm wrapped around her waist. "It's a date."

"Yay!" Mom cheers, and I want to laugh at the excited look the two of them share, but I hide it and look at my dad.

Like he's done since I was a kid, he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and pulls me in for a one-armed hug, but instead of letting me go, he holds on a second to say quietly, "I like her for you."

I wish I could say it wouldn't matter to me if he and Mom didn't like her, but it does. I respect my parents and their opinion, and having their support has always meant something to me.

When he lets me go, I kiss my mom's cheek, then wait for Uncle Frank to release my girl, then accept a hug from him that as always is over the top with lots of shaking from side to side. When we get out to my car, I open the passenger side door for April, then wait until she's in before I close it and head around the trunk. I get in behind the wheel and start the engine, then rest my hand on the back of her seat as I back out of my spot. As we pass by the front of the house, Mom waves, Dad lifts his chin, and Uncle Frank does a dance with lots of hip thrusts. Hearing April laugh, I grin, then press down on the gas and head to the front gate and through it, only giving the guy who took over for Aye a chin lift as we drive past him.

"I really like your family."

"They like you too." I pick up her hand from where it's resting on her lap and bring it to my mouth so I can kiss her knuckles.

"Your mom and dad remind me a lot of my own parents."

"I can see that." I rest her hand on my thigh.

"And you're a lot like your dad, but I think Malo takes after Frank." I hear the smile in her voice and glance over at her to catch a glimpse of it.

"Malo is mom's favorite, and mom is Frank's favorite so the three of them have always spent a lot of time together."

“So it makes sense that Malo got Frank’s sense of humor,” she says, sounding relaxed and happy. “I bet it’s interesting when they get together.”

“You could say that,” I respond and we both laugh.

When we get to my house about twenty minutes later, I pull into the garage and park, shutting the door behind us. We both get out, and she waits for me at the door. As soon as it’s opened, Binx greets us with a loud meow, and she scoops him up, holding him against her chest talking to him like he’s a baby, not a cat.

“I’m going to feed him.” She turns to me, and I get into her space, taking Binx from her grasp.

“I got him. Go change and meet me in the kitchen when you’re done. We’ll talk outside.”

Her eyes fill with unease at the mention of us talking, and I reach out to touch her cheek.

“What do you want to drink?”

“Wine, white if you have it,” she says, and I skim my thumb along her jaw, then lean down to brush my lips across hers. When I pull back, her lashes take a moment to flutter open, and she licks her bottom lip before whispering, “I’ll be right back.”

I watch her spin on her heel and disappear around the corner, then a moment later, I hear her feet on the stairs. Looking down at Binx, he blinks at me and meows, then reaches out with his paw toward my face. I rub him behind his ear, then carry him with me to the kitchen and set him down on the floor near his bowls. I go to the fridge for the second half of his wet food and dump it into his dish. With him eating, I take off my shoes, then get a bottle of white wine from the fridge along with a beer for myself.

After pouring her a glass, I open my beer, put it to my lips, and tip it back, taking a gulp before checking my cell, which has links to all the cameras in the club. Seeing that Malo is in the office and things are quiet, I head out the back door, past

the deep-set outdoor couch, to the fireplace where I start a fire with the flip of a switch, then turn on some soft music.

When I walk back into the kitchen a couple of minutes later, she's there holding Binx, wearing a pair of tight shorts and one of my tees that is way too fucking big on her. The tension I didn't even know I was carrying seems to disappear at the sight of her in my shirt, looking absolutely adorable with no makeup and her hair up in a messy bun.

"I started a fire." I walk to the counter and pick up her glass, handing it to her before taking Binx and placing him on the floor so I can grab her hand. Snagging my beer off the counter, I take her with me out the back door, then look back at her when she stops suddenly.

"I had no idea it looked like this out here at night."

I glance around, taking in the glow of the pool, the view of the mountains that appear almost blue under the moonlight, and the way the fire and string lights cast a warm glow around the yard and seating area. I knew the space was cool, but I never knew how much of a mood it set until she was in it. Really, I wish we didn't have some heavy shit to talk about and that we were just out here to spend some time together relaxing and just enjoying each other's company.

"Now I can see why you bought this house."

"I bought this place because the market was shit. It only needed a little work and was in a great area," I tell her as I lead her to the couch and take a seat, pulling her down with me. "Today, this house would sell for almost double what I paid for it, so I didn't buy it for the yard—even though tonight I'm seeing it's awesome. I bought it as an investment." I pull one of her legs up over mine, then adjust us so we're close, and her eyes widen ever so slightly.

"Oh," she says, and I grin, watching her gaze drop to my mouth. Fuck, I want to kiss her, but I don't. I take a sip of beer and watch her look away to take a sip of her wine.

"Now—the good shit first, or the heavy?" I ask, and she rubs her lips together.

“Heavy first, if I have to choose.”

“Right.” I pull her other leg up so that if she tries to bolt, I have a shot at stopping her. “Before I was born, my dad took out some really bad guys,” I start, and she turns to face me with her lips parting in a silent O. “He thought with them out of the way that it was the end of it, but as what tends to happen, that guy was replaced by another. And even though my father hasn’t been involved in that life for a very long time, he’s extremely cautious when it comes to his family’s protection.” I run my hand up and down the smooth skin of her shin. “That’s why we have security—not because my family has some kind of criminal affiliation, but because someone could decide they want to make a name for themselves and use my family to do it.”

“When you say ‘took out’...?” Her words trail off, and my hand stops moving.

“I mean he took them out in a way that they will never take another breath.”

“That’s what I thought,” she says quietly, biting her bottom lip.

“I told you before you are safe, and I meant that. There is no way I would ever put you out there if I thought someone might come after you to get to my family.”

“I don’t know that you have control over what other people do,” she says softly, and I shake my head.

“You’re right, but you’re wrong. My family might not be personally involved in what happens in the underground criminal world, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t still connected in one way or another to those who are in control.”

“That sounds—” She pauses for a long moment. “—scary.”

“I get why you would think that.” I smooth my hand down her leg once more. “And I wish I could tell you none of that matters, but I won’t do that, because it does. Things still come up from time to time, which means we have to be alert, and being with me, you’ll have to accept there is going to be security around as a precaution. Not only that, but you’ll have

to accept that in the past, my family was connected to some really fucking bad people, even if they aren't connected to them anymore.”

“I can accept that,” she says instantly, and I hold her gaze, seeing nothing but trust shining back at me.

“That’s good, baby. Now let’s talk about us,” I say, and that trust in her eyes is immediately replaced with fear, an emotion I’ve seen in her expression more than once since I decided I wasn’t willing to let this thing between us become some fling that both of us could just walk away from. Something I know she would have let happen, even if it wasn’t what she wanted. “I’m pretty sure I’ve made it clear that I like being with you,” I begin, and she gives me a slight nod, confirming she knows it. “I can say I wasn’t looking for this; a relationship wasn’t even on my radar. But you changed that for me.”

“Maxim—”

“You were right,” I interject, unsure if she was even going to say more. “This morning when you said you weren’t sure I was moving to Tennessee, I was pissed, because I assumed you knew how I felt about you. But then realized you couldn’t know, because I haven’t told you, and I’m learning you would rather assume this isn’t serious than to think it is and be let down.” I watch her watch me with rapt fascination.

“You’re right. I wasn’t planning on living full time in Nashville, but things changed after I had to leave you to come here for work last week. I learned quickly I didn’t like being away from you, and I know there is no way I’d be able to come here for weeks at a time unless you are coming with me. Since I don’t see that happening, because you have work and your family there, I’m looking for someone to run Wet for me so I can focus on finding a spot to open up in Tennessee—either a bar or a club; I don’t know which yet. And while I work on getting whatever place I find up and running, you and I will do the whole dating and getting to know each other thing before the whole wedding and kid thing.”

“What?” she breathes, and I smile at the stunned look on her face.

“Do you want to get married?”

“I—”

“Not tomorrow,” I cut her off. “Though we are here in the city of drive-thru wedding chapels, so we could head into the city and get it over with,” I joke, even though it’s not something I’d be against if I thought she would go along with it. My parents didn’t really know each other before they got married, and they are still happy and completely in love. And from the time I was little, Mom always said that when you find the person you are meant to be with, it might not be easy, but you’ll know they are the one and that everything you go through to be with them is worth it. I honestly never believed her until now.

“I want to get married...” She licks her bottom lip. “One day.”

“And kids?” I ask, and she gets a faraway look in her eyes before she focuses on me once more.

“When I was young, all I ever wanted was to be a mom, probably because my mom was so great and made it seem like there was no greater job in the world than having and raising me and my sisters.” Her hand covers mine that I rest on her belly without thinking. The image of her pregnant with our child is so vivid it seems almost real as it fills my mind. “Over the years, I lost that desire, finding that a career is much more attainable than a man I could even envision having a child with. But I do want kids someday, just not anytime soon. I want to travel and experience new things before I have kids.”

“Then we are on the same page.”

“We are.” She lets out a long breath then tangles her fingers with mine. “I’m not very good at this relationship stuff and you’re right I would rather assume this isn’t serious than be let down. But I do want this to work even if it doesn’t always seem like I do.”

“I know baby, that’s why I’m holding steady even when you’re trying to kick me out or brush me off.”

“I’m not that bad,” she whispers, and I smile softly.

“You are but I’m finding every bruise to my ego is worth it when I get a little more of you.” I cup her jaw and the look in her eyes causes my gut to tighten as the energy between us seems to take on a life of its own. I don’t know who leans in first, but our mouths meet, then one thing leads to another before we lose ourselves in each other. And fuck but I do not mind one fucking bit being lost in her.

Chapter 15

April

WITH THE TV on my back deck playing quietly in the background, my feet resting on Maxim's lap, a half a cup of coffee in my hand, and our breakfast plates stacked on the opposite side of the table, I go through my emails, and there is a lot of them. I didn't do as much work as I should have while I was away; then again, I didn't really have much time.

Okay, I did have time, but instead of working, I spent time with Maxim and his family and just lazing about, which was fabulous and a much-needed break.

After reading over the email I just opened, I smile and look at Maxim, and he takes his eyes off the TV and meets my gaze.

"What's that smile about?" he asks, rubbing the top of my foot.

"You have a closing date for your house." I spin my laptop around so he can read over the email the seller's realtor sent earlier this morning. "Next Friday afternoon, the house is all yours."

"Guess we need to do some furniture shopping," he says, then tips his head to the side. "Unless you'd be cool with Mom flying out for a few days and you two saving me the torture of having to deal with that."

"I would not be opposed to that idea," I tell him with a grin. I learned when Myla and I went shopping in Vegas that not only does she have great taste, but like me, she is a marathon shopper. We spent the entire day out wandering through one shop after another, not buying much but browsing everything, and it was the best time. "What kind of style are you thinking?"

"I don't know. You can choose," he says, distracted by his phone when it beeps.

“You want me to decide?” I ask, and he stops typing to give me a look, a look like the one he gave me when he laid out how things are going to go between us. “Right, never mind,” I mutter as my belly dips. The truth is I’m still settling into the fact that we have a plan for our relationship that goes way past just the next few weeks or months.

“I’ll give Mom a call this afternoon.” He sighs, looking over my shoulder, and I turn to see what’s caught his attention and find Binx climbing up the screen on the back porch in an attempt to get to a moth that’s fluttering around on the opposite side.

Dropping my feet to the ground, I start to get up to grab him but stop when the TV catches my attention. No, not the TV, but the guys lounging on a large leather couch talking to the host of one of the local early morning talk shows. The headline under them in big bold letters reads **The Fallen’s lead singer Cohen opens up about the one who got away.** Swallowing, I start to reach for the remote, hoping to turn it off, but Maxim sees before I’m able to grab it and snatches it up off the table to turn up the volume.

“So have you seen her since you’ve been back in town?” the host—a petite blonde in a cute denim dress—asks, and the cameraman zooms in on Cohen.

“I have.” He rubs his hands together as he rests his elbows on his knees and grins.

“So how did it go?” The camera pans out.

“I walked away without a scratch, so I’d say we’re making progress.” He chuckles, shaking his head, and the guys and host all laugh on cue.

“So she’s still angry you chose your music career over her?”

“Yeah.” He gives a fake somber look. “But I told her I’m not giving her up this time without a fight, and I’m not.” He looks directly into the camera.

“Turn it off,” I demand as anger makes my hands ball into fists at my sides.

“She’s the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

“Turn it off,” I repeat, and a second later, the screen goes black. Breathing heavily, I close my eyes in order to get some control of my temper. That’s when I feel it, heat prickling against my skin and the air around me getting thick with anger that is not my own. I open my eyes and look over at Maxim. He hasn’t moved an inch, but his jaw is twitching, and even with the space between us, I can see that his muscles are bunched.

“I’m going to kill him,” he whispers, turning his head just enough to meet my gaze, and the look in his eyes is so dark that I’m not sure he’s exaggerating.

Oh no.

“He’s not worth it.” I hold up my hands in front of me. “He really isn’t. This is all a publicity stunt. He just wants attention.”

“I don’t give a fuck if it’s a publicity stunt or him laying his heart on the line. That is fucked up.” He tosses his arm out and points at the TV. “He’s not stupid. He’s been in the entertainment business long enough to know that he’s swinging your ass out there every fucking time he mentions you in an interview, even if he’s not using your name.”

He isn’t wrong, so I press my lips together, trying to come up with some other way to calm him down.

“I told you that next time he did something, *I* would be dealing with him, and after his latest fuck-up, he’s mine.” He drops the remote to the top of the table and takes a step toward me. Normally, I would be all about him getting in my space, but the rage rolling off him has me instinctively taking a step back. “Don’t back away from me.”

“You’re kind of freaking me out,” I say softly, and his brows draw together.

“You’re never in danger when it comes to me.” He reaches out and grasps my hand, then pulls me roughly against his body so I’m firmly against him before he releases it and takes hold of both my hips. Lifting my hands, I place them on his chest, then tip my head back to look into his eyes. “Never.”

“I know.” And I do know that to the bottom of my soul, but I’ve never seen him mad before this moment. I thought I had, but I was wrong. I move my hands up to rest on the tops of his shoulders. “I get why you’re upset, but feeding into him is only going to make it worse. You’re the one who told me that, and you were right.”

“Baby,” he says gently, then he drops his chin so that his face is close to mine and growls, “I don’t give a fuck.” My eyes widen. “You’re mine, so him making it seem like you two still got a shot is not okay with me. Him doing it on television where his fucked-up fans can see, feel sorry for his bitch ass, then lash out at you is really fucking not okay with me.”

“Okay,” I say, because really, what else am I supposed to say? He’s right. Cohen making it seem like he has a shot at working things out with me is not okay, and him doing that on a TV show is extra wrong.

Especially when I asked him to stop, I mean, no, I didn’t tell him about all the messages and emails I received after he went on the radio, but he had to see the negativity aimed at me, since there were a lot of comments on his posts and photos on his social media. And unless he has someone else controlling all his content and he never looks at anything anyone says, he had to see the people bashing me, some threatening to do some not so very nice things if they ever ran into me in public.

How he could be okay with any of that and still claim to care about me proves he is full of shit. Then again, I’m coming to realize he didn’t really care about me when we were together. I was exactly like that chick I ran into in the bathroom when I was out with Maxim and his sister. I was just someone who was there when he needed and gullible enough to believe the bullshit coming out of his mouth. I saw it when we were together that the only thing he cared about was himself and his band making it big and that he would do whatever he had to do to make that possible—screw anyone attempting to get in the way of that. But I never thought he would use me as a means of gaining attention.

“You’re not still in love with him, are you?” The question catches me off guard—or more, the vulnerability in his tone

does. He's never seemed unsure about anything, so him sounding unsure about me still being in love with my ex is seriously surprising.

"Absolutely not," I say with ease, then take hold of his face in my hands and lift up on my tiptoes. "Our relationship was all drama and angst, and he never chose me even when I begged him to. He wanted to be a rock star, wanted to be on tour hanging out with the band and groupies, partying, and living it up. That life was never for me. Even if I liked watching him perform because it was something he loved, I didn't want to do that every night for the rest of my life. I didn't want to be another woman who was screaming for him to keep going from below the stage. I wanted to be the quiet he came home to when the show was over."

I shake my head. "Looking back, I don't know that I was ever really in love with him. I think I was in love with the idea of being loved by him. In love with the idea of him choosing me, if that makes sense," I finish, not noticing until then how tight his hands on my hips have gotten or how the look in his eyes has changed.

"After I fuck him up, I'll send him a thank you card."

"What?" I breathe, and his expression fills with warmth.

"If he had been that guy you needed, I don't know that we'd be standing here right now, so after I'm done with him, I'll send him a thank you card for fucking shit up with you." He gives my waist a squeeze. "Because now all that is you is mine."

I swallow, pretty sure that right now is the wrong damn time to be turned on, and force myself to focus. "You're not really going to mess him up, are you?" I ask, and he grunts in response. Knowing that grunt, having heard it from my dad, uncles, and cousins, I decide to pull out the big guns. "Please don't." I soften my tone and eyes while running my fingers down his jaw. "I understand why you want to, and I get it even more because I wouldn't mind kicking him in the balls right now. But at the end of the day, he does not factor into my life, into *our* life, and I don't want him to think he does."

“Something you’re going to have to learn, baby, is I take your protection seriously, and not only did he fuck up once, but he did it twice. And now he has a harsh lesson to learn. You do not fuck with my woman and get away with it.”

“Well, I hope you know that I do not have bail money to get you out of the slammer, since I spent almost all my rainy day cash when I was out shopping with your mom,” I say while hoping I can find ways to keep him busy so he doesn’t have the chance to mess Cohen up and end up in jail.

“I’m not going to need bail money, but even if I did, I’ve got it covered.” He grins, and my eyes narrow on his.

“I’m being serious.”

“I am too.” He leans down to brush his lips across mine, then pulls back and cups my cheek, smoothing his thumb across my bottom lip. “Enough talk about him. We’ve got shit to do today.” Damn but he’s right; we do have a lot of stuff to do today, most of it including driving around and searching out other locations for either a bar or a club, since he still isn’t one hundred percent sure he wants to purchase The Drop.

“Fine.” I let out a long breath. “I need to shower and get ready.”

“A shower sounds good.”

“I didn’t say you’re invited.”

“Does it look like I need an invitation?” he asks with a cocky smirk, and I roll my eyes. “Kiss me, baby, so I can get the dishes cleaned up.”

“You kiss me,” I sass, and he doesn’t hesitate to slide his hand that was on my hip across my back or wrap his hand that was around my neck under my chin as he bends me backward over his arm. The kiss—like always—is hot, but it’s more the emotions behind it that have my toes curling and heart pounding. I swear I can taste how he feels about me as his tongue slips between my lips. I kiss him back, digging my nails into his shoulder and sliding my hand into his thick hair, hoping he knows how deeply I’ve come to care about him.

In such a short time, he's become important in a way that I wasn't sure anyone would ever be. He's accepted me for me, pushed when I've tried to pull away, and stood steady when I've felt like the tidal wave of emotions he's brought up would send me under.

Every day, I wake up excited to find out what is going to happen between us, when normally any talk or thoughts of the future would freak me out. I'm falling hard and fast for him, and I really wouldn't have it any other way, because even if he doesn't say it with words, every action tells me he's right there falling along with me.

“BABE, WHAT THE fuck is this?” Maxim asks, and I pull my cheek off his pec where it was resting and move my chin to the top of my hand on his chest so I can look at him.

Today, I was successful at keeping him busy so he didn't have a chance to act on confronting Cohen. After we left the house this morning, we drove around Nashville, looking at about a dozen or more empty lots that are available for purchase. Ate lunch at one of my favorite chicken spots near downtown, then we came home to go over the list of locations and make a pros and cons list. We tried to figure out if it would be easier to build a place from the ground up or go through with purchasing The Drop. And the next few days should be just as busy, so I'm hoping he'll be so preoccupied that he will forget all about Cohen.

“It's a documentary.”

“Yeah, I know that, but why are you watching it?” he asks, and I glance at the television quickly.

“Because it's interesting.”

“Some guy murdering multiple women over the course of three years while being married and having kids is interesting to you?”

“Yes.” I shrug, then start to rest my cheek back to where it was—where it's been since after we ate dinner and decided to watch some TV.

“Baby, this shit is fucked up. How does this not give you nightmares?”

“Because I know that guy is not on the streets anymore. He’s locked up in prison where he can’t hurt anyone ever again.” I tip my head to the side. “Do you want me to change the channel?”

“Are you enjoying it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then no,” he says, and I smile, because I’m sure he’s as invested as I am in the show. Just when I start to relax back against him, the doorbell goes off, and we both turn our heads toward the stairway leading to the first floor like we can see who’s here, when we definitely cannot. “Expecting someone?”

“No.” I lean over to snatch my cell off the coffee table in front of us just to make sure I didn’t have my ringer off and that my family isn’t attempting to get ahold of me. Not that I expect it to be them, since I spoke to my mom and sisters earlier today when we made plans for dinner at my parents’ place for Saturday. When I see I haven’t missed any texts or calls, I push up off Maxim just as the bell rings for a second time. “It might be a delivery person or something.”

“I’ll grab it.” He starts to get up, and I shake my head.

“I’ve got it.” I head for the stairs and roll my eyes when I hear him right behind me. When I reach the first floor, there is an outline of someone behind the etched glass, but with it being dark out, I can’t make out more than their shadow. I pull the door open, surprised to see a woman with a dark, cute bob, holding a bouquet of flowers.

“April?” she asks with a curious smile.

“Yes,” I say, feeling Maxim get close to my back and wrap his hand around my hip.

“Good.” She lifts her hand not holding the flowers, and I see something black, but it takes a second to process that it’s a gun. I don’t even have a chance to blink before I’m shoved roughly to the side by Maxim and end up crashing into the stand in my entryway, just barely catching myself before I end

up on the floor. Ignoring the pain in my hip and arm, I right myself and turn to find Maxim and the woman in a tussle for the gun, the flowers she was holding now scattered all over my entryway floor.

Without thinking about what might happen, I charge forward, then my heart stops and my stomach twists painfully when there is a bang so loud it makes my ears ring. Ramming into her as I scream, I'm shocked when she drops easily to her knees, then curls in on herself, screaming in agony.

"Are... Are y-you okay?" I pull my attention off her to sweep my eyes over Maxim as he bends to pick up the gun discarded amongst the brightly colored flower petals littering the ground. Once he has it in his grasp, he holds it up, clicks the button on the side, and shoves it into the back of his slacks before meeting my gaze.

"Go call 911 and get some towels," he orders, and I blink at him, then look down at the woman groaning at our feet and the red quickly staining my white tile floor, feeling like I'm outside the situation looking in. This cannot be real. "Baby." He grabs my face, his fingertips feeling cold and wet against my skin. "Go upstairs, call 911, and bring down some towels."

I nod, then on shaky legs, I stumble toward the steps and up them, having to catch myself twice on the railing so I don't end up falling. When I reach the living room, I grab my phone from where I left it on the edge of the coffee table, then head up to the third floor as I dial the number for the police.

I give the dispatcher a quick rundown of the situation, along with my address, not sure if I'm making any real sense as I grab a stack of towels out of my linen closet. I hustle back downstairs, hanging up and tossing my cell toward my couch.

When I reach the first floor, I find that Maxim has taken off his belt and wrapped it around the woman's upper thigh and is now kneeling on the ground next to her, holding his hands to her leg. Saliva fills my mouth, seeing the amount of blood on my floor and his hands. Dropping to my knees across from him, I shove his hands out of the way and put one of the towels over the wound on her leg, pressing down.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell her, twisting my head her way, and her eyes fill with hatred.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” She grabs my upper bicep, digging her sharp nails into my skin. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” She squeezes harder, so hard that I whimper. “He’s too good for you!” she shouts, arching up off the ground, then cries out when Maxim takes both her wrists, locking them against her chest.

I make eye contact with Maxim as the sound of police sirens gets closer, and I swallow. I thought he was angry this morning; I was wrong. The silent fury now burning in his gaze is enough to scare me. I don’t want to assume this has to do with Cohen, but there is really no one else she could be talking about, and Maxim knows it too.

Dropping my eyes to my hands, I keep the pressure on her wound while Maxim holds her in place, even when she begins to thrash around like a wounded animal.

It feels like it takes forever for the police to arrive when it’s minutes before they come into the house, take in the situation, secure the gun Maxim has been holding onto, then call the EMTs inside. They usher me and Maxim out of the way, then I watch in a daze with Maxim’s arms wrapped around me as they take over caring for her wound. They finish by placing her on a stretcher and wheeling her down my driveway to the back of the ambulance. When the ambulance drives off a few minutes later, two officers step into my house and look at the mess left behind before focusing on Maxim and me.

“Is she going to be okay?” I ask, and I don’t know what to make of the sound Maxim lets out or the look the younger of the two officers gives me.

“Hopefully, we’ll know more when she gets out of surgery,” the older officer says, then adds, “Do you know her?”

“No.” I shake my head from side to side. “I’ve never seen her before tonight.”

“You told dispatch that she showed up with flowers, then aimed a gun at you.” He pulls out a pad of paper. “Do you

happen to know why she would have done something like that?”

“Because of her ex,” Maxim answers before I can, and the officer frowns.

“We don’t know for sure tha—”

“I do, and you do as well,” he rumbles, cutting me off, then looks at the officers. “Her ex is Cohen, the lead singer of The Fallen. He’s been on the radio and the news recently, promoting his latest album and claiming he wants her back.” His hand wrapped around my hip squeezes. “After his first radio appearance, she started receiving threatening phone calls and messages, so many of them that she had to change her number. This morning, he was on some TV program doing the same shit, so I don’t think it’s a leap to assume that the woman who just tried to kill her in her entryway is connected to her ex.”

“Is that all true?” the officer asks, and I nod while wrapping my arms around my middle. “All right.” He looks around once more. “I’m going to have someone come in to take some photos, and we’ll get your statements, but unfortunately, that’s really all we can do for now. Until the woman who attacked you gets out of surgery, we won’t be able to get a statement from her to find out her reason for coming here tonight. And although I agree the timing of everything is suspicious, we don’t really want to jump to conclusions right now.” He looks at the younger officer. “Call Mike and see if he can come over here.”

“On it,” the guy says, then the older officer looks between Maxim and me.

“You two are free to go get cleaned up, and I’ll let you know when we’re done down here.”

“Thanks,” Maxim replies, placing his hand against my lower back, then urges me up the stairs. When I reach the top landing, Binx comes around the corner, and I start to reach for him but stop when I see the blood on my hands. “Come on, baby. Let’s shower really quick, then I need to make some calls.”

“We need to bring Binx,” I tell him, going to the kitchen so I can wash my hands. “I don’t want him to get outside on accident if they leave the door open.” I pump a handful of soap into my palm and scrub, and then do it again and again. My throat feels funny when the blood around and under my nails doesn’t come off, and I know I’m about five seconds from breaking down completely.

“Baby.” His warm body presses against my back, then his hands move down my arms to my wrists, stilling my movements. “I put Binx in the bathroom. He’ll be okay for a few minutes while we get cleaned up.” He shuts off the water and dries my hands with a paper towel, then moves us away from the sink and toward the stairs.

When we get to my bedroom, he walks me right to the bathroom, flips on the shower, then helps me get undressed before he takes off his clothes. He doesn’t spend much time in the shower with me. He washes up and gets out, then leaves the bathroom only to come back dressed in jeans and a T-shirt a few minutes later. “Come on.” He reaches in and turns off the water, then holds out a towel for me. I step into him, letting out a breath as his arms wrap around me and he holds me against his chest. “It’s going to be okay.”

As much as I want to believe him, I don’t. Some woman who I don’t even know came to my house and tried to kill me. And the more I replay the way the two of them were fighting over the gun, the more I realize she could have killed him instead. I don’t even want to imagine what I would do if something were to happen to him, especially when it would have been because of me.

“You could have died because of me.”

“No.” He wraps his hand around my jaw, forcing my head back so I have no choice but to meet his eye. “What happened is not on you.”

“But it is.” Unshed tears cause my vision to become blurry. “That woman showed up here because of me.”

“That woman showed up here, because she is mentally ill. That is not on you.” His arms around me get tighter—so tight

that it feels almost impossible to take a breath. Then he presses his mouth against mine and holds it there.

The kiss feels like a reminder that he's here with me—alive, safe, and mine. Yet it does nothing to ease the ache in my chest.

Chapter 16

Maxim

“TURN RIGHT HERE,” April says softly from my side, and I flip on my blinker, then pull onto a dirt road. As we crest the top of a small hill, a beautiful two-story log house with a wraparound porch on the second level and enough space for parking below comes into view. Even in the dark, I can see the care that has gone into the property from the flowers to the landscape lighting. As we get closer, the front door to the house opens, and Asher and November step outside and walk to the top of the steps while I park.

When I shut off the engine, November heads down the steps to the passenger side door, and as soon as it swings open, she reaches in for April and pulls her out of the car, hugging her. I get out and shut my door, then head around the back to the trunk, where I placed her bag and mine not long after the police left her house.

“I need you to look after your girl for a couple of hours while I go take care of some stuff.” I keep my voice low when Asher gets close, and hand him April’s bag.

“Maxim.” His hand lands on my shoulder, and squeezes. “Take the night to cool down, then deal with whatever you need to tomorrow.”

“I’m cool.” It’s not a lie. Rage like I’ve never felt in my life had burned hot and bright through my veins when I saw that gun pointed at my woman, but I tucked it away, needing to keep it together for her. And until I’m in front of Cohen, I don’t plan on letting it loose.

“You seem cool, but I know you’re not,” he says, sounding concerned. “What’s your plan?”

“I gotta go.” I slam the trunk closed, and April—who is still in her mom’s arms—looks at her bag, then me. The moment our gazes meet, she releases her mom and steps toward me.

“What’s going on?”

“I got some stuff to take care of,” I tell her, and she starts to shake her head. “I’ll be back.”

“Maxim.”

“Go inside with your mom and dad, baby. I’ll be back.” I head for the driver side door, fighting the urge to touch her, hold her, reassure her that everything will be okay. But I know if she touches me, it will be difficult to walk away right now.

“Take care of her,” I tell Asher after I get in behind the wheel, and he reaches in for Binx’s cat carrier.

“Maxim,” she yells trying to get past her dad.

“I got her,” he says, not allowing her to get close to the car as he steps back, slamming the door.

I turn on the ignition and back out of the driveway, seeing the tears filling her eyes as the lights land on her, the sight of them killing me. When I turn out of her parents’ driveway, I hit Kenton’s number.

“Hey,” he answers on the first ring, not surprisingly, since I sent him a text before April and I left her place, letting him know what happened and to be ready for my call.

“I’m heading your way now.”

“How is she?” he asks, and my chest aches.

“With her mom and dad,” I reply, because saying she’s okay would be a lie. I know she’s still shaken up, even if she’s trying to pretend like she’s not.

“Good, they’ll take care of her. Justin and I are heading to the office now, so meet us there.”

“See you soon.” I hang up, then dial Gene. My conversation with him is much shorter, and in just a few grunted words, I can tell he’s pissed. Most likely because I told him he didn’t need to stick close to me when I was with April, and now he’s seeing that was a mistake. Then again, who could have guessed that some crazy woman would show up with a gun and some false sense of righteousness?

When I arrive at the building where Kenton's office is thirty minutes later, I park in the lot, then head inside. The building is dark except for the light near the elevator, so I head up to the second floor, and as soon as the doors open, Gene is waiting for me. Without a word we walk into Kenton's office together, and I find Justin sitting behind a computer with Kenton standing next to it, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Did you find where he's staying?" I direct that question to Justin, a man who has been a friend of my father's since before I was born. He's also a guy who has a way of getting information that even the FBI would have a hard time finding.

"He's staying in a rental near downtown." He glances down at his computer, then back at me. "He's been there the last few weeks. But he's not there tonight."

"Where is he, then?"

"Working in a studio on Music Row."

"What's the address?" I ask and see Kenton step toward me. I turn my head his way, and he stops midstep. "Do not," I growl, "even think about trying to stop me from doing this."

"I'm not trying to stop you." He lifts his hand up between us. "I get that a message needs to be sent, one that cannot be misinterpreted, but we need to be smart about this. I want you to think about what you're about to do," he says softly, sounding a lot like my dad would in this situation.

"You were not there." I point at him, then rumble, "Because of him, my woman could have died tonight, and if I hadn't been there, she probably would have." A flashback of seeing the gun and somehow shoving her out of the way plays through my mind.

"Then we'll deal with him," he says, and I look around the room and pull in a deep breath.

He's right. I don't need to go into this situation halfcocked. I need a plan and one that doesn't involve a whole bunch of witnesses. And with the cops now involved I have to act smart, and make a point without causing damage.

“All right.” I walk across the room to the couch and take a seat. “Let’s come up with a plan.” I lock eyes with Justin. “And I want you to make sure that nothing about April being attacked tonight ever makes the news. She doesn’t need that drama; she has enough shit to deal with already.”

“I’ll handle it.” He lifts his chin, and I settle in.

After about forty minutes of going over the details, we head out of the building, and Kenton gets into his car while Justin and I ride with Gene in his SUV so we can head across town. As we drive, all the rage I felt earlier comes back full force, and even if I know it might not be smart to head into a situation pissed off, I need that anger, because I have a point to make.

When we reach the area the studio is in, we double park close to a stop sign, Kenton in his jeep in front of us, and we wait. From what Justin was able to find by tapping into Cohen’s credit card and footage from a couple of the cameras around the studio, the singer has kept a tight schedule most nights. He and his crew normally leave the studio around midnight, then head downtown to the strip, where they party for a few hours before heading back to the house they rent.

Only tonight, with any luck, we’ll pick him up before he has a chance to meet with his friends so that he and I can have a talk. As the minutes tick past midnight, I look back at Justin, who is sitting in the third row, and he lifts his eyes off his computer to meet my gaze.

“He’s here—just have some patience,” he mutters, then I notice Gene become alert, so I look out the windshield and see Cohen exiting the studio with another man.

The two of them stop at the back of a pickup truck and talk for a moment before they part ways, the guy getting into his truck while Cohen heads for a black Benz on the opposite side of the lot. After the guy pulls out and takes off, Cohen backs out of his spot, then heads for the exit, flipping on his turn signal to go left. Kenton, who was parked in front of us, takes a right ahead of him, then we follow, sandwiching him in.

“We’re right behind you,” Gene says when Kenton stops at the first stop sign, with Cohen stopping behind him. I get out, lift my chin, and remove the gun Kenton gave me from the back of my jeans before I approach Cohen’s car on the driver side. Going on instinct, I open his door, and his head spins my way while his eyes go wide.

“What the fuck?”

“Give me your cell and move the fuck over,” I tell him, and he swallows, handing me the phone already in his hand before unhooking his belt and moving over to the passenger seat.

“How much money do you want?” he asks, and I laugh, the sound gruff and foreign to my own ears.

“I’m not after your money.” I press down on the gas when Kenton pulls off, and I follow.

“Then what do you want?” he questions, and I see him reach for the door handle out the corner of my eye.

“You don’t want to do that.” I press the barrel of the gun against his thigh and click off the safety. “Not that I’d be upset about having a reason to shoot you.”

“What’s this about?”

“You and I are going to have a conversation.” I turn right and follow Kenton into a parking garage that’s in the middle of being renovated. When we get up to the fourth floor that is completely empty, I park and shut off the engine, grabbing the keys, and ordering, “Get out.”

“Man, just tell me what you want,” he begs, looking around the dark space, and I shake my head.

“Just get the fuck out.” I open my door, then wait for him to emerge on the opposite side of the car before I slam it closed and walk around to where he’s now standing with his back to the open edge of the building. I cross my arms over my chest, waiting for Kenton, Justin, and Gene to join me, taking some satisfaction when he registers that he has no way of escaping, is outnumbered and fucked if he’s not careful.

“If this isn’t about money, I—”

“Let’s talk about April Mayson,” I say, and the look in his eyes changes ever so slightly, the muscle in his jaw clenching tight.

“What about her?” he asks, then his eyes narrow, and he shakes his head. “Wait, are you the guy she’s seeing now?” He tosses his head back and laughs. “Fuck, I can’t believe this. What, are you so insecure in your relationship with her that you needed to kidnap me?”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to just shoot him?” Gene asks, taking a step toward him pulling out his glock, and I reach out, placing my hand against his chest, holding him back while never taking my eyes off Cohen.

“Insecure? No. Just done with your bullshit affecting my woman.”

“Your woman.” He grins. “Dude, she’s still mine, even if we aren’t together right now.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him that it didn’t feel that way when she was sucking me off this morning, but getting into a pissing match with him is not on my agenda, even if it pisses me off that he’s attempting to lay claim to her.

“Tonight, one of your fans showed up at her house with flowers, and when she answered the door, the woman pointed a gun at her chest with the intent to shoot her. And she would have, if I hadn’t shoved her out of the way.”

“What?” he whispers, the color draining from his face.

“You heard me.” I step toward him. “Now, I know she asked you to not bring her up again publicly, but since you didn’t do that, I feel like I need to deliver that message myself.” I get in his face, pressing my chest against his, my fingers twitching, wanting to wrap around his throat. “She does not exist for you. What you thought you two shared *never* existed.”

“Someone tried to...”

“Kill her. Because of you,” I finish for him, my face inches from his. “You claim you care about her, but I’m finding that hard to believe after the way you tossed her under your ladder,

needing a few more feet to get the attention you so desperately want.”

“I never wanted that to happen,” he growls, placing his hand against my chest to shove me back.

I grab his wrist with one quick move, twisting it behind his back, causing him to double over and cry out in pain.

“This is going to be the only warning you’ll ever get from me,” I hiss against his ear as I hold him in a position that would cause him to dislocate his shoulder if he attempted to get out of it. “After tonight, if you so much as whisper her name in someone’s ear and I hear about it, you and I won’t be having a conversation. Do you understand what I mean when I say that?”

“Yes,” he hisses, jerking his head around to meet my gaze, and I hold his eye for a long moment before forcing him to his knees and taking a step back.

“Tomorrow,” I say as he pushes up to stand. “You’re going to announce that the woman you wrote your album about never existed, that she was some woman you and your band made up.” He starts to open his mouth, and I shake my head. “You’re going to put whatever spin you need on it to make it believable, then you’re going to go along your merry fucking way, with April nothing more than a memory.”

“I love her.”

“You don’t.” I barely resist the urge to rub my chest over my heart. “If you did, you wouldn’t have let her go. You wouldn’t have done anything to harm her or make her doubt how much you cared for her.” I turn my back on him and head toward Gene’s SUV. When I open the door, I toss Cohen’s keys still in my hand in his direction, and he lets them fall at his feet.

“Do you love her?” he calls out, and my eyes lock with his once more.

“Yes.” I don’t even hesitate to answer, and he lifts his chin. Fuck, looking into his eyes, I can see that kills. He cares about her—maybe not the way I do, where the need to protect her is

always at the forefront of my thoughts, but it's still there, shining bright. Then again, my woman is easy to love, and if you're lucky enough to have that love returned, you'll bask in it when you've got it and crave it when it's gone.

“Take care of her.”

I don't respond. I get into the passenger seat of Gene's SUV and slam the door closed, my mind on getting back to April and making sure she's okay. I hope like fuck that Cohen heard what the fuck I said and cares about her enough to do the right thing.

An hour later, I pull up to April's parents' house, shut down the engine of my car, and get out, stopping at the trunk to grab my bag before I head for the stairs. Before I even reach them, Asher opens the front door, and his eyes sweep over me.

“Kenton called to let me know you were heading this way, said you took care of things.” He steps back to let me inside.

“I hope I did, but only time will tell,” I say, and he drags in a deep breath, then pats me on the back.

“November gave April something to help her sleep about an hour ago. Last time I checked on her, she was passed out.”

“Was she okay?”

“Worried about you... and pissed.” He smiles. “She'll be fine.” I lift my chin, and he motions for me to follow. “Room's the last on the left down the hall. There's a bathroom in there.”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He glances at a clock on the wall. “Gonna head to bed. I'll see you both in the morning.”

“Night.” I watch him walk off, then a moment later, I hear the alarm for the house beep. I head down the hall to the bedroom and open the door, just barely making out the outline of April in bed through the dark. Closing the door quietly, I walk across the room to another door, finding the bathroom. I go in, close it behind me, then flip on the light. After I change and clean up, I shut off the light, then make my way to the bed in the dark, climbing in behind her and pulling her against me.

“If my dad finds you in here, he’s going to kick your ass,” she says, sounding sleepy as she burrows into my side and wraps her arm around my waist.

“He’s the one who told me to come in here.” I kiss the top of her head, and she snorts.

“Figures my dad would break his own rule for *you*.”

“What rule is that?”

“That he would never allow a man to sleep in the same bed as one of his daughters under his roof unless they were married.”

“Hmm.” I smile, moving my hand up, then down her back.

“So are you going to tell me what you did while you were gone?”

“I had a talk with Cohen.”

“Just a talk?” she asks, her muscles bunch, and my hand stops.

“Just a talk.”

“Do you think he’s going to stop?”

“If he doesn’t, he and I are going to have a different kind of conversation,” I say, and she goes quiet for a long moment, then rests her leg over my hip.

“Let’s hope that isn’t necessary,” she whispers, and I kiss the top of her head.

“Go to sleep.” Curling deeper into me, her muscles relax and my eyes close.

“Maxim,” she calls, sounding half asleep.

“Yeah.” I give her hip a squeeze.

“Next time you leave me like you did tonight I’m kicking your ass.”

Smiling I don’t respond to her threat, but I do lie there awake for a long fucking time, soaking in the feel of her safely against me before I follow her off to sleep.

Chapter 17

April

STANDING IN MY kitchen, pressed chest-to-chest against Maxim, I look down at his phone and watch him end the call we were just on with Officer Moore, the older detective who showed up the night of the shooting. When both his arms are back around me, he gives me a squeeze, and I tip my head back to meet his gaze.

“How are you feeling about that?” he asks softly, referring to Officer Moore explaining that the woman who came to my house with the intent to shoot me was suffering from a mental break after not taking her medication for schizophrenia. And from what he said, it’s not the first time she’s tried to hurt someone or herself, so the doctors plan on admitting her into a facility after she is well enough to leave the hospital, which might be awhile.

“Relieved,” I answer honestly, then let out a deep breath. “If things had turned out differently and she had actually hurt you or me, I might not feel so empathetic, but honestly, I can do nothing but feel bad for her.” I move my hands to his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart under my palm. “I have no idea what it must feel like having an illness like that, but I do imagine it’s not easy thinking things are real when they’re not,” I say, and he lifts his hand to my cheek, his fingers smoothing my hair back and over my ear. “I hope she gets the help she needs.”

“Me too, baby.” He leans in, touching his lips to my forehead, then leans back.

“So what’s on your agenda for today?” I ask when I hear his laptop out on my deck—where he’d been working most of the morning—ding with a message.

“Work, until you get back here.”

I smile at the annoyance in his tone, annoyance that I know has everything to do with me being away from him all day.

“The open house is running until five, so I’ll call you when I’m on my way back home and see if you want me to stop to pick up dinner.”

“Is eating you for dinner an option?” he asks, ducking his head to nibble my neck, making me laugh.

“I feel like I’m more of a dessert than an entrée.” I rest my hands against his chest, as he starts to laugh.

“You are the sweetest thing I’ve ever eaten.” He kisses me then slides his hands around to my ass.

“Don’t worry about dinner; I’ll figure it out. You just come home when you’re done for the day,” he says and my heart flutters as I look into his eyes.

One thing can be said about going through a traumatic experience with someone, and that is it really does bring you closer together. Or at least that’s how I feel after going through everything with him.

Hearing my cell ring from inside my bag, I glance at the clock on the microwave. “That’s probably Harris checking to see if I’m on my way.” I press up on my tiptoes and kiss him quickly, then duck under his arm before he can distract me with his hands or his mouth.

I start to pick up the brown paper grocery bag I’m taking with me off the counter, but he snatches it up before me, so I just grab my purse that I already packed and my shoes off the floor. With him behind me, I head for the stairway, then down to the entryway. I don’t know who he found to clean, but whoever it was did such a good job that I doubt even CSI could find evidence of blood with their fancy tools of the trade.

Before I reach the door, I stop to put on my heels, and as soon as I have them on, his hand shoots out, wrapping around the back of my neck, stopping me before I can turn for the door to open it. Then his mouth lands on mine, and he kisses me, making my belly dance. When he lets me go, it takes me a second to find the strength to open my eyes. “Be good today.”

“I’m going to work,” I remind him, sounding a little breathless.

“I know.” He opens the door, then walks me out to my car, leaving me near my door as he goes to the trunk placing the grocery sack there and I notice a dark SUV parked in one of the spaces across from my place, backed in so that the driver has a clear view of my front door. When I meet Gene’s gaze through the windshield I wave at him and he lifts his chin.

“You know he is more than welcome to come inside,” I tell Maxim as he opens my door for me.

“He won’t, he’s not really a people person,” he says and my nose scrunches.

“He has to be bored out of his mind.”

“He likes his own company.” He kisses my nose then lips. “Get in and buckle up.”

“Annoying,” I grumble, sliding into my seat then roll my eyes when he laughs.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“See you when I get home.” I lean up as he ducks his head into my car to kiss me once more, this time hard and fast, then he lets me go and shuts the door. After putting on my seatbelt, I grab my cell from my bag, then back out of the driveway, waving at him, and he lifts his chin. As I drive out of my neighborhood, I press Harris’s number, and it rings on my car speaker.

“Are you on your way?” he answers, his voice sounding scratchy like he has a cold, then he sniffs.

“Are you sick?”

“I got a col-d.” He sounds totally put out, and I smile.

“You should be in bed.”

“I’ll be okay.” He starts to cough, and I shake my head.

“Go to bed; you need to rest.”

“I d-on’t need rest,” he says while Molly in the background shouts that she told him the same thing.

“Let Molly take care of you, and if you’re feeling better by Friday, you can go with me to Maxim’s closing, and we can all get lunch afterward. I know he wants to meet you guys.”

“Fine,” he groans, and I bite back the urge to laugh, knowing for sure that he will not appreciate me finding him being sick and missing work funny.

“Tell Molly about lunch Friday, and also remember my parents’ get-together Saturday evening.”

“I’ll tell her, and I haven’t forgotten-n.”

“Good, feel better, and make sure you rest.”

“I’ll try.” He hangs up.

As I drive, a knot forms in the pit of my stomach. With Harris out, I’m on my own today. I’ve never had any issues running an open house alone before, but given that they still haven’t caught the person who killed Meghan or Charlotte and that I will be there by myself at least for a couple of hours, it worries me. I think about calling Maxim, knowing he wouldn’t mind coming to hang out with me, but I don’t want to bother him since he’s working. After debating with myself for a few minutes, I call Matt to see if he can meet me at the house and stay there with me at least until realtors start to arrive, so I won’t feel so vulnerable. Thankfully, he agrees immediately.

I get to the house a few minutes before him, and when he pulls into the driveway to park, I get out with my purse and walk around to my trunk to get the grocery bag there.

“Holy shit,” he shouts as soon as he exits his car, and I turn, sure he’s taken aback by the absolute beauty of the house like I was the first time I saw it in person. Every detail of the property and house was designed to look like it belongs on the cover of a magazine. From the ten thousand dollar arched front doors to the wildflower garden beds and backyard with views of a private golf course from the infinity pool.

Which is probably why it’s been featured in one of Nashville’s most popular catalogs more than once and why

they assumed they would be able to sell it without much trouble.

But it turns out the larger company who had the listing before me wasn't giving the house or the owners a lot of attention, which made them feel forgotten.

That's when they decided to give me a shot, something I'm seriously thankful for because if I can get this place sold I will not only make a killing in commission, but I'll also potentially get more clients in this neighborhood and that could be huge for my business.

"It's nice, right?" I ask, glancing at the house, and he quickly looks over his shoulder at it before shaking his head.

"Yeah, it's nice, but that's not what I'm talking about. Cohen put out a statement today."

"What?"

"He says there was never a woman, that everything was made up to build a buzz around his band's new album."

He hands me his cell phone, and I glance down at the screen and quickly scan the news article he has pulled up.

Holy shit, he did it.

He takes his phone back and reads from the story. "I'm still looking for the kind of love I wrote about on the album and believe it exists." His head lifts, and his gaze locks with mine. "Do you think he heard about that crazy woman trying to shoot you and now feels bad about it?"

"No," I say immediately, because even though I trust my friends, no one knows about Maxim talking to Cohen except my parents and the men who went with him, and I'd like to keep it that way. "Or I don't think so. It wasn't even on the news." And it wasn't, which was actually surprising, but then again, there are probably shootings all the time that don't make the news.

"Well, whatever his reason, I'm glad he did it." He takes the shopping bag from me. "And from what Kirk said, women are going nuts, and their album is doing even better than it was."

“Good for them.” I let us into the house and head for the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” He stops me before I can start unloading the groceries I brought. Looking up at him, I tell him the truth as I smile.

“Better than I’ve ever been.”

“When do Kirk and I get to meet the guy who makes you smile like that?”

“Soon.”

“I can’t wait.” He leans down to kiss my cheek then asks, “Do you need any help in here, or are you good with me working outside?”

“Go work,” I urge, and with a nod, he heads to the back door, pausing to look at me over his shoulder with his hand on the handle. “This house really is fucking awesome.” He grins.

“I know, right?” I grin back, then watch him step outside as I get to work, and it takes me over an hour to get everything just right.

I toss some premade cookie dough into the oven, because honestly there is nothing better than walking into a house that smells like someone has been baking. I set out a cheese and cracker tray along with some small bottles of water, refresh the flowers the owners have around the house, make sure the pillows are fluffed, beds are made, and that there are enough brochures out for everyone to take one with them. While I work, Matt hangs out by the pool on his phone, probably talking to his clients, then around noon when the house is full of realtors with their clients, he takes off to do some work, leaving me on my own but promising to come back if I need him.

With the constant flow of people in and out of the house all day, the time flies by, and before I know it, I’m putting what is left of the cookies I made into a Ziploc bag, gathering up the signup sheet and realtor cards left behind, and putting it all into my bag before shutting off the kitchen lights. I head through the house to the front door, making sure everything is

as it should be, then grab the key and lock box from the entryway table and go outside.

As I turn to lock up, I catch a black car drive around the circular driveway out the corner of my eye and sigh, because even if I want nothing more than to get home to Maxim and Binx, I'm sure that it's probably the owners coming home. And without a doubt, they're going to want to see how the day went.

With the most enthusiastic smile I can muster, I wait as I hear a car door slam shut, and a moment later, a woman I don't recognize dressed in black slacks, a black designer top with dark sunglasses covering her eyes, and a Louis bag slung over her shoulder walks around the corner.

"Hi, are you here for the open house?" I ask.

"I am." She looks from the key box in my hand to me, causing her dark hair that is cut in a chin-length bob to swish across her cheeks. "Am I too late?"

"I was just getting ready to lock up, but I can still show you around if you'd like."

"Great." She steps up onto the porch with me, leaving me no choice but to open the door for her to go inside or be pressed up against her. Just as I start to follow her in to the house, a sage-green Range Rover with dark-tinted windows pulls around the driveway. Thinking that actually might be the owners and wanting to give them a heads up if it is, I turn back to the woman.

"If you want to start looking around, I'll be with you in just a minute," I tell her, and she nods, then disappears farther into the house. I head down the short steps to the driveway and blink when I see Maxim get out of the passenger seat of the Range Rover, Melanie exits from the driver side, and Myla and Kai get out of the back.

"What are you guys doing here?" I walk toward them with a wide smile on my face, hugging Myla first, then Melanie and Kai before going to Maxim and leaning up for a kiss that makes his lips tug up into a smile.

“I was already planning to fly in later this week so that you and I could start shopping but after what happened we decided to fly in to see for ourselves that you were okay,” Myla says, stepping close and tugging me away from her son to give me another hug.

“You didn’t have to do that.” My chest warms as I lean back to look at her. “Even though I’m happy you’re here.”

“We’ve been worried,” she says softly as Kai rests his palm against her lower back. “It’s still hard to believe that someone tried to—”

“I’m okay, and so is Maxim,” I cut her off before she can finish, then glance up at Maxim quickly before focusing on his mom once more. “He didn’t tell me you guys were coming into town.”

“We told him not to.” She reaches out, giving my hand a squeeze. “We were going to surprise you this evening, but we ended up catching an earlier flight, so we decided to surprise both of you—only you weren’t home. When Maxim told us you were working, we figured we’d surprise you here and let you show us around this property.”

“Are you thinking about buying?” I ask, not even attempting to hide how happy that idea makes me. And I know that it would make Maxim happy having his parents closer even if he’d never say it.

“Yes,” Melanie answers for her parents as she ducks under Kai’s arm so he’s forced to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

“We’ve been talking about it,” Kai says, and I tip my head back to smile at him.

“Well, if you like to golf, this is the place for you,” I tell them as Maxim’s hand finds mine, and we walk toward the house. When we get inside, I turn to tell everyone that I’m going to check on the woman who showed up right before them, but as I start to open my mouth, she comes around the corner out of the front living room.

“Sorry.” She holds up her phone. “I just got a call from my daughter and have to run and pick her up.” She scoots past

where we are all stopped and heads for the door.

“If you want to take one of my cards, I’d be happy to show you around another time.”

“That’s okay. I have a realtor already,” she says, not even turning to look at me as she heads outside, looking down at her cell phone.

“Well, I hope her daughter is okay,” Myla says, sounding just like a mom who’s had to run out to get her kid after an unexpected phone call.

“Me too.” I set down my bag and flip on the light for the entryway.

“Were you here alone?” Maxim asks.

I bite my bottom lip as my eyes meet his. “Well—”

“Where is Harris? I thought he was with you today,” he cuts me off before I can explain.

“He’s sick.”

“Babe, what the fuck?” he growls.

“Matt was here with me, and people have been around all day,” I defend myself, resting my hands on my hips, not appreciating his tone even a little.

“You were going to be alone with that woman if we hadn’t shown up.” Since I can’t deny that, I press my lips together. “You should have called me.”

“You’re right,” I give in, not wanting to argue with him in front of his parents and sister.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he bites out, the muscle in his cheek jumping, and I glare at him in return, which only seems to annoy him more.

“I told Kai that I loved this house the moment we pulled into the driveway,” Myla says, breaking into the stare-down between her son and me, and I drag my eyes off him to focus on where she is looking into the front living room.

“And I reminded her that we don’t golf, so buying a house on a golf course wouldn’t make much sense.” Kai shakes his head at his wife, and she turns her head just enough to look at him over her shoulder.

“We can learn. It’s supposed to be relaxing.”

“I’m not golfing,” he states firmly, and she frowns at him.

“Don’t worry; I’ll go golfing with you, Mom.” Melanie moves away from her dad to stand next to her. “Besides, there’s always a lot of cute guys out on the golf course near my house when I drive by, so maybe it’s the same here.”

“Neither you nor your mom are going golfing...” Kai pauses, then adds, “Ever.” I turn to hide my smile and head for the kitchen, flipping on the light there.

“So,” Melanie starts, following right behind me, “I don’t want to step on your toes if you’ve already made plans for Maxim’s birthday, but I was thinking since Mom and Dad are here that we could all have dinner together.”

“When is his birthday?” I ask, my mind swirling, wondering what I can possibly get for the guy who has everything.

“Tomorrow,” she says, and I feel my eyes widen. “I’m going to guess by that look that he never told you.” She goes to the pantry, opening the door to look inside.

“He didn’t even mention it was coming up.”

“Of course he didn’t.” She rolls her eyes when she turns to face me, and I shake my head.

“What are you two talking about?” Maxim asks, coming into the kitchen, and I turn on him.

“That tomorrow is your birthday.” I raise a brow, and he narrows his eyes on his sister, who just shrugs in response.

“Are you talking about Maxim’s birthday?” Myla asks, and after Melanie nods, her eyes come to me. “He’s never liked celebrating it. The most he’s ever let me do is make him a cake.” She tips her head back to look at her husband. “He’s just like his dad in that way.”

“So I shouldn’t plan on having people at the restaurant sing him ‘Happy Birthday to You’ as payback for not telling me?”

“I think you should totally do that.” Myla laughs, and Kai chuckles.

“I’d personally pay to see that.” Melanie grins at me, and I smirk back, then look up at my guy when he gets close, shivering when he places his lips next to my ear.

“Do it, and I’m taking it out on your ass.”

“Don’t threaten me, sir,” I whisper back, then turn to meet his gaze and hold his stare, the emotions I see shining back at me making my heart beat a little funny. Not with aggravation or frustration, but with something that is deeper, richer, sweeter. Love. If I’m not wrong, this complicated, sometimes aggravating, and amazing man loves me, and without even knowing it was happening, I fell in love with him too.

Holy shit.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starving,” Melanie says, breaking into the moment, and Maxim lets out a frustrated sound while I turn to face his sister, who has the fridge open like it’s her house and she is going to prepare a meal with the contents.

“There is a really good Mexican place not far from here,” I tell the room, and Myla’s eyes light up.

“Do they have margaritas?” Melanie asks.

“They have the *best* margaritas.” I smile at her.

“I could use a margarita,” Melanie says, and Maxim groans, probably remembering our last dinner where tequila was involved, and Kai just shakes his head.

AN HOUR AND a half later, with my belly full of delicious food and my body warm from the margarita I drank with dinner, I sink into Maxim’s side. It’s been a good night catching up with his parents and sister, and as the air cools, the dimming light of the sun casts a warm glow across the table and our waiter gets

closer carrying a slice of cake with a candle sticking out of it, I know it's about to get better.

"You didn't," I hear Maxim grumble when the waitstaff around the room begins to sing for him at the top of their lungs, with a cute waitress coming over to place an oversized sombrero on his head.

"This is epic." Melanie laughs, and I catch her pulling out her phone, I'm sure to take some photos that will be used as blackmail later. I turn to face Maxim and smile at the look on his face, then take the piece of cake the waiter starts to set on the table. While I hold the plate, the candle is lit, then I hold it in front of Maxim and wait for him to blow it out.

Not surprising, it takes him a minute to give in, but when he does, he holds my gaze, letting me know with one look that I'm in so much trouble. I also couldn't care less, because the happiness I see in his eyes is so totally worth whatever punishment he'll come up with later.

Chapter 18

April

“HEY, BABE. MOM sent a text. She says you haven’t responded to her message, and she wants to know if you still like the leather couch or if you want to go with something else for in front of the fireplace in the living room,” Maxim calls from the bedroom.

I look at my reflection in the mirror and watch my nose scrunch before I duck my head to finish brushing my teeth without responding. Once I spit, rinse, and wipe my face on the towel hanging next to the sink, I walk to the doorway of my bathroom and look at my bed. My bed where Maxim is sitting up with his laptop in front of him, giving me the smallest glimpse of his defined chest. A sight I’ve gotten really used to seeing most evenings when the day comes to an end and we’re both ready to call it a night.

“I love your mom,” I start, and his eyes lift from his computer to meet mine. “Really love her, like a lot.” He raises a brow as I walk across the room to the bed. “But I think that if I want to keep loving her, I’m going to have to throw in the towel, and you’re going to have to take over the whole shopping for your house thing.”

“Babe.” His lips twitch, and I shake my head as I climb onto the bed.

“I’m being serious. It’s all too much. You closed on your house over two weeks ago, and you haven’t been able to move in, because she keeps changing her mind about the stuff she’s picked out, and the furniture store has had to cancel and reorder things about a dozen times. And since you’re not getting the stuff from one of the big box companies and almost everything is made to order, it’s pushing the delivery date back by weeks each and every time.”

I fall to my back and rub my face. “Not to mention that she decided the entire place needed to be repainted, which it really

didn't. So now you couldn't even move furniture in even if you had it, unless you wanted it possibly ruined. And since your couch—in whatever color your mom ends up deciding on, because she obviously doesn't like the one I picked—costs as much as my car, that would just be stupid,” I groan, then let him tug my hands away from my face.

“Are you done?” he asks, looming over me.

“Are you going to take over so I continue liking your mom?”

“Yes,” he says, and I blink at him.

“Really?”

“No, but I will talk to her.”

“Are you crazy?” I sit up quickly and spin around to face him, smacking my palms against his chest. “You can't call your mom and say anything about this, unless you're going to tell her that you've decided you want to be more hands on because it's your house and you think you should be making the decisions, not me.”

“I'm not saying that.” He takes my wrist and pulls so that I'm lying flush against him. “I will tell her that you and I are going to be making the decisions going forward, because it's going to be *our* house.”

“Oh my God, you want your mom to hate me,” I breathe, and he grins like he thinks I'm being funny, but I'm not. Over the last few weeks, I've learned that Myla really likes decorating and that when she has a certain vision in mind, there is no swaying her. And don't get me wrong, she has great taste, but where she likes things more modern with sharp angles and bold design pieces, I like a more rustic contemporary feel that is warm and cozy.

And with the two of us having different tastes, and me not wanting to upset her for obvious reasons—the main one being she is his mother—I've pretty much let her take over the whole thing and pretended like I love it all. And yeah, maybe I shouldn't have done that, but she's sounded so excited every time she's called after sending me a photo of something or a

link to a website, so I didn't want to say *"You know, I don't really like what you've picked out."*

"My mom could never hate you."

"I don't think you know your mom. She takes decorating very seriously," I tell him, then gasp when he rolls me to my back and drags my hands up over my head. "What are you doing?"

"What are you wearing?" His eyes drop to my chest, and I look down, trying to remember what I put on for bed and see the forest-green silk nightie with black lace detail that I purchased a few days ago for half off at one of my favorite boutiques.

"Don't try to distract me when we're having a conversation," I snap, then attempt to get him to let my wrist go, but it's almost impossible, because he is so much stronger than me.

"We're still having a conversation." He ducks his head, and my hips come up off the bed when he covers the silk with his warm mouth right over my nipple.

"This isn't fair." I squirm against him, and he lifts his head just enough for me to catch his smile.

"Do you like the leather couch?" He moves his mouth to my other breast, and I squeeze my eyes closed while my nails dig into my palms. "Do you?"

"Wh-what?" I pant while he adjusts his hold so that he has one hand free, then that hand slides up the top of my thigh just under the edge of my nightie.

"The leather couch you chose that Mom asked about tonight, do you like it?"

"Yes," I hiss, trying in vain to get my hands free while one of his fingers slides up, then down the center of my panties.

"I like your bed. Do you like your bed?"

"My bed?" I shake my head from side to side when his fingers skim over me once more, making it impossible to focus on anything but what he's doing.

“We’ll move your bedroom furniture to the new house; that way we don’t have to wait for something to be ordered or delay moving in after they finish painting. We’ll keep the leather couch and anything else you like, and the rest we’ll sort out.”

“But I need my bed here.” I gasp when his finger skims again.

“Why when you’re going to be with me every night?” That’s a good question, one I don’t have an answer to. “You’re moving in with me.” He moves his hand from between my legs, then rests it on my chest between my breasts.

“You know you could ask me to move in with you like a normal person,” I snap and he grins.

“I could.” His eyes lock with mine then his expression softens. “I won’t lie, baby. I don’t give a fuck what you fill the house with—stuff is just stuff. All I need in that house is you. And all I want is for you to be happy being there with me. So I’ll tell my mom to back off... in a way that won’t upset her. We’ll go shopping, even though I have no desire whatsoever to do that, and we’ll figure it out.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I swallow over the lump that has suddenly formed in my throat and try to get my hands free, but he doesn’t loosen his hold. Clearing my throat, I beg the tears I feel building not to fall, but of course they don’t listen. And I know this when I feel one slide down my temple, and his eyes watch it disappear into my hair. “The furniture doesn’t really matter. I’ll talk to your mom, and she and I can figure it out together.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say, babe, but you’re full of shit.”

“What?”

“And to be honest, my mom’s taste is not mine either,” he continues, completely ignoring me. “I like the way it feels every time I walk into this place.” He spreads his fingers wide, then slides his hand up my throat, and I wonder if he can feel

my pulse as it beats out of control. “This place feels like home. You... feel like home.”

“I love you,” I blurt, and his fingers flex around my neck on the word love while the look in his eyes warms.

“I know.” He lifts one shoulder ever so slightly, and my eyes narrow on his.

“You’re not supposed to say that. You’re supposed to act surprised.”

“Sorry, should we try that again?” He smiles, and I shake my head and let out a long, aggravated sigh.

“No, you already ruined it.” I wiggle my fingers. “Can you let me go now so I can touch you?”

“No.” He moves his hand back down to my chest, then lower, dragging down the top of my nightie and exposing my breasts. “I love you too.” He brushes his lips over my nipple.

“I know,” I say, and it’s meant to come out sassy, but instead I sound breathless.

“Now, are we done talking?” He cups one breast, then licks my nipple and blows across it.

“For now,” I pant, and he grins right before he opens his mouth, covering my breast, his tongue swirling around my nipple. Gasping, I lift my hips and fight him to let me go, then cry out in frustration when I can’t get free. “I want to touch you.”

“And I want to touch you.” He takes his hand from my breast and slowly lifts the bottom edge of my nightie up my thighs and over my hips, exposing my belly. I hold my breath when his fingers skim under the edge of my panties, causing my stomach muscles to twist and dance.

“Maxim.” I lift my hips when his fingers slip lower, brushing just below my pubic bone, giving me something but nothing at all.

“Yeah?” he asks after releasing my breast with a pop.

“When I get free, I’m going to hurt you.”

“When I let you go, baby, you’re going to be too tired to do anything.” He rolls his finger over my clit, and then he keeps good on his promise.

By the time he’s done with me, my body feels like Jell-O, and I can do nothing but lie there and let him clean me up before I completely pass out, ignoring the smug look on his face.

So annoying.

SITTING AT THE island in my kitchen, still half asleep, my gaze follows Maxim around the kitchen while he makes us breakfast and talks on the phone with his mom. Dropping my eyes to his abs and the dark hair that disappears under the band of his boxers, I hear him laugh and lift my head. Finding him shaking his head at me, I give him a shrug and take a sip of my coffee.

“I’ll tell her. Love you, Mom.” He ends the call and sets down the phone, then goes over to the stove, saying over his shoulder, “Mom said she’ll call you later. She also said she’s relieved that I’ve decided to take over, since she’s not here and has been overwhelmed with helping Malo.”

“What’s going on with Malo?” I ask as he places a perfectly made omelet on a plate, then brings it over to me.

“Apparently, he ran some social media ads for Panic Pants, and he’s already sold out of the inventory he had in stock. People have been asking daily when he will get more in.”

“Seriously?” I ask, accepting a piece of toast from him before he goes back to the stove to grab his plate. When he comes around the island to take a seat next to me, he touches his lips to mine quickly.

“They’re a hit. Mom said he’s already sold over five hundred pairs, and he’s making a killing, since he’s charging over a hundred and fifty dollars each.” After some quick math, I shake my head in amazement.

“That’s awesome.” I pick up a piece of toast to take a bite.

“It is, but now he and I are going to have to talk about the club.”

“What about it?” I turn to frown at him. From what he’s said since we’ve been back here, Malo stepped up with running things in Vegas and even told Maxim he’d like to take over permanently.

“If this thing takes off for him, I’m not sure he’s going to want to manage Wet, so I’ll have to figure that out.” He shakes his head before taking a bite of his omelet.

“How about you let him come to you if he doesn’t want to keep running the club?” I cut off a chunk of my omelet and add, “I get that you’ll always think of Malo as a kid, but he’s not, and you need to trust him to tell you when or if he doesn’t want to do something.” I take the bite and chew, then cut off another piece. It’s delicious, with lots of spices, cheese, and veggies.

“I would, but I don’t know that he’d come to me if he changed his mind.”

“I love you, but you really need to learn to have a little more faith in your brother.” I sigh, then gasp when he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and pulls me around for a hard, quick kiss.

“You’re right. I’ll work on it.” He lets me go and motions to my plate. “Eat quick—we have an appointment at eleven.”

“An appointment?”

“At the car dealership.”

“I’m not going with you to a car dealership,” I tell him, taking another bite, and his brows drag together.

“Why not?”

“You know how you said you have no desire to go furniture shopping?” He lifts his chin ever so slightly. “I have zero desire to go to a dealership, and even less desire to look at cars all day long.”

“But I *am* going to go furniture shopping with you,” he reminds me. “So now we’ll both be doing something we don’t

want to do.”

“I’m not going.”

“You are,” he states like it’s inevitable.

“I’m not.”

“We’ll see,” he mutters, digging into his food, and I stare at his profile for a long moment, then go back to eating, because this is one thing I will not budge on. For me, there is nothing worse than being stuck in one place and having no choice but to wait. And when you’re purchasing a car, you have no choice but to spend the day waiting for one thing after another. You wait for a car to drive, wait for a price, wait for a contract—wait, wait, wait.

No thank you.

SITTING IN A private office at the Tesla dealership three hours later, I stare at a tiny die cast Model X on the desk in front of me. With my arms crossed over my chest, I don’t even attempt to hide the sour look on my face as the salesman goes on and on about the car Maxim just purchased. Even as annoyed as I am, being here against my will, I can still admit it is a very cool car, and not having to pay for gas or maintenance is huge when owning a car. And if I could afford to spend a small fortune on a vehicle, I’d buy one for myself.

That said, I don’t want to be here, and as soon as Maxim gives me my cell phone and keys, which he took before he physically carried me from my house, I’m escaping and going to one of my sisters’ houses for the night. And hopefully no one will tell him where I am.

“So,” our salesman Johnny says, placing his hands on his desk before he stands. “Your car should be ready for pickup in a few weeks, depending on shipping, and I’ll call you as soon as it arrives.” He holds out his hand to Maxim, who takes it when he stands and mutters something before he looks down at me. I glare at him as he reaches for me and fight the urge to kick him when his lips twitch.

I don't take his hand. Instead, I push up out of my chair and pick up my cup of coffee, which is actually really good coffee for a car dealership, then grab my half-eaten candy bar and the two bags of chips I picked up from the waiting room. Johnny, like he's done since we arrived, gives me a wide berth as I pass him, saying a quiet goodbye, and I muster up a smile as we leave the office.

When we get outside to the parking lot, Maxim opens the door for me to get in, and I do, then watch him walk around the hood to the driver side. As soon as he gets inside, I hold my hand out toward him.

"Can I have my keys and phone please?" I ask.

"No." He starts his car, and I think about attacking him to get them back, but he backs out of his parking spot, leaving me no choice but to stay safely buckled in my seat.

"Are you hungry?" He glances over at me quickly before pulling out on the main street. "I was thinking we could have lunch at Restoration Hardware, then look around."

Not wanting to give in to him, but also not wanting to miss out on eating at the café in Restoration Hardware, which has amazing food—plus, shopping there after—I give a noncommittal grunt, and he laughs. "Don't gloat."

"Never, baby." He places his hand on my thigh, and without thinking, I cover his hand with mine, and he flips his hand over, lacing our fingers together.

When we get to the parking garage near Restoration, we park on the second floor, and as I get out, I notice a familiar-looking guy slam the door of a brand-new cherry red Mercedes across from us. His eyes lock with mine as he walks past me, and I register why I know him. He hasn't changed one bit since the night he called Harris that disgusting name, and even if he doesn't remember me, I for sure remember him. As he heads for the elevator, I feel Maxim get close and his hand come to rest against my lower back.

"Who's that?" he asks, but I don't answer. I take my bag off my shoulder and walk to the hood of Maxim's car, set it down,

and start to dig through it. “What are you looking for?” he questions, and that’s when my hand wraps around the cool piece of metal—a gift from Uncle Nico when I turned sixteen.

Maybe not the most traditional gift for a teenage girl, but it’s one I always have with me, and one that has come in handy more than once. Pulling out the multitool, I leave my bag where it is, then flip out the largest knife and walk to the red Benz.

“April,” Maxim calls as he follows, but I ignore him as I lean down just enough to slam my hand into one of the tires, then jerk it back, hearing a hiss. “What the fuck?” he mutters, and again, I ignore him and walk to the next tire and start to do the same thing. But before I can make contact with the tire, his hand wraps around my wrist, stopping me. “Talk to me.” I look up at him, and his eyes scan over my face. “Who was that?”

“The guy who called Harris a—”

“Right,” he cuts me off before I can say the word, then with one move, he takes the tool from my hand and slams it into the tire before leaving me where I’m standing and doing the same thing to the other two on the opposite side of the car. Looking at me over the roof, he orders, “Get in the car. We’re leaving.”

I don’t argue; I hustle to his car, grab my bag, get in, then wait for him to join me. As soon as he’s behind the wheel, he hands me the multitool, and I drop it in my purse.

“He deserved that,” I tell him, with my heart beating a million miles a minute.

“Yeah, he did, but next time we’re going to commit a felony, at least give me a heads up.”

“I hope there isn’t a next time,” I tell him, not trying to be funny, but he laughs anyway. “Do you think they got us on camera?”

“I’ll make a call as soon as we get out of the parking garage and make sure we’re covered.”

“Okay,” I whisper, feeling freaked out and a tad bit guilty now that I’m no longer riding on a vengeance and adrenaline

high.

“At least you gave me a valid reason to get out of shopping,” he mutters, and I laugh, resting my head back against my seat. Then I turn my gaze his way, and he looks over at me and shakes his head. “Love you, crazy woman.”

“I know.” I let out a breath, wondering if I will ever get used to hearing him say he loves me.

I really hope I don't.

Chapter 19

April

STANDING IN MY living room, I watch two men carry my mattress from upstairs, past the kitchen, and smile at both of them as they head around to the set of steps to go down to the first floor and outside. I do not envy them. I know that mattress is heavy as heck and awkward, given that it's all cushion and there aren't even handles to hold on to.

Blowing some hair that's fallen out of my messy bun out of my face, I look around my mostly empty house, trying to come to terms with the fact that I will no longer be calling this home after today. After weeks, moving day has finally arrived, and after just a few short hours, my house has been packed up by the team Maxim hired to move me out. And as much as I love him and his house, and as excited as I am to really start our lives together, I'm also going to miss this place.

Moving to the kitchen, I grab the lamps that were on my bedside tables off the island and start to carry both of them downstairs. I want to put them in my car with the stuff out of the fridge and freezer and a few of the other things I needed to take myself, worried they would get broken being in the truck with all the other stuff. When I reach the driveway, I spot Maxim at the back of the moving truck, talking to the two guys, and as soon as he spots me, he walks to my car and helps me load the lamps into the trunk.

"The guys said they only have a couple of boxes left to bring down, so we can head over to the house whenever you're ready." He pulls me against him and holds me tight. I melt into his chest and wrap my arms around his waist.

Even if I haven't been the one doing the heavy lifting, it's been an exhausting day, and it's not over yet. We still have to unpack everything, and since I don't really know for sure where things will be going, the guys won't be helping with more than getting furniture and boxes into the house and in the rooms.

“Are your parents and sisters still coming at four?”

“The last time I checked my phone, that was the plan.” I tip my head back and look up at him. “Is it bedtime yet?”

“A few more hours.” He kisses my forehead, and I reluctantly let him go. “I’m going to do one more walkthrough with the guys. Do you want to wait here with me, or do you want to head on over to the house?”

“I’ll head over to the house.” I lean up on my tiptoes for a quick kiss. Really, after today, I’m wondering if waiting for movers to move you isn’t worse than sitting at a car dealership for hours. At least at the dealership I had good coffee and snacks to keep me happy. Two things I haven’t had all day, since the kitchen was the first room to be packed up and the cup of coffee Maxim brought me this morning is long gone. “I just need to run up inside to grab my keys and bag.”

“Go get them,” he orders, tapping my bottom, and I roll my eyes before heading up the driveway and into the house.

Even knowing he’s going to do a walkthrough with the guys, I head up to the third floor and go around each room, opening all the closets and making sure that everything is out. Not that it really matters. I’m not selling my place; instead, I’m going to rent it out and keep it as an income property, much like he’s doing with his place in Vegas.

After walking through my bedroom, closet, and bathroom, I head down to the main level and check the cupboards in the kitchen, then go down to the bottom floor. I never used the room there except for storage, so I just make sure everything is out before I head to the door and grab my purse off the hook along with my keys.

When I get to my car, Maxim kisses me once more and tells me that he will see me at the house within the hour. As I head across town, I try to remember if there are still loungers out by the pool at the house or if the owners took them with them when they left. I honestly can’t recall, but if they are there, I’m going to find one and put my feet up for an hour and maybe, if I’m lucky, nap until someone wakes me up.

Just as I'm pulling into the driveway, my cell phone rings over the Bluetooth, and seeing it's Shell—a newer agent that Matt and I have been helping out when she needs advice—I press answer on the call.

“Hey, girl, what's up?” I ask, putting my car in park in the driveway, wondering if I will ever get used to the house in front of me being mine. Probably not, just like I will probably never get used to a man like Maxim being mine either.

“I know today is moving day for you, and I really hate to ask for your help, but I have clients who want me to show them the Hudson property, and I can't get inside.” The Hudson property, the house I'm selling on the golf course, the one I have yet to get an offer on—probably because the monthly dues are outrageous for most.

I just keep reminding myself that all it takes is one buyer and they are out there somewhere.

“The key's not working?”

“There is no key in the box,” she says, and I pull my bag into my lap and dig through it for my cell phone.

“Let me check something.” I go to one of my apps, and it takes me a minute to pull up the list of realtors who have recently visited the property. The last one was yesterday at noon and is a guy I don't know. With no way to get in touch with him, I look at my reflection in the mirror and shake my head. I look a mess with my crazy hair, baggy tank top, and the only leggings I had that weren't packed, but then again, if I'm just dropping off a key, it doesn't really matter.

“I have a spare key. Give me—” I glance down at the clock and think about traffic. “—maybe twenty minutes, and I'll be there.”

“Thank you.” She sounds relieved. “I got here early, wanting to walk through and look over the property, so you should be here before them.”

“Perfect, I'll see you in a few minutes.” I hang up with her, then call Maxim, but it just rings and goes to voicemail. Knowing I'll be back before he gets to the house, I make a U-

turn in the driveway and head out to the main road. Thankfully, traffic is light, so I arrive at the Hudson property in less time than I thought it would take. When I pull around the driveway, I find Shelly standing out front, talking on the phone.

Not wanting to be blocked in if her clients arrive, I pull around to the end of the circular driveway and then get out, taking the key for the house with me.

“I’m so sorry about this,” Shelly greets me with an apologetic smile as she steps off the front porch, looking gorgeous. Her long blonde hair is feathered back away from her pretty face, and her white top and black slacks are the perfect accent to her red heels.

“It’s not a big deal, and seriously, if these people buy this house, it will be worth it.” I walk up to the front door with her to let us both inside.

“Since you’re here, do you have anything I need to show them?”

“There are a few things.” I walk to the kitchen and the sliding doors that are off the breakfast nook. “The owners just recently put in the fireplace out here.” I open the doors and step out onto the covered deck that has an L-shaped couch in front of the stone fireplace, dining table, and outdoor kitchen. It’s one of my favorite spaces in the house, with views of the infinity pool below, the golf course, and Tennessee hills.

“This is beautiful.”

“It is, and you can tell your clients that all the outdoor furniture is included in the sale along with the two golf carts that are parked in the second garage.”

“Can you imagine having that kind of money?” She spins to face me. “Like you don’t care that you’re giving away thousands of dollars in stuff when you sell your house?”

“I can’t,” I mumble.

“Me neither.” She shakes her head before following me back into the kitchen, and I stop at the island.

“The master bath has also been recently remodeled, the entertainment room just had the sound system upgraded, and the entire house had all carpet replaced. Really, it’s the perfect house; it just needs the right buyer.”

“I can see that.” She picks up one of the detail lists off the counter, one of the few left since the last time I came to restock. With the owners out of town visiting their home in the Hamptons, it’s made it easier for realtors to schedule showings, which means there are a lot more viewings. But unfortunately, most of them are people who just want to look at the house with no intention of purchasing.

“I’m going to use the restroom, then I’ll head out,” I tell her when she starts to turn on the lights.

“Sure, and thanks again for coming. Hopefully, I’ll have good news for you this evening.”

“Fingers crossed.” I smile, then head to the half bath down the hall. After taking care of business and washing my hands, I untie my hair so I can put it back into a bun that is just as messy as the one I had it in before, minus the pieces falling out. After checking my reflection one last time, I open the door to the bathroom and walk to the kitchen.

Not seeing Shell there, I move to the front door but stop dead in my tracks when I see her on the floor, with a redheaded woman standing over her. As I gasp, the woman spins around, taking a step back from Shell, dropping her purse.

“Sh-She just pass... passed out,” the woman stammers, and I quickly make my way across the space between us and drop to my knees at Shell’s side, grabbing her jaw with the tips of my fingers.

“Shell? Shell, are you okay?” I shake her, but she doesn’t move, doesn’t even seem to take a breath. I turn to look up at the woman to tell her to call 911, but as I do, something slams into the back of my head, and pain registers right before darkness takes me.

I COME AWAKE with a groan and wrap my hand around my head when it throbs, feeling wetness against the tips of my fingers. It takes me a minute to get my eyes to open, and when they do, I look up at a blank ceiling and notice a couch on one side of me and a coffee table on the other. I close my eyes, trying to piece together where I am and why my head is aching, and that's when everything comes back to me.

Shell, the woman, and being hit.

Oh God.

I force my eyes back open, and my stomach churns. Fighting the urge to puke, I roll to my belly, then push up to my knees. Ignoring the red on the almost-white carpet, I grab onto the couch to hold myself up for a moment, hoping that the pause will ease some of the dizziness. Once I'm sure I won't vomit or pass out, I stand and look around, seeing I'm in the front living room at the Hudson house.

Relieved, I stumble on shaking legs toward the entryway, and I'm halfway there when I hear a scream. My stomach twists at the sound, and I glance at the door, my exit to safety, then toward the direction I heard the pain-filled sound coming from.

Without thinking, I head to the kitchen slowly, making sure to keep low and hopefully out of sight, then once there, I start to quietly search for something to use as a weapon. The first drawer I open is nothing but restaurant flyers, the next wooden spoons, and it isn't until the third one that I find a bamboo block filled with a variety of knives. Hearing a cry of pain, I grab the biggest knife I see, then with my heart pounding so hard the blood in my veins is making a whooshing sound in my ears, I walk with my back pressed against the wall toward the master bedroom. The only door that is closed at the end of the long hall.

When I get there, I listen, not hearing anything over my own beating heart. I wonder what the hell it is I'm doing, because this is how every single horror movie plays out at the end, with some idiot woman going toward a sound she knows she should run away from. Gripping the knife a little tighter, I

place my hand on the door handle and turn slowly, wanting to be able to just peek inside before I decide my next move.

As I push in, I look into the room, and all I see is a couch and a TV. I let out a silent curse about rich people with so much money they can afford what is basically a living room inside their bedroom, then open the door a little wider.

When I hear a louder whimper but don't see anything, I step inside, then keep close to the ground as I scoot toward the wall that separates the sitting area from the actual bedroom. As I reach the step and archway, I look around the corner and immediately wish I had run for help instead of pretending to be brave. I pull back and close my eyes, still seeing blood—so much blood—and Shell's naked body spread out on the bed, with her head hanging over the edge, almost all her blonde hair stained red.

Holding the knife tighter in my grasp, I hear a woman talking but can't make out what she's saying. It sounds like she's in another room, the bathroom maybe or the closet, both on the opposite side of the wall from me. I look at the bedroom door, and just as I plan to take a step that way, I hear a quiet whimper, and my eyes slide closed. If I leave Shell now, chances are she won't be alive by the time the cops arrive. Saying a silent prayer, I walk to the archway and peek around the corner, seeing the closet door is open and dark. The bathroom door is closed.

Tiptoeing, I go to the bed to check on Shell and rest my fingers against her neck to check her pulse. "Shell," I whisper, and tears of relief and dismay fill my eyes when she doesn't respond, but I see her chest move up and then back down ever so slightly. The breath causing blood to bubble from the small stab wounds on her chest.

She's still alive, but there is no way I will be able to get her out of here without help, and I don't even know that it would be safe to move her even if I could. I glance at the bathroom door, hearing the woman in there still talking to someone, then look around the room, trying to come up with some kind of plan.

There are not a lot of options. I either try to catch the woman and knock her unconscious when she walks out, or hold the door closed on this side until someone comes into the house. And since I don't have my cell phone to call for help and no one knows where I am, that could be a long while. Plus, I honestly don't know if I'd be strong enough to do that for more than a few minutes.

Being as quiet as I can, I unplug the lamp from the bedside and carry it with me to stand at the side of the bathroom door, taking off the shade and placing it on the ground. With my heart pounding, I transfer the knife that I don't want to lose into my left hand and grasp the lamp with my right, thankful it's one of those candlestick ones that are light without the thick base.

As I stand there, I listen to the woman talking on the phone—not sounding panicked but normal—and as I listen harder, I swear it sounds as if she's talking to a child, trying to encourage them to do something. How she can have a conversation while a woman she attacked is dying a room away is something I just do not understand.

“A... April.” My eyes widen and fly to the bed, seeing Shell reach out her hand to me, and I shake my head. “Ap—” She coughs, and red splatters across the cream duvet and floor. The woman talking inside the bathroom stops, then I hear a thunk and the sound of swishing fabric right before the bathroom door is flung open, and she steps out wearing some strange white cloth covering her from head to toe. I don't hesitate to swing out the lamp in my hand, but I don't get it high enough, so I end up hitting her in the stomach and knocking her back into the bathroom a step. Her eyes widen, then she rights herself and rushes me.

I try to swing the lamp again, but this time she's prepared and able to grab hold of the base, tugging it away from me. Letting go so she's unable to drag me into her, I transfer the knife to my right hand and lift it.

“Don't come any closer,” I pant, and her eyes fill with hatred.

“I knew I should have just killed you.” She lifts the lamp over her head and comes at me on a scream, since I’m just outside the doorway of the bathroom, I step to the side before she can hit me, and she ends up stumbling into the room, catching herself on the edge of the bed. With her back to me, I kick out at her, trying to push her over, but it doesn’t work, and I’m unprepared for her to spin around with the lamp and knock the knife out of my hand.

I look to where it lands on the floor a few feet away, and her eyes go to it as well, right before we both dive for it, crashing into each other. I slide across the carpet, and my fingertips touch the blade, then I yell when she grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls my head back. I reach behind me and dig my fingernails into her arm through the paper-like material covering her, hearing her hiss, and she pulls harder on my hair, causing pain to radiate through my scalp.

“Get off me,” I yell as she attempts to slam my face into the ground, then I buck up to try to dislodge her, but she’s heavy—really fricking heavy—and my body is weak. When she tries to reach over me for the knife and almost touches it, I roll to my side, taking her with me and sending her to the ground.

I try to roll back to get the knife again, but before I can, she grabs my hair once more. Crying out, I ignore the pain in my head and stretch my arm out toward the knife, my fingers brushing the handle, causing it to move just out of reach once more. Before I can stretch for it again, her hand wraps around my throat from behind, and she tugs back so hard that my throat aches. I give up and turn toward her quickly so that she can’t strangle me, and I reach for her face. Which is stupid, and I know it’s stupid when she uses that opportunity to straddle my chest and wrap both her hands around my neck, putting all her weight into the hold she has on my throat. I buck, kick, try to scratch her face and arm, and tear at her with my hand that is free, but she’s relentless, and I’m getting weaker by the second from the loss of blood or the hit to the head. I don’t know which, or maybe it’s both.

Staring into her blue eyes that seem void of all human compassion, I open my mouth, wanting to plead with her to

stop, but no words come out. My arm trapped under her weight feels along my side, and my fingers twitch. That's when I feel the thick braided cord attached to my leggings. My fingers fumble as I try to grasp it, then my nail hooks, and I pull.

Just like in Vegas the night Malo showed me his invention, a loud shrieking sound fills the room, and like he said would happen, the woman startles, and her hands on my neck release almost instantly as she goes to cover her ears.

I drag in a much-needed breath of air, then shove her off me with one hand, using all the strength I have. She flies back off balance with a stunned expression on her face, and I don't hesitate to reach behind me for the knife on the floor. But I don't have a chance to grab it before she realizes the siren sound is coming from my pants and that there is no one here but us.

Like a wild animal, she comes at me in a rush, her body crashing into mine, sending my head bouncing off the floor. Stars dance in my vision, and bile crawls up the back of my throat when she straddles me once more, wrapping her hands around my neck. Then a crack of thunder reverberates through the room, and she screams out in agony, her weight knocking the air from my lungs as she falls forward against me. With the little energy I have left, I attempt to push her away so I can breathe, but it's no use. I'm too exhausted; my muscles are no longer willing to cooperate.

As darkness starts to creep in, the weight on my chest is shoved aside, and a warm palm rests against the side of my face.

"Fuck, call an ambulance," I hear Maxim roar, and I cover his hand with mine as I try to blink away the darkness trying to consume me.

"Stay with me, baby," he demands, and I try to focus on him, but it's difficult. "You're going to be okay."

"Okay," I agree. "I just need to rest my eyes for a minute."

“I love you.” His forehead presses against mine, his big body making me feel safe and warm. “Stay with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I whisper back... right before everything goes black.

Chapter 20

April

SITTING ON THE couch in the living room with the TV on low, I watch my mom and Myla whisper back and forth to each other as they unpack the boxes that were stacked up against the wall by the movers days ago. My fingers twitch, wanting to help them, but since I've been told more than once to stay put, I pick up one of the books May brought to me while I was at the hospital and open it up. Try as I might, I can't for the life of me focus on the words on the page, and my mind wanders.

Three days ago, I woke up in a hospital bed with Maxim at my side and my entire family and his waiting just outside the room. The doctor explained then that I had suffered a concussion, and due to the wound on the back of my head, I had lost enough blood to need a transfusion. And because they were concerned about a lump that had formed on the back of my head I would be spending a couple of days in the hospital so they could monitor it.

During the three days I was in the hospital, Shell passed away due to her injuries. The woman responsible for her death along with Meghan and Charlotte's confessed to what she had done after the surgery she had undergone for the wound she suffered after being shot in the shoulder by Gene.

It turns out that Mary Garther was a doctor with a private practice, and her husband was a local real estate broker with a wandering eye. When she found out he was not carrying on one but two affairs with realtors from around town, she lost her mind. Instead of confronting her husband and ending things with him, she decided she would remove Meghan, then Charlotte from the picture.

She set up appointments with them under fake names, wore wigs so she couldn't be recognized, injected both women with some concoction she got from the office where she worked, then murdered them. She thought that with the two women

who had been entertaining her husband gone, her marriage would get better, but that didn't happen. Instead, he met Shell, and not long after that did they begin having an affair. When Mary found out, that her husband was once again cheating she decided Shell needed to go too, so she put a plan in place.

Only she didn't account for me being at the house or my very determined man using his resources to track me down and come to my rescue when I didn't answer my phone or return any of his calls. Something that I will forever be grateful for, because I know deep in my gut that I wouldn't be here right now if he hadn't come after me. And worse, I don't know that Mary would have been caught or if she wouldn't have gone on to kill the next woman her husband decided to sleep with.

As a woman, I can understand her anger and her hurt, but I do not understand her taking that pain out on the three women who did not make her a promise of fidelity and commit their life to hers.

And in my opinion, men get off way too damn easy when it comes to cheating, and women—instead of blaming the men they share their lives with—take it out on the other woman way too often.

“Are you okay, honey?”

Coming out of my thoughts, I look up at my mom as she walks around to the side of the couch and rests her hand on the top of my head. “I'm okay.” I close the book I'm not actually reading, and her eyes fill with concern.

“Are you in pain?”

“A little, but I just took a pain pill, so it should kick in soon. If anything, I'm bored out of my mind.”

“The doctors said you need to take it easy for a few more days,” she reminds me with a gentle smile, and I reach for her hand, then give her fingers a squeeze.

I know she's worried. Has been worried about me since Maxim called to tell her and my dad that he didn't know

where I was and asked them to come to the house earlier than planned in case I showed up while he was out looking for me.

“I’ll be okay,” I reassure her, then look to the right when Malo comes into the room with his hand in a large bright-orange bag of chips.

“I thought you were helping outside.” Myla frowns at him as he walks to where I’m sitting and takes a seat next to me.

“I was, but now I’m in here hanging with April,” he tells her, pulling some of the fluffy white blanket covering my lap over to rest on his, then looks at me. “What are we watching?”

“Nothing.” I laugh, handing him the remote, and he starts flipping through channels while Myla sighs.

“Do you want me to get you some water?” Mom asks, touching the top of my head, and I take my eyes off the TV and start to tell her no, but Malo answers before me.

“Yes, please. Actually, can I get a soda?”

“Malo, I’m going to let your brother kick your ass like he’s been threatening to do,” Myla snaps at her son.

“I said please,” he tells his mom with a fake wounded look.

“Do you see what I have to deal with?” Myla asks my Mom, and she presses her lips together to keep from laughing.

“How’d I know I’d find you in here?” Maxim grumbles at his brother as he steps into the room. “I thought you were helping us outside.”

“It’s hot out, and I got hungry. No one should have to work under those conditions.”

Hearing my mom snort, I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing, and Maxim’s eyes come to me and soften. “Is he bothering you?”

“Of course I’m not bothering her. She loves my company,” Malo tells him, sounding offended.

“Malo,” Maxim growls, and Myla steps between her sons.

“Come on,” she orders Malo, snatching the bag of chips from his hands. “Before your brother really does kill you, come help me upstairs.”

“Fine.” He starts to get up, then stops and focuses on the TV, and I look to see what caught his attention. At first, all I see is a cute brunette news anchor of one of the most popular late morning shows standing in front of the camera in workout gear and assume he’s checking her out. But then I see the bold script at the bottom of the screen. **Panic Pants Could Save Your Life.**

“Oh my God,” I breathe as Malo grabs the remote and turns up the volume.

“So, these are Panic Pants.” The woman turns to her side, resting her hand on her hip. “They look like your everyday workout leggings, but they’re not. During an emergency, you pull this cord.” She does, and the pants start to shriek for a moment before she reattaches it. “The sound they make is supposed to startle the person attacking you, giving you some time to get away.” She turns back to face the camera. “As an avid runner, I can’t tell you how happy I was to find these on the market. And although I hope I never have to find out if they work, I do feel safer with them on, especially when I run in the mornings before the sun is up.”

“Do they have them for men?” A handsome guy with graying hair dressed in a suit laughs as he comes on screen with a rolled-up stack of papers in his hand.

“They don’t, but you would probably fit in a woman’s size medium,” she tells him with a flip of her hair, and Malo barks out a laugh while the guy’s face turns red.

“Well.” The man turns to look at the camera and clears his throat. “You heard it here first. Get your Panic Pants, guys, then come back here where we will be talking with Anne Hathaway about her new movie.”

“That guy is a dick,” Malo says when it cuts to a commercial, then he grins. “Not that I give a fuck, because I’m famous, bitches!” He jumps and grabs his mom around the

waist, lifting her into the air and making her laugh as she smacks his shoulder and demands to be put down.

Smiling, I watch the two of them, then turn when Maxim comes to sit next to me, carefully placing his arm around my shoulders.

“Your brother is crazy,” I tell him, curling into his side.

“I know,” he mutters back, then he looks to the entryway for the living room when the doorbell goes off. “More visitors,” he grumbles and I pat his chest, since I got home this morning, people have been stopping by nonstop.

“I got it,” my mom tells us as Myla finally gets free from her son. A moment later, Mom comes back into the room with Harris and Molly following her carrying flowers and balloons.

“Hi.” Harris gives a one-handed wave to the room, then focuses on me, looking a tad freaked—probably because of the bruising and bandage wrapped around my head. Heck, when I saw myself in the mirror for the first time before I was able to shower, I freaked out too.

“I’m okay,” I tell him while my mom, Myla, and Malo all leave the room, and I carefully stand as Maxim gets up and takes the flowers setting them on the side table where there a few others. As I hug Harris, Maxim get close and places his hand against my lower back to hold me up like he’s afraid I might fall or break.

“You don’t look too bad,” Harris tells me, and I laugh as he rocks me back and forth. “Molly and I have been worried about you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He lets me go so Molly can hug me, and she does it quick, like she’s afraid to touch me.

“We wanted to see you in the hospital, but my mom didn’t think it was a good idea to visit you there,” Molly tells me, fiddling with her hands in front of her.

“Your mom was right.” I sit, and Maxim places the blanket back over my lap while the two of them take a seat in the

oversized sapphire-blue velvet chair that Myla picked and I fell in love with. “It was kind of chaotic. I’m glad you both waited to come see me at home,” I tell her honestly. The truth is I cried for the first two days after I woke up, not for me but for Shell and the fact that I wasn’t able to help her. Even now I can’t help but to wonder if I didn’t mess up by not leaving the house and calling the police. She nods, then looks at my throat and flinches so I drag the blanket up my lap and hold it to my neck so she doesn’t get uncomfortable. “So what are you up to today? Anything good?”

“We’re going to the travel agent to start planning our vacation,” Harris says with a smile while taking his wife’s hand.

“That’s exciting. Have you decided where you’re going?”

“We’re going to take a Disney Cruise to the Bahamas.” Molly wiggles like she can barely contain her excitement. “I’ve never been on a boat or to the beach before.”

“You’re not going to want to come home,” I promise, then cover my mouth when I yawn.

“We should let you rest.” Harris stands, and Molly gets up with him. I want to tell him they can stay, but I know before long I’ll end up passing out. Plus, Molly’s visibly uncomfortable.

“How are you guys getting to the travel agent?”

“Molly’s mom is driving us, she’s outside,” he tells me and I nod.

“Well next week when things calm down, we’ll have dinner.”

“Sure.” Harris walks over and leans down to give me a short hug while Molly just waves.

After Maxim comes back from walking them out, he sits next to me, then reaches down so he can bring my feet to his lap.

“Tired?”

“Unfortunately.” I let out a deep breath. “I swear all I’ve done is sleep for the last few days, and it’s annoying.”

“Your body needs rest to heal. Do you want me to help you get into bed?”

“No, I think I’ll just doze here.” I cover his hand with mine. “What were you guys doing outside?”

“Setting up the new loungers for the pool. Something that would be a lot easier to do if your dad and mine actually used the directions.”

“Directions are for wimps.”

“Apparently.” He smiles, then reaches up to touch my cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I smile back, and his expression softens.

“Maxim, can you come help us upstairs for a minute?” his mom shouts, and he groans, letting his head fall back on the couch.

“I love my family and yours, but I can’t wait until they all leave.”

“Me too,” I tell him as he moves my feet carefully off his lap, then stands and looms over me, placing one hand on the armrest of the couch and the other on the back.

“Rest, and yell if you need something.”

“I will.” I accept a soft kiss, then watch him walk out of the room. Once he’s gone, I grab the remote, lie down on the couch, and Binx jumps up to join me. I turn on a comedy, finding it much easier to watch than one of the shows I’d normally be into. Then again, I think I’ve had enough true crime to last me a lifetime.

SITTING AT THE desk in the home office Maxim and I have been sharing since we moved into the house, I go over the schedule for Wet for the next week double checking that all the slots are filled on the computer. As I click through the list of women on the schedule I wonder if I can convince Maxim to take me

back to Vegas sooner than later so I can meet all the girls. Maybe then I would have a better idea of where they would best fit cause right now I'm just pretending that I know based on their names. Like Crystal probably likes showers and Tina sounds like a girl who enjoys a nice bath.

I shake my head at my own thoughts and sigh.

A few weeks ago, when I was physically well enough to go back to work I went to meet a client for a showing and completely broke down. I couldn't even get out of my car, and it was so bad that Maxim had to come pick me up and drive me home. It was then that I realized that I wasn't mentally prepared to step back into a house that wasn't mine with people I didn't know. After that situation, I found a therapist to talk to and they assured me that my fear was normal. They also explained that it would be wise to take a step back from my business until I had a chance to deal with the emotional trauma I suffered from what happened.

I didn't want to, really didn't want to but knowing it's necessary in order to get better I've stepped away from anything to do with selling houses and have been helping Maxim with stuff he doesn't have time to do especially now that Malo has been so focused on Panic Pants. Really I don't mind it at all, it's giving me something to do and I know with baby steps I'll get back to selling houses eventually.

Feeling eyes on me I look up and find Maxim in the doorway watching me then notice a piece of fabric in his hand.

"Everything okay?"

"I have something to show you outside," he says and I glance to the window and see that it's dark, not really surprising since we are heading into fall.

"I'm almost done with this, can you give me five minutes?" I ask him and he shakes his head then steps around the desk to where I am.

"I can finish that up tomorrow."

"Or I can finish it tonight, I just have a few girls left." I start to spin the chair around to face him when he comes to stand

behind me but he stops me before I can.

“No more talk about work.” The piece of fabric in his hands comes down in front of my face.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” He places it over my eyes then I feel him tie it into a knot at the back of my head. “Up you go.” He helps me stand then starts to lead me out of the office.

“Don’t let me fall,” I hold onto him tightly as he leads me blindfolded through the house.

“I would never let you fall,” he assures me right before he scoops me up into his arms bridal-style, causing me to shriek. “I got you.”

“Okay.” I hold onto his neck, then feel him come to a stop right before he maneuvers me to open the sliding door leading outside. And I know it’s the door leading outside, since I have spent almost every day by the pool or in it since my stitches were removed a week ago.

“What are we doing?”

“You’ll see.” He rights me, placing my feet on the ground, then he turns me away from him so that my back is against his chest. When I feel his fingers at the knot tied at the back of my head, my heart pounds with anticipation. “Surprise,” he whispers against my ear, and I blink my eyes open, seeing twinkle lights wrapped around the base of each tree, along the fence, and arched across the glowing pool. It looks like a fairy garden under the dark star-filled night sky. A lot like his yard in Vegas only better because it’s here where I get to enjoy it every evening.

“This is... wow.” I turn to face him, and my heart drops into my stomach. Between his thumb and index finger is the most beautiful ring I have ever seen in my life—a large oval-shaped diamond surrounded by smaller stones.

“I thought about waiting to ask you to marry me.” He takes my left hand and brings it up between us. “But after everything that has happened, I don’t want to put it off.” He

slides the ring down over my knuckle. “I also don’t want to wait a year to make you my wife.”

“Are you proposing, or are you telling me we’re getting married?” I ask, looking up into his eyes.

“Do I need to tell you we’re getting married, or will you just say you’ll marry me?”

“You know... you have a really bad tendency of ruining important moments with your highhandedness,” I inform him, even though I really don’t care. I love that he’s always so sure about everything that he never makes me question how he feels or what he wants. I love him more than I thought I could love someone.

“Are you going to marry me?”

“Can you ask me properly?” I snap, then I gasp as his mouth crashes down on mine for a kiss that is so deep it takes my breath away.

And as I kiss him back, all I can think is how fitting this is.

Our relationship started with him pushing his way into my life, so it’s only right that our future would start the same way.

Epilogue

Maxim

Six months later

WITH DETERMINATION IN my step, I head down the long, tiled hallway and past the two receptionists who watch me as I go. When I reach the end of the hall, I push through a set of double doors, and all heads turn my way.

“Maxim,” July rushes toward me with her hands out, and I shake my head and take hold of her wrist before she can try to hold me back.

“I need to see her.”

“You can’t go in there,” she whispers, then I see April’s other sisters get close with matching worried looks on all their faces.

“It’s bad luck,” my sister tells me, stepping up to my side and resting her hand on my shoulder.

“I don’t care.” I hold her gaze for a moment, then watch her sigh.

“Come on, July. We’re not going to be able to stop him.”

“But—” July starts, and Melanie shakes her head, pulling her away as she sputters in disbelief.

Without a backward glance, I head through another set of closed doors, and as soon as I step into the room, my mom and November, who are both standing near April, turn my way.

“We’ll wait outside,” Mom tells her, and April nods, then gives her mom a hug, and a moment later, I hear the door close behind me.

My heart lodges in my throat as I stare at her across the distance between us.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she whispers, the worry in her tone setting my teeth on edge. The idea that she doesn’t want to marry me, doesn’t want to spend the rest of her life with me, is enough to send me over the edge. My whole life, I’ve been waiting for this moment without even knowing it, and finally it’s here right within my grasp.

“You we’re supposed to meet me down on the beach twenty minutes ago.” I take a step toward her, and she takes a step back. “I’m not letting you out of this.” I take another step, lessening the distance between us. “You said you would marry me, and I’m holding you to that promise.”

“I’m pregnant.”

My entire world stops on those two words, and every cell in my body becomes hyperaware of her—every move, every breath she takes.

“I thought I might be, but I found out for sure just a little bit ago.” She glances down at her hands in front of her that seem to be shaking. “I know this isn’t what we wanted. I know that you wanted—”

“You,” I cut her off before she can say more. “All I want and ever wanted is you and the life we build together.” I take the last few steps, closing the final few feet keeping us apart.

“We had a plan.” I hear the tears in her voice as I pull her against me, and her arms wrap around my waist.

“Now we’ll make a new plan.” I lean back just enough to see her face and swipe the tears from under her eyes with my thumb, then let my hand drop to rest against her flat stomach. “I knew I loved you long before the words were ever spoken, knew you were my future before I put a ring on your finger, so it seems only right that a life we didn’t know we created took root before we planned for it.” I dip my head to press a kiss to her soft lips. “The most amazing things to happen in my life have been unplanned, so this is happening right when it’s meant to.”

“You’re going to make me ruin my mascara if it isn’t already.” Her bottom lip trembles, and I shake my head.

“You look perfect,” I assure her, then press my forehead against hers. “Now, will you come downstairs and fucking marry me already?”

“Yes.” She laughs, resting her palms against my chest. “And I was coming. I just got sick, so I had to have your mom and mine help me fix my hair and makeup.” She shakes her head. “Did you really think I left you standing at the altar?”

“When you didn’t show up, I wasn’t sure what to think, but I knew if you were getting cold feet, I wasn’t giving you the chance to run off. ” I palm her cheek and smooth my thumb over her bottom lip. “We’re having a baby?”

“Apparently.” She drags in a deep breath, then looks down at her stomach, covering it with her hand. “It doesn’t seem real.”

“I love you.”

“I know.”

“No more tears until after we say I do.” I touch my mouth to hers, then take a step back. “I’ll see you on the beach.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and I kiss her once more, then head out of the room. And not surprising, I can tell the women on the opposite side of the door have been eavesdropping.

“See you all downstairs.”

I head back down to the beach, then ten minutes later, with the sun setting, she walks toward me, seeming to glow. The first time I ever saw her, I thought she was beautiful, but with her hair up, wearing a form-fitting white dress that is molded to her body, with her makeup done to perfection, she absolutely takes my breath away.

And as we say our vows in front of our friends and family with our little one safely growing in her belly, I place my hand on her stomach, feeling overwhelmed by pride, fear, possessiveness, and a love so deep that I wonder if I’ll drown in it.

April

Approximately two years later

“MY DADA.” MALIA, my beautiful two-year-old daughter with dark hair just like her daddy’s and eyes the same color of mine, grabs Maxim’s hand off of my thigh where he rested it, then pulls it up to her face, holding it there while glaring at me.

Hearing her dad laugh, I give him the dirtiest look I can muster up, when all I really want to do is melt into a puddle of goo at the sight of him and our daughter together.

Truth be told, when I took that pregnancy test on our wedding day and it came back positive, I felt like I was going to be missing out on all the things I had been looking forward to. Little did I know that I was getting something greater than I could have ever imagined.

Now, instead of traveling the world and going on grand vacations, our days involve early pancake breakfasts at home, chalk in the driveway in the late afternoons, finger painting before dinner, and a dozen other activities to keep Malia occupied throughout the days.

And because of our sweet girl, I finally understand why my mom always seemed so content to just be a mom and wife. Within my own little family, I’ve found a different kind of happiness, one I didn’t know existed. A happiness wrapped in baby giggles, stolen kisses, sticky fingers, date nights in bed, family Halloween costumes, midnight showers, and a million other little things that mean nothing but also mean everything.

But maybe that is the point of life—understanding that all the best parts are tied up in moments we don’t think much of at the time.

The End

A big thank you to my husband for thinking up the perfect match for April, she needed someone strong and Maxim is perfect for her.

About the Author

Aurora Rose Reynolds is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author whose wildly popular series include the Until, Until Him, Until Her, Fluke My Life, Underground Kings, How to Catch an Alpha, and Shooting Stars series.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

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