

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FERN FRASER

The
Valentines
CHRONICLES

She's always
been a little

Wild
AT HEART

WILD AT HEART

**AGE GAP, SECRET
BILLIONAIRE
ROMANCE**

FERN FRASER

Copyright © 2023 by Fern Fraser

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editing by [Violet Rae Editing and Proofreading](#)

CONTENTS

1. [Rebel with a cause](#)
2. [Hanging by a thread](#)
3. [Hands up](#)
4. [The Fixer](#)
5. [Fly home, Jailbird](#)
6. [Hungry](#)
7. [How to have a difficult conversation](#)
8. [Birds & Bees](#)
9. [No regrets](#)
10. [Office Hours](#)
11. [Epilogue 1 - Emergency repairs](#)
12. [Epilogue 2 - Valentine's Day](#)

[Galentines Chronicles](#)

[Fern Fraser](#)

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Peyton

I parked my car behind one of the portable buildings at the Halcyon Resort construction site twenty minutes ago. Regis Enterprises, an international property development company, owns the land, and I'm trespassing.

There's nobody around, yet if someone spots my car, they could report me to the police. Gah! Imagine the humiliation. My boss will fire me, and my brothers will never let me live it down. Oh god, they'll be so mad.

So, where's the other volunteer helping me hang the protest sign? Amanda from the organizing committee didn't tell me who was coming, but they should've been here by now.

Oh my god, what am I doing?

I would never break the law under normal circumstances, but I'm hella mad at multinational corporations. What gives them the right to destroy the environment and build playgrounds for the rich? Where will future generations play if all the forests vanish?

I'm not backing out, even if the other volunteer doesn't show. I'll wait for five more minutes, but I could certainly do with a pep talk before I lose my nerve. My best friend Gem always makes me feel better, so I'll call her.

Last weekend, I had a great time chatting online with my book club friends. Gem, Tabitha, Mandy, Devyn, Cleary and Corey are the sweetest. They know my deepest darkest secrets. We were all in the chat at the same time, for wine night. After too many drinks, Cordy proposed a challenge to push us out of our comfort zones. We all agreed to take a chance instead of sitting around whining about Valentines every year. Now here I am, holding up my end of the agreement.

The unanswered call diverts to voicemail. "Babe, it's me. I'm just letting you know I'm following through on the pact we made for Galentines."

Why am I whispering? I'm in my car, and there's no one around.

"Anyway, how is your plan... um... going? I, ah... well, okay. Call me back whenever you get this message."

This is ridiculous. I'm rambling.

Although I'm proud of myself for being brave, being here alone freaks me out. The other volunteer and I were supposed to find the best place to hang the sign together. From what I can see, there's only one suitable spot beside a clump of trees and in full view of the main road. It's perfect.

The light is fading, but I can't draw attention to myself by using a flashlight. If I wait too long, I won't be able to see, so it's time to get going.

I pop the trunk and grab the black duffel bag with the signage. Kicking off my heels, I slip into sneakers, creep around to the front of the building, and quickly realize my plan won't work. The buildings are too far apart, and the ties aren't long enough.

Crap. What am I supposed to do now? Disappointment causes me to drop the bag and stride toward a clump of trees. I need to clear my head and come up with another plan.

Brightly colored wildflowers pepper the ground, and the damp, earthy smell of the forest carries a hint of sweetness. It reminds me of long summer days playing hide and go-seek with my brothers.

Hang on a moment...

I can hang the sign between two trees. Their long smooth branches are perfect for climbing. Although I haven't climbed a tree for a while, I've got nothing to lose by trying, have I? My work clothes might end up ruined, but it's a small price to pay.

Hitching up my skirt, I firmly grasp the rough bark and climb up the branches. The sound of leaves rustling makes me feel safe. I climb higher, but I feel like I am not alone. Hidden among the branches of the majestic tree makes me feel safe and protected.

Phew! Climbing is hard work, and I'm completely out of practice. It might be time to renew my gym membership. I need a short rest break and find a nice thick branch to rest on while I catch my breath.

Jude

The construction crew won't arrive for another three months. Technically, no one should be on-site, including me. But, as the owner, I'm the only one who can get away with it.

My blood boils when I spot the uninvited intruder—a blue Mazda hatchback—parked behind a clump of shrubs. If they're trying to go unnoticed, they've failed. My body tenses with anticipation. I didn't arrange to meet anyone, so who's trespassing and why?

The unwelcome intruder is taking their time. They've been sitting in the car for the past ten minutes while I debate

whether to call the police or let my private security team deal with them.

I wipe a clammy palm down the front of my pants before unlocking the home screen and scrolling through my contacts. My cousin, Seb, will know what to do. His full name is Sebastian, but we call him The Fixer. He's the head of legal for Regis Enterprises and has a solution for every problem.

"Hey, Jude," he answers and chuckles to himself. The joke never gets old as far as he's concerned.

I love that he's amused, but I've got stuff on my mind. "Can you talk?"

"Hit me. What's going on?" Seb holds off making more smart-ass retorts while I describe the situation.

"What's your best guess?" Seb sounds incredulous because why would anyone be here? There's no equipment to steal and no money.

"Vandal?" It's the only reason I can think of, but even then, it's thin as far as motivations go.

"Crap. It was bound to happen," Seb groans. "Jude, I should have mentioned this earlier, but we've been getting a ton of angry emails and letters from protestors. Of course, every single one of their gripes is unfounded—but it's to be expected with any project of this magnitude."

"Maybe," I snarl. "It's the same story everywhere we try to build."

Despite fifteen years of successfully working in the family business, it still tears me up inside.

"Of course, you'll face opposition when you're making any kind of large-scale change," Seb says coolly, but my anger doesn't subside.

Regis Enterprises is a family-run business, but Elysium Cove is my passion project. The cutting-edge eco-resort is modeled on Scandinavian design and technology and is my pride and joy.

“I’ve done everything possible to get the project off the ground. There should be no more objections.” And yet, this type of shit keeps coming at me, even from members of my own family.

Frankly, it’s exhausting, and if the person in the blue Mazda is a protestor, it’s getting personal. The intruder will pay for trespassing on my sanctuary and disturbing my peace of mind.

“You read the report, right? No objections.”

“Correct. But there’s one thing. Seb, can you double-check the insurance policy? Are we covered for every situation? Damage, vandalism, and that kind of thing?”

I’m not too concerned about the potential damage to the property. The temporary structures set up here are replaceable. All I’m focused on is making sure everyone is safe.

“It’s watertight. We’re covered for everything you could imagine, but I’ll check again. Is something else wrong? You sound a little tense,” he says. “Where’s the security team?”

“They don’t start work until next month.” I’m cursing myself for the oversight. I’d thought about hiring my own team, Camelot Security, to start sooner, but decided against it. “I’ll call Finn Knight next.”

“Why don’t you call the cops?” Seb suggests.

“I’m not calling the cops,” I say firmly.

Although I’ve only been in town for a couple of weeks, I’ve already had several run-ins with the law.

“As your trusted legal advisor, is there anything you want to tell me?”

We’re cousins, and Seb often knows what I’m thinking before I do—which is both a blessing and a curse.

“Nah. Only minor things... Speeding—”

Before I finish, he laughs knowingly and says, “All the usual.”

“Gee, thanks for your support.” Since we were toddlers, we’ve been more like brothers, and he knows me too well.

“Anytime.”

What the hell?

“Seb, you will not believe what I am looking at.”

A gorgeous young woman with a duffle bag slung over one shoulder is running toward the forest as if her hair is on fire.

“Who is it?” Seb demands, his voice rough with intensity. “A vandal? Is he armed?”

“Don’t think so. She’s wearing a red sweater and a black pencil skirt. She looks like she’s come straight from the office.”

She stops when she reaches a majestic oak tree, then hikes up her pencil skirt. My eyes almost pop out of my head when she reveals her creamy thighs. The woman digs the toe of her shoe into the bark, gripping each branch tightly and using them to scale the trunk.

“She sounds cute.” Seb laughs.

“Knock it off, champ.” It’s annoying how often he knows what I am thinking. His uncanny ability to read my mind comes in handy sometimes, but other times it’s a curse.

“Okay. So, what is she doing?” he asks.

She isn’t dressed for adventure. Her rubber-soled shoes and iron willpower are the only things stopping her from slipping. If the trespasser were a burly dude, I’d chase him off without hesitation.

But watching the mysterious woman climb a tree stirs something primal inside me. Who is this incredible woman?

“Gotta go!” I shout, already on my feet and running to meet her.

HANGING BY A THREAD

Peyton

The view from here is awesome. I'll snap a couple of selfies and add them to the family group chat. My brothers are always adding pictures of themselves doing dangerous things in exotic locations. We can't all be military-trained machines, but I can still be a badass in my way.

Sure, I can't tell them what I'm doing climbing the tree because they'd be mad as hell, but I'll keep the protest sign out of the photo. Angling the camera just right, I get a few shots, but the branch I'm standing on cracks under my weight with a loud boom.

My foot slips, and I lose my balance, but I grab hold of the branch and wrap my arms securely around it. My phone plummets to the ground, but it's the least of my worries because my foot is tangled in the signage ropes.

I'm further from the ground than I thought. I never used to be afraid of heights, but I'm thinking this is where I'm going to die.

It's okay. Breathe.

My heart is racing, but if I believe in myself and trust muscle memory, I will be fine. I'm a little rusty, but I know how to do this. I force my shaking hands to grip firmly, and kick off my shoes, then swing a leg over and pull myself up until I am straddling the branch. The branch will hold my weight if I sit close to the trunk.

As soon as I catch my breath, I'll figure out how to climb down.

Damn. I rushed in solo to handle a task that needed two people. The banner is too big for one person to handle, and my impatience almost landed me in hot water. My phone will be smashed to pieces, but at least no one will ever know how ridiculous I am.

Gah! I imagine my brothers calling me a brat and laughing their heads off at my stupidity.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

I squint through the rustling leaves, searching for the source of the booming voice. A tall, dark-haired man is standing beside the base of the trunk. He meets my gaze, a soft glimmer of understanding and empathy in his eyes.

"Do you need a hand?"

Do I need help? Yes, but I wish I didn't. "I'm okay, thanks! I'm almost finished and on my way back down."

"What are you doing up there, anyway?" He stares at me with kindness instead of judging me for stupidity. Or worse, assessing me for illegal activity.

I hold up the banner, which is looped around my ankle.

His lips quirk into a smile. "Wow, that sign is impressive," he says with admiration.

"It sure catches your eye, right?" Between the shock of slipping, and the humiliation of being found by such a hot guy, I've about lost my head. But I just figured out who he is!

"You're Amanda's friend. Sorry, I waited, but I didn't think you were going to show," I explain, hoping he isn't mad because he is seriously hot...

Oh, good lord. Who am I kidding?

He's a hunk, and I'm awkward as all hell. A guy like him would never look twice at me, and besides, I don't date. Even if we did date, my overprotective brothers would give him the third degree and he'd end up running.

A flicker of confusion crosses his face and settles in the small crease between his eyebrows.

"I'm Peyton." Oh my god, I'm such a bonehead.

"Jude," he says with a determined look in his eyes. He rolls up his shirt sleeves with sharp, decisive motions. His tanned arms flex, muscles rippling, and he looks like he's ready for action.

"Um, Jude, what are you doing?"

Does he think I'm going to jump into his arms? Am I supposed to trust him? Not a chance—I'm too much for him to handle. Still, he looks pretty strong. I can't take my eyes off him, and a rush of attraction makes my heart race.

Jude

What a woman. She's fearless, bold and too proud too.

I didn't see her trip up, but it's my guess that her foot got tangled up in the rope connected to the sign, and the awkward way she's perched on the branch supports the theory.

Climbing down without help puts her at risk of injury. The main cabin doesn't have any climbing supplies, but I always keep some extra rope and tools in the trunk.

"Wait right there," I tell her.

"Where are you going?" she asks, her voice trembling lightly. She looks hurt and confused.

My chest tightens. She thinks I'm abandoning her because I'm not communicating clearly. Why did I think she could read my

mind?

“I’ll grab some gear from my car and help you get down, okay?”

“Thanks.” Her shoulders slump, and she breathes a sigh of relief.

“I’ll be right back.”

I respect her for acting like everything was alright earlier, but I’m glad she’s accepting my help. Reaching my car, I pull out the rope, checking for any signs of damage, but it’s in perfect condition.

Slinging it over my shoulder, I race back and loop the rope around the trunk. I give it a hard yank to ensure it’s secure before looping it around my hips.

“Your boots!”

I glance at Peyton, who is pointing at my feet. “Good call,” I answer before removing my boots and socks. The soles are leather, and I’ll never get any traction.

Before starting my ascent, I carefully test each foothold before committing my weight. After a few minutes, I reach her position and secure the rope around her waist. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close.

Her breath glances off my cheek, light and delicate, and the sweet smell of her shampoo drifts into my nose. Carefully and slowly, I lower her to safety and untie the rope from around her waist.

She looks at me with soulful dark eyes, filled with adoration like I’m some kind of hero. Imagine waking up to that beautiful face every morning.

The air between us hums. I sense a connection beyond the physical, and though I can’t explain it, it feels like a string connecting my heart to hers.

Growing up in a wealthy family forces you to view the world with a cynical eye. Having your heart broken by so-called friends who only care about what you can do for them teaches you to keep your distance.

This includes both female and male friends and even business partners. It's why our family works together, and it's the main reason why I don't date.

The justifications I used to bypass relationships in the past become irrelevant when I realize I want something more with Peyton. It doesn't make sense, since I have no idea who she is, still, my gut senses the truth.

"Thanks for your help," Peyton says before sinking to the ground to untie the rope from her ankle.

Something pink and shiny is hidden in the leaves under the tree. I look closer. "Is this your cell?"

"Yes. I dropped it, and probably smashed the screen."

"Looks fine to me. Toughened glass," I say and hand it to her.

After taking a quick look, she tosses it in the duffle bag. "Thank you. You're a lifesaver."

Reaching for my socks and boots, I leap at the chance to praise her.

"You," I say, pointing at her ample chest but not looking at it because I am not an asshole, "are a badass. You didn't need my help."

Her eyes flash with amusement, and I feel even worse. Because maybe I am an asshole, just not the kind who objectifies women.

Dang. The sign she's sitting on states that she believes I'm the biggest jerk on the planet, but she's wrong. I just need a chance to prove it.

"Fuck," I mutter, raking a hand over my face.

"Are you okay?" she asks, concern in her eyes when she catches me. "Sorry. This whole thing isn't working out how I planned."

Me neither. Not by a long shot. It's better for meeting Peyton but worse because she's going to hate me when she realizes who I am.

“What do you mean?” I ask. Meeting her gaze, I wait for her to explain.

“I assumed the building site was the obvious place, but I should have suggested a different location. The road isn’t even built yet.” She shakes her head, and waves of dark hair cascade over her shoulders. “It would have been more powerful where people could see it.”

“This protest matters to you,” I say, admiring her courage and dedication. Something I didn’t expect I’d be doing when I raced after her a short time ago.

“Doesn’t it matter to you?” she asks, confusion on her face.

I nod to encourage her to keep talking. “How did you get involved in this?” I ask, shifting uncomfortably. I need to figure out what I’m up against and work out a plan.

The environment is critically important to me. Peyton has a misconception about what I’m trying to accomplish. She needs to hear my side of the story before she discovers my identity.

“I’m responsible for ordering the environmental impact studies for all development applications for the local council,” Peyton says.

Is it any wonder I’m becoming obsessed with her? She knows her stuff and has authority. But at her core, she’s spirited. Wild at heart.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She studies me, waiting for a response.

I’m transfixed. She’s the complete package. Smart, beautiful, and gutsy. I tilt my head. “You’re the boss.”

“I work for the Director of Environmental Impact Studies.” She frowns. “I wish I were the boss, but I dropped out of college.”

“Same,” I say and shrug.

Peyton stares at me with her mouth slightly agape.

“You’re smart and savvy and show leadership qualities at a young age. I’m sure you’ll be the boss someday.”

“Twenty-five is not young.” She rolls her eyes, then covers her mouth with her hand and laughs.

“Tell yourself again when you hit thirty-five.” I groan.

She hits my arm playfully, and her touch lingers. I want to tease her more, so she’ll do it again.

“Okay, back to business. What did the report say?” I ask.

She won’t be able to dig up any dirt because there isn’t any. I always conduct my business to the letter of the law. Always.

“Unfortunately, the report didn’t turn up anything useful.” She shakes her head. “I deal with developers who are determined to do whatever it takes to get their projects approved. Call me cynical if you like, but it pays to be cautious.”

“That must have been a letdown,” I empathize, imagining how I would feel in her place.

Peyton heaves a sigh. She’s convinced that her actions are justified, and her frustration is breaking my heart.

“Can you believe I had this whole scenario in my head for how I would storm into the office and confront the boss?” She glances at me with the cutest grin on her face. “I even rehearsed a speech.”

“Bold move,” I say, shaking my head with admiration. “What happened?”

I would remember her if I’d seen her, but I must have been out. I’d give my right arm to see her cute little ass swish through the office.

“Mr. Regis wasn’t in the office.” Eyes blazing, she adds air quotes around my name. “At first, I thought the staff was covering for him. They wouldn’t even tell me his name!”

We follow strict protocols to ensure anonymity, but from Peyton’s perspective, it sounds ridiculous. I tilt my head, lifting my brows.

“Pompous ass, right?” She laughs. “No matter what, I kept asking, but everyone in that office was just so damn nice.”

She curls her shoulders inwards in fury. Sweet Peyton. She's trying so hard.

What the actual hell? I'm falling for this woman. What happens when she works out that I'm the big bad wolf? I'm so fucked.

"What happens now? If they have all the right permits, you can't legally hold up the project," I surmise.

"I can't stop them, but I have the right to voice my opinion," she says with determination. "You don't get a free pass to do what you want just because you have deep pockets."

Ouch.

Although I admire her boldness, I'm concerned about the amount of risk she's taking. A coastal town like Bailey's Cove, situated between pristine forests and the new airport, will attract developers looking for opportunities.

I am not a threat to her, but there are plenty of shady operators around. Who knows what could happen if she pulls another stunt like this with someone dodgy developer?

I can't let her put herself in danger.

There's a slight chill in the air now that the sun has dipped below the horizon. The chorus of chirping crickets grows louder.

"If you're up for it, why don't we wander into town and grab something to eat?" I help her to her feet.

I take her warm, small hand, and she wraps her fingers around mine, using the other hand to brush the dirt off her skirt.

"Sure thing. We should get out of here before someone sees us," she says with a dazzling smile.

"It's all good. Don't worry."

No one will find us. I can't tell Peyton why I'm so sure—it would reveal too much. But it looks like she's agreed to dinner with me, and I'm not losing this chance to get to know her better.

"I've taken enough risks for one day," she says.

No, you haven't, kitten. Not by a long shot.

HANDS UP

Peyton

The gravel road crunches and tires squeak behind us. Twisting over my shoulder to take a look, my throat constricts when I realize it's a patrol car.

"We're in so much trouble." My voice warbles, my throat is tight, and my mouth is dry.

"Don't worry," Jude says as he steps forward, blocking my body with his. "Tuck in behind me and let me handle it."

The officer scowls, his mouth set into a thin line. His gaze shifts suspiciously between Jude and me. "What do you think you're doing?" he barks. "You're trespassing on private property."

Jude squares his shoulders. Both men are an even height, and Jude looks him directly in the eyes.

"We're not trespassing, Officer Hart," he says after glancing at the badge on the man's broad chest. He holds his hands up in a peaceful gesture. "We know the owners."

"Sure you do," he says.

No! Why did he say that? Crap. We'll be in even bigger trouble.

I jab Jude in the back, but he turns sideways, pulls me forward, and curls his arm tightly around my waist, holding me in place.

"We didn't do anything." I smile sweetly at the officer, but he responds with a hostile glare.

"We're sorry, and there was no damage done," Jude says earnestly, shaking his head.

The officer takes a menacing step forward. "Come with me," he growls. He turns to Jude. "I'm arresting you for trespassing."

A chill runs down my spine, and my knees almost buckle. I'm only standing now because of all the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"Officer, would it be possible to speak with you alone? There's been a misunderstanding."

The glare from the car's headlights slices across Jude's face, sharpening his chiseled features. He looks as though he's carved from marble.

The officer shifts his stance and swings his head, taking us in, then growls, "Follow me."

Jude turns to me with his jaw clenched so tight that a muscle pops beneath the skin. His eyes plead with me to trust him.

"Will you be okay waiting here? I won't be long." Biting my lip, I dip my face in a nod. He senses my apprehension because he takes my hand and twines our fingers together.

"I'll be fine." There's nothing more I can say with a policeman standing a few feet away.

The last time I had been in any kind of trouble, I relied solely on my family for help. As I stare into Jude's deep brown eyes, something in his gaze makes me feel like I can trust him. The set of his jaw shows determination, and I'm not sure why, but I feel it in my bones—I trust his ability to make things right.

Jude carefully holds up his hands again, then follows the officer to the police cruiser. The men stand in the glare of the headlights, so I can't see what they're doing.

A short while later, they return.

"I'm taking you to the station," the officer says.

"Why is he taking us to the station?" I ask, glancing at Jude. My heart races.

"It'll be okay, Peyton," Jude says, his voice low and reassuring. "You won't get into any trouble. Just do what he says, and we'll sort everything out when we get to the station."

"You two quit talking and get in the van," the officer barks as he retrieves the key from his pocket. He unlocks the back of the cruiser, and the van door squeaks. We climb inside, and the policeman pulls the door shut with a resounding thud, locking it firmly.

The metal walls of the police van feel as if they're closing in around me. I wrap my arms around myself and tip my head back. It lands with a thud.

Jude gives me a reassuring smile. His voice is calm yet confident when he says, "Everything will be fine, Peyton."

He looks so sure of himself, and that gives me a glimmer of hope. "Yes"—I nod solemnly—"because I'll explain what happened and that you had nothing to do with it."

I'm racked with guilt for initiating the protest, but meeting Jude was a stroke of luck. The best thing to happen out of this entire fiasco.

"You know, I thought you were going to hit the policeman at one point."

Jude looks away, his expression suddenly darker. "I didn't like the way he was looking at you." He sweeps his gaze over my body possessively as if it's the most natural thing in the world for him to want to protect me. Concern etches his features. "Are you cold?"

I nod because even though I'm not cold, I'm trembling, most likely from shock.

Jude wraps his arm around my shoulder. His solid frame and hard body provide a reassuring anchor. I lean against him, craving the assurance that I'm safe.

His chest vibrates, emitting a low rumble like a comforting purr. He gently places his large hand on top of my head, pressing his lips to my hair. "Soft as a kitten," he murmurs.

His gaze smolders. I tilt my chin, head up and part my lips in anticipation. Jude's lips caress mine in an electrifying kiss that sends shivers throughout my body. I can barely keep my knees from shaking as his strong arms wrap around me, and I'm lost in the moment, swept away by the sizzling kiss.

He caresses my curves, his touch growing urgent with each passing second. His lips brush against mine as his tongue seeks out mine. Heat rises between us, and I tremble with anticipation, wanting more.

The van stops, and we break apart. But when our eyes meet, it feels as if my heart has stopped beating.

I've finally met someone who understands me. In my eyes, he can do no wrong. God help me, but I'm falling for him. He's quickly becoming my supporter, savior, and defender. Jude is quickly becoming my everything.

THE FIXER

Jude

We arrive at the police station. Two unfamiliar officers—a man and a woman—wait for Peyton as she apprehensively steps out of the van. The officers silently escort us inside. I mouth a silent “trust me” to Peyton, who stares over her shoulder, wide-eyed, as the female officer ushers her to a waiting area. Leaving her is killing me, but I swear I will make this up to her. I’ll make everything right.

All these years, I’ve shied away from women. Yet if I’d known Peyton was out there somewhere in the world, I would’ve done anything to find her. She’s ethical, passionate, and willing to fight for what she believes in.

The report she submitted was of very high quality and more comprehensive than any other of its kind I’ve seen. She shouldn’t discount her qualifications simply because she didn’t complete college.

She’s perfect for me, but more importantly, with my resources, I can help her in ways she can’t imagine.

Regis Enterprises is a family-run business. Our grandfather and his siblings established it. Now, my dad and his brothers are running the business. My siblings, cousins, and I are the third generation of Regis employees. Everyone works for the family business except for my cousin Luca who works in the film industry.

Some of us work in property development. My cousin Chase works in the hospitality side of the business. He owns a winery and supplies our domestic and international hotels with wine and spirits.

We put our trust in the family for legal matters, and that's why Sebastian is the head of our legal team. I've met plenty of families who rip each other to shreds, but we're not like that.

Peyton doesn't know what I'm planning for Elysium. Right now, she believes it's another hotel. Lying to her makes me feel like an asshole, but before I tell her the truth, I need to prove I'm not the bogeyman she thinks I am.

Once I get the opportunity to share my vision with her, she will recognize the potential and understand how it aligns with her values. I am confident that she will eventually see the beauty and value of the project and love it as much as I do.

It'll be easier for her to hear the truth if I choose the right time to tell her. This isn't the right time. I won't do that to Peyton, and I won't give her a reason to hate me. I'm not sure how I'll fix this problem, but I *will* do it.

I'm going to burn in hell for the sneaky way I'm going about this because my reasons for concealing my identity aren't completely altruistic.

They are also carnal, but I swear I'll take care of her the way no one else can.

I follow the policeman into a small room with a metal desk and two chairs, hoping like crazy that my cousin can come through with the goods.

* * *

After explaining the situation to the people in charge, I call Seb and fill him in on what happened. By the time I'm done, Seb is laughing so hard he sounds like he's got front-row tickets to a sold-out stand-up comedy show.

"You're enjoying this. What's so fucking funny?"

"Are you kidding? You never date anyone, and when you finally meet a woman, look where you end up."

"Great," I grumble. He's beginning to irritate me. The fucker is enjoying my humiliation.

"Why aren't you laughing? It's fucking hilarious." Seb breaks into another round of laughter.

"Don't worry about the cops," he says when he eventually composes himself. "They know they can't charge you with anything."

"Yeah. About that. I feel like a jerk now the cops know I'm trying to impress a woman."

"Forget it. Regis Enterprises are making a generous donation to the local precinct. You won't get any more pushback."

"Thanks, Seb. I owe you one." I exhale slowly, running my fingers through my hair. "Any idea what to tell Peyton?"

The line is silent for a few moments, but I can hear Seb breathing on the other end.

"Seb? Are you going to help, or do I add you to the long list of people who hate me?"

"Will you shut the fuck up? I'm thinking." His voice is strained.

"Well, don't take too long." I stride across the room, my feet thudding against the carpeted floor. My heart races. I need to find Peyton.

"Listen up, dickhead. If you want a chance to get to know her, this is how I see things playing out."

Every crease in my forehead deepens as I listen to Seb's "How to Get to Know Peyton Better" plan. It seems solid but with one glaring weakness.

I take a deep breath and run my free hand through my hair. “For the plan to work, I need to keep lying.”

The problem with telling one white lie is that it quickly spirals out of control. One by one, the lies stack on top of each other like bricks in a wall, and before you know it, you’re constructing a wall of bullshit.

Seb’s voice is low and thoughtful as he weighs the options. “The cops did you a favor because now you have a believable reason to spend time together. If you tell her who you are too soon, she may react badly and never speak to you again.”

I pause for a moment before responding. I deserve a slap in the face for lying to her, but the thought of never seeing her again is too much. The scent of her hair when I kissed my sweet little kitten in the van was irresistible, and I want more. So much more.

“Seb, you’re a fucking genius.”

“Thanks. I’ll give myself a substantial Christmas bonus.” A soft chuckle echoes down the line.

“Yeah, you do that.” I can imagine the smug satisfaction on his face, but he’s worth his weight in gold.

“Jude, I know you value your integrity. This can’t be easy,” Seb says in an uncharacteristically emotional tone.

I don’t care about my honor. I just want to find Peyton and get out of here. She’s alone and probably scared. It’s up to me to find her and keep her safe.

“Okay, thanks for your help.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” He starts laughing again, and the sensitivity he showed earlier is gone.

“Laugh it up, chuckles. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Jude. Despite laughing at you, I’m not pleased with the situation. If this woman means something to you, I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“Peyton.”

“Pretty name. Hey, I’ve got to run. Uber Eats at the door.”

“What happened to your new diet?”

“It’s keto,” he says before the line goes dead.

He’s full of shit. He’s supposed to be getting healthy by watching his diet and going to the gym. Maybe he’ll change when he finally meets the right woman.

* * *

A few moments after ending the call, I’m riddled with guilt. Seb’s plan is great, but it isn’t going to work. It’s ridiculous. It’s over the top. It’s dangerous and foolish and so many other things I’ll regret.

Peyton needs a friend, not more complications. A friend... fuck.

Who am I kidding? I’m not doing this because I want to be her friend. I’m consumed with how I’m going to win her heart and can’t think of anything else.

Losing her is not an option. The misery and suffering will be unbearable. My chest tightens at the thought of never getting to know her the way I crave. Thinking about her luscious curves makes me groan. Luckily, I’m alone, so I can press my palm against my zipper to stop my body from reacting. Where Peyton is concerned, my dick has a mind of his own.

It’s a wicked, twisted thing I’m about to do, and I need to keep my shit together to make this work. All I need is the chance, and I’ll work my ass off to show her who I am.

After what feels like an eternity, an officer comes into the room and tells me I can leave. It’s time to find Peyton and face the music.

Peyton’s hunched shoulders and ashen skin tug violently at my heartstrings. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and any hesitation I harbored about whether I’m doing the right thing vanishes.

I’m strong enough to do what needs to be done. Strong enough for both of us.

FLY HOME, JAILBIRD

Peyton

I slump on the cold, hard bench with a sigh and stare at the wall covered in faded posters of police officers and motivational quotes.

The gravity of the situation becomes clear under the harsh fluorescent lighting. I can't help feeling sorry for myself even though I know I'm responsible. If I could turn back the clock, I would do things differently.

I was foolish to ignore that getting in trouble with the law was a real possibility. The smart thing would have been to drive home, and look at where I am now. How embarrassing.

The list of consequences is so long that I don't even want to think about it, but I can't stop myself. Firstly, any negative publicity will hurt the cause. Secondly, how will I explain the situation to my boss?

Having a criminal record means that the management of Regis Enterprises won't take me seriously. No one will take me seriously.

My parents will kill me. My older brothers will never let me live this down, and my boss will likely fire me. My girlfriends from the book club will stand by me, but instead of sharing my triumph, they'll be commiserating my shame.

Squinting in the bright light, I close my eyes against the harsh glare, hug myself tightly, and pretend it's Jude's embrace surrounding me.

Lost in my thoughts, I imagine Jude near me, and memories come flooding back. The way his long, thick fingers traced my curves, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Even his breath on my neck caused a spark of electricity in my body. My pulse quickens in anticipation of what's to come.

When I was in Jude's arms, I wanted the moment to last forever, but it ended too soon. The anticipation of not knowing what will happen next is agonizing. Time drags on excruciatingly slowly.

The thud of boots on the wooden floor grows louder, jolting me out of my imagination and back to the present moment. My eyes snap open, and I sit upright. Jude is standing beside a police officer, his chin raised ever so slightly—looking mighty proud of himself.

"You're both free to go," the officer says, his deep voice reverberating through the room.

Relieved, I push to my feet. "But how? What happened?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Let's go," Jude says. He holds out his hand, which I grasp tightly. "I'll tell you everything as soon as we get outside."

"The place gives me the creeps," I say as we stride past the intimidating front desk staffed by a uniformed police officer. "The sooner we can get out of here, the better."

The last thing I hear before we leave is an officer talking on the radio. Finally, we're outside, and I can breathe again.

* * *

I gaze at Jude with admiration as he explains the deal he made with the prosecutor. The guy owes him a favor, and he called it

in to help get us out of trouble.

“Twenty hours of community service? You’re brilliant. You were hiding an ace up your sleeve the whole time!” I exclaim, thrilled by Jude’s revelation.

It suddenly becomes clear why he’s been so calm, asking me to trust him and telling me everything would turn out fine.

“The prosecutor suggested that we help with reforestation. The punishment fits, don’t you think?” Jude asks as his deep brown eyes study me.

“That’s a pretty light sentence, don’t you think? And reforestation isn’t the worst thing in the world.” Relieved, I run a hand through my hair.

“It’ll be an adventure. We can make a picnic out of it and have fun while we work,” he says, brown eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Now you’re really trying to sell it.” I laugh, shaking my head in amusement.

“Think of how much better the world will be when we’re done. And who knows, maybe we’ll see some cute furry animals.” His lips quirk in a playful smile.

“You just want to get close to the wildlife,” I say, my gaze fixed on his.

“Exactly. Maybe we’ll find a little hideaway in the woods for some alone time.” His voice is low and full of promise.

“Ah, so that’s your real agenda,” I say, feeling my face flush.

His eyes glimmer with pride, and his lips curve into a satisfied grin. Overwhelmed by gratitude, I throw my arms around his neck and hug him. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds me tight. Being together feels so natural. Our breathing slows, and it feels like he’s a part of me.

We eventually pull away, gazing into each other’s souls. A swarm of butterflies flutters in my stomach. Jude inches closer until, finally, he leans in and kisses me. We kiss until we’re breathless. I lose track of time until a car horn blares, and I startle.

“That’s our ride,” Jude says.

One step ahead of me, as always, he’s thought of everything. Jude leads me to the Uber, opens the door, and I slide in. Then he races to the other side, smiling as he sits beside me. I’m so relieved when the driver finally pulls away from the curb.

Jude

I slide in next to Peyton in the backseat. The Uber is a hatchback. It’s cramped, and my thigh presses against hers. She doesn’t pull away, so I take her hand and intertwine our fingers.

The car weaves away from the police station, down a narrow country road heading back to the Halcyon Resort, where we left our cars parked earlier.

Electricity thrums between us. It’s so powerful that it takes my breath away, but I know what I’m doing. Everything is under control.

* * *

As I instructed, the driver takes us to the building site and pulls up beside Peyton’s car. I help her get out, and she stands with me, her hand in mine as we watch the Uber drive away.

“Thank you,” she says. “For everything.”

We gaze at each other, but neither of us says anything. Her hand stays firmly in mine. I curl my fingers around her wrist, and her pulse flutters beneath my fingertips.

Her lips part as she looks at me, her eyes full of questions. Something powerful binds us, something bigger than any dream I could have for myself. I realize Elysium will be a sweeter victory if I have someone to share it with. Someone who believes in it as much as I do, and she is standing in front of me.

The overwhelming desire to kiss her urges me closer. I want to taste her sweet lips.

Ah, fuck. Who am I kidding?

I don't want her to go. I'd rather take her home and love her until the sun rises, and even then, it won't be enough to satisfy my need.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. We never got a chance to eat anything, but now it's late.

"I'm ravenous," she murmurs. The sultry look on her face tells me food won't satisfy her need.

She reaches up and cups my face, pulling me toward her even though I'm already moving in for the kiss. Our lips meet, and instantly, the fire is lit, only this time, it blazes out of control.

I pin her against the car door, my hands on either side of her shoulders, keeping her there. She grips my hips, pulling me closer, and the close contact sends a thrill of desire straight to my balls.

Her hair skims my cheek, and then I'm drowning in the scent of her perfume. Drowning in the sound of her tiny sigh.

"Where do you want to go?" I ask. "Your place or mine?" I keep my eyes on her to make sure I didn't read her signals wrong and mess everything up.

"Why wait?" Peyton clasps my shirt. I take a step back, and she dives into her purse, searching for her keys. She presses the button on the fob, and the car unlocks with a beep.

"Here? At the scene of the crime?" I ask, loving how sassy and bold she is.

Arching an eyebrow, she smiles seductively, and a broad grin splits my face.

"Why not? Let's celebrate our freedom," she says before sliding into the backseat. I slip in beside her, and she gives me a mischievous smirk. "Hey, wouldn't it be funny if—"

"Shh," I say, placing a fingertip on her lips. "Don't say it." I don't want to be charged by the cops for public lewdness. Not

even The Fixer can get us out of that misdemeanor. “But I love your exhibitionist streak,” I murmur in her ear as she slides onto my lap.

She smiles sinfully, the corners of her mouth turning up.

My hands roam over her luscious curves, caressing her everywhere. It’s just the two of us in the backseat of the car. Inky darkness shields us from prying eyes. Being with Peyton, wherever we may be, is the most natural thing in the world.

The desire in her eyes makes me so hard. She hikes up her skirt, revealing her sleek, strong thighs. I lower my body in the seat so her head doesn’t meet the top of the car, allowing her to ease onto me. She dips her face, and our lips lock in a passionate kiss.

A burning curiosity to understand her on a deeper level floods me, but when she starts rolling her hips and grinding against me, I forget everything. All I can focus on is the way her movements make me feel.

We kiss until we’re breathless. The slow burn is freaking delicious, but she’s driving me out of my mind with desire. If we keep messing around, there will be no going back, and if she’s changed her mind, now is the time to stop.

“Are you sure you want this? It’s not too late to stop.” I search her face for any sign of hesitation.

I need to hear that she wants this and isn’t getting swept away in the heat of the moment.

She tilts her chin, an earnest look in her eyes. “I want this. I want you.”

A wave of relief washes over me, but my mouth twitches in anticipation. “Good. Because there are a thousand filthy things I want to do with you, and I plan on taking my time.”

She meets my gaze, a playful smirk on her lips. “Do you have a condom?”

I freeze. Why would I carry condoms?

“Shit. No, I don’t,” I say, watching her reaction closely. “We can stop, but if you want to keep going I’ll make you come in

other ways.”

“Uh-huh.” She looks at me expectantly.

“I’ll give you as many orgasms as you want, however you want them.”

“I’m on the pill,” she says. So this is her way of giving consent, but I can add more reassurance.

“I don’t date, but I was tested a few years ago with clear results,” I say.

Peyton scoots her hips back to make room for her hand. She tugs at the zipper on my pants, working it loose before thrusting a hand into my boxes. She confidently grips my cock, stroking from root to tip.

I dig my fingers into her thigh and surrender. I’m at her mercy. Ready and willing to do her bidding.

Sitting on top, with her thighs wrapped around mine, she squeezes her legs together, letting me know who’s in charge.

Peyton’s slightly upturned, luminous green eyes sparkle, and she shudders as she splays her legs wider, giving me access to her pussy.

Her delicate, kittenish purr drives me wild. “Kitten, you’re so wet.”

Fuck. I’m addicted, and I’ll do anything she wants. Because without her, I’ll never be the same again.

HUNGRY

Peyton

Tonight is full of surprises, and they keep coming, one after the other. Everything about this situation is crazy. Even the way I met Jude is crazy, but just because I've never done anything like this before doesn't mean it's wrong.

I've accidentally stumbled my way into something incredible. Something I want more of.

The minute we're inside the car, he kisses me. It's not slow or gentle. No, it's pure, carnal lust. Jude pulls his lips from mine, dips his face to my neck, and kisses my skin until he finds the spot that makes me swoon.

Wow, and wow.

Love at first sight is real. I've read about it and always wanted to believe it was possible. But it's never happened to me. Until now.

My heart pounds as he holds my hips, guiding me as I straddle him, dragging his gaze to my splayed legs. "Look at you, all turned on for me."

I can tell he's struggling to keep his composure. I love how he licks his lips, not taking his eyes off me. He spreads me wide open and lines himself up with my entrance.

At the slightest touch, I moan with pleasure.

"Please." *Touch me. Don't make me beg.*

"Please, what? What do you need?" His hands run up my thighs, eliciting a deep moan from my throat.

"I need you." I whimper, my heart pounding.

"What do you need? Say it?" His voice is ragged and demanding.

"I need you inside me." I am breathless with exhilaration.

"My hand? My mouth?" His hand skims down to my ass, squeezing my flesh.

"Your cock, Jude. Just fuck me, will you?"

"Is this what you need?" he teases, rubbing the flared head over the seam of my pussy.

I place my hands on his shoulders to brace myself before slowly lowering. I'm already slick, and he slides inside.

"You feel so good," he growls. His eyes blaze. His needy, animalistic expression makes me feel like a goddess.

My back arches as my body adjusts to his girth. It's true. We fit perfectly.

There's no need to put sensible limits on what we're doing. The experience refuses to be placed inside a neat little box.

I'm not going to lie and tell myself I'm being swept up in the heat of the moment. Or that my senses are heightened because I'm being young and irresponsible. I know exactly what I'm doing. I crave Jude and want this to happen more than anything else. Being with Jude is pure bliss and feels like the most natural thing in the world.

"You're something else," he whispers in a reverent tone, cupping my breasts.

He traces circles around my nipples. His touch feels so good. I gasp when he tugs my nipples, as waves of pleasure ripple through my body.

“You like that, don’t you?” he asks, his voice husky.

“So good,” I murmur. My core floods, and I rock my hips.

His eyes blaze, and his expression becomes needy and animalistic. He’s hot. Hotter than hot.

For once, I’m not in my head, analyzing. I’m not thinking about anything except giving my shoulders a little shake and making my tits bounce for his pleasure.

He takes a nipple in his mouth, his long pulls are almost painful. I grind down harder, giving myself to him completely, arching my back, loving how his hands pinch and pull at my sensitive skin.

He cups my face tenderly. As we kiss, our tongues dance, and we grind our hips in unison, fucking slow and deep.

My cheeks flame when I look down at where our bodies are joined.

A slow smile of satisfaction spreads across his handsome face. “Dirty girl,” he growls.

Yes. Wanton and wild. “I thought I was your kitten,” I tease.

His burning look makes me hotter and wetter than I ever imagined. “Dirty little kitty cat,” he says.

I thread my fingers through his hair and give a sharp tug. “I love the way that sounds.”

Jude shifts his hand, placing it around my throat, and tightens his grip. “My kitty is a wildcat,” he growls. He’s so possessive, and it’s so hot.

Our lovemaking grows frantic. It’s fast and intense. He digs his fingers into my hips, and I claw his skin, raking my nails down his shoulders.

“That’s it,” he groans. “Ride me. Use me. I’m yours.”

Pleasure coils inside me as the pressure grows brighter, hotter, and tighter. “Harder,” I moan. “I’m close.”

He grips my hips, holding me in place while he punches his hips upward. His length fills me as he thrusts in and out. His thrusts grow stronger. Bolder. Rolling my hips, I match his rhythm, giving myself to him with complete commitment.

“I want to feel you come on my cock. Squeeze me with your hot little pussy, dirty girl.”

His filthy words make me cry out as an orgasm body bursts through my body. I press my mouth to his and shatter.

Unable to hold back, Jude comes with a roar, digging his fingers into my ass as he erupts.

I sag forward, resting my forehead against his while the aftershocks of my orgasm ripple through me. My body shudders until I’m limp. Boneless.

Tonight, I’m nobody’s daughter, sister, or friend. I’m simply me asking for what I want and sinking into a pleasure I’ve only ever dreamed of.

I’ll never forget this night. I’m going to keep the memories close, even if it’s a one-night thing. Taking the risk is worth it, even if I end up with a broken heart.

Jude

I could stay with Peyton forever, but the backseat of the car is cramped. After cleaning her up, I help her back into her panties and smooth down her skirt.

She already told me she has no one to race home for. There’s no boyfriend or husband.

Correction. She doesn’t think she has anyone taking care of her, but she’s mistaken because now she has me. And I’m not

letting her go. I don't like knowing she lives alone, but I'm being a greedy prick by wanting to keep her longer.

Peyton tries to slip off my lap, giggling when I grip her hips and won't let go.

"What's the rush?" I ask.

"It's getting late and tomorrow is a work day. I better get going."

She's right. It's late, and tomorrow is a workday, but I'm not ready to let her go. "Stay a while."

"A little while longer," she says as she snuggles into me. I thread my arms around her waist, loving how she gives me her weight so trustingly. I'd be a happy man if she stayed in my arms forever.

"Peyton."

"Yes?"

She twists and glances over her shoulder, and the sudden movement causes her hair to tickle my nose. I sneeze, and she scoots off my lap, laughing so hard that I can't help laughing as well.

"What were you going to say?" she asks when our laughter dies down.

As we step out of the car, I pull my phone from my back pocket and give it to her. "Can you key in your number?"

"Sure." She inputs her number. "It's under K."

She gives me the phone, and there's an unmistakable twinkle in her eye. "Got it."

Sure enough, she's put her number in under K for Kitten. Not Wildcat or Dirty girl, but Kitten. Whatever name I give her doesn't matter because one day soon, she'll be in my phone under M for Mine.

"I sent you mine," I say.

Her brows draw together, but not even a frown can detract from her beauty. Her hair is mussed, and her beautiful face is

flushed. She looks beautifully ravished.

Peyton shifts her gaze to the phone, her slender fingers tracing the edge of the device before she presses a button on the side. A faint blue light illuminates her face.

“It works.” She lets out a long breath, her expression a mix of relief and anticipation.

“Go ahead, check your messages,” I say, aware that I know nothing about her life. She may be anxious to contact someone.

She taps a message at lightning speed with her thumbs. “How do you do that? It takes me ages, and I only use my pointer finger.”

We lock eyes. The age difference between us is apparent. “You only need one finger.” She says with a mischievous wink before dropping her gaze to her phone again.

Tension radiates off her as her fingers scroll across the screen. The smile drops from her lips and she inhales sharply. “Finn,” she says.

The sound of another man’s name on her lips sends a surge of jealousy through me. My fists clench in an effort to keep my emotions in check. “Who the fuck is Finn?” I growl.

Peyton’s gaze snaps to mine. She takes in my clenched jaw, flared nostrils and narrowed gaze before allowing a slow smile of satisfaction to spread across her face.

“My brother,” she answers lightly, amusement in her voice.

“Sorry,” I mumble, quickly regaining control of myself. I don’t want to scare her away with my possessive outburst. “Is something wrong?” I ask.

She glances up from her phone. “Jude, when did the prosecutor say we need to start our community service hours?” she asks, her voice taking on a serious tone.

“The dates are open, but we need to finish up within the month,” I reply.

She looks up at the sky, where the stars twinkle like a blanket of diamonds. “Do you want to work together?” Her gaze returns to me, and there’s a hint of hesitation in her eyes.

I wrap my arm over her shoulders and pull her close. “Try and stop me.”

“I’m available on the weekend,” she says as she softens in my arms.

Soothing her fear—the fear I’m responsible for—makes me feel like even more of a jerk. This is going to be traumatic, and I don’t know if I can see it through. “Do you need a ride home?”

We haven’t discussed our backgrounds much. She’ll probably be surprised when she sees the Bugatti. If I have to come clean to keep her safe, I’ll do it.

Peyton shakes her head. “I can drive myself home. You don’t need to keep coming to my rescue.”

Her body language becomes guarded, and I detect a distance growing between us.

“What if I want to?”

Her eyes flash. “Thanks, Jude. But I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Of course you are. That isn’t what I meant.”

“Sorry. I overreacted.” She hangs her head, embarrassment clear in the way her shoulders stoop. But there’s no need for her to feel bad.

I tilt her chin, and she meets my eyes. “No one will find out. And you should be proud of yourself.”

She scoffs. “Only you would say that. If my brothers found out, especially my big brother?” She shakes her head and blows out a breath. It looks like she doesn’t want to disappoint them.

“Are they all older than you?” I ask, and she nods. “Are they bossy and overprotective?”

“How do you know? Do you know them?”

I shake my head because how could I know her brothers when I only met her tonight? “I have a younger sister, and she’d tell you I have a bad habit of interfering in her life and telling her what to do.”

She rolls her eyes, but a smile tugs at her lips. “Well, my brothers are the kind of people you don’t want to mess with.”

Alarm bells go off in my brain. “Why? Are they criminals?”

Peyton chuckles. “Nothing like that. My brothers are all ex-military, although two of them work together these days in a high-level security company. They won’t reveal their secrets, but they have some high-powered clients.” The pride in her voice is unmistakable.

“Your brothers sound tough, but if they mess with you, they’re going to have to deal with me. I’m highly trained, you know.”

I start ducking and weaving, showing off my boxing moves, but laugh at how ridiculous I look.

“Oh god, another alpha macho man,” she groans, rolling her eyes. “As if there weren’t enough of you in my life, always trying to rescue me.”

She included me in her inner circle. My heart swells. So does something else, but we can’t go there again tonight.

“Come here,” I growl, drawing her into my embrace for one more kiss. Peyton is struggling with wanting to be independent and wanting to be taken care of.

I need to watch out for it. It’s a line I don’t want to cross if I want to make her happy.

She steps away from me, so I take her hand gently and open the car door for her. Peyton gets into the driver’s seat and turns the key in the ignition. “I still feel embarrassed,” she says.

“Why?”

“My last name may be Knight, but you’re the one doing all the rescuing. You saved me twice.”

My heart almost stops beating. Brothers? She’s a Knight? I didn’t know the Knights had a sister, and I’ve got my hands all

over her.

Her gaze bores into me, questioning my sudden shift of emotions. “Jude, are you alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Her voice is soft, concerned.

“I’m fine,” I say, with a false smile as I try to calm my raging emotions. “I’ll call you later.” I wave as she drives away. A hollow feeling settles in the pit of my stomach and all that’s left is a desperate desire to be with her and never let her go.

Hell, nothing matters now except her. Business, family friendships, all of it. I’ll burn it all to the ground before I lose Peyton.

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Peyton

It's been three days since "the incident." I've been waiting for someone to rake me over the coals, but not one person has mentioned it.

It's been business as usual in the office, so I assume everything is back to normal. That is, except for Jude, who messages me every day. Anticipation builds inside me because tomorrow is Saturday, and we'll spend the day together doing our first community service session.

I'm beginning to think I might have gotten away with it, and everything moving forward will be plain sailing. Jude is flirty and fun, and I get butterflies whenever he calls me Kitten.

I'm standing in my kitchen making dinner for one when the phone buzzes. Jude has been messaging me all day. In his previous message, he said he'd text the address where we're meeting in the morning. A short time later, when my phone buzzes, I answer, thinking it's Jude.

"Hi," I purr without checking the screen.

"Peyton." It's Finn. His icy tone startles me.

“Oh.” I gasp when the knife in my hand clatters onto the counter.

“My friend from the Rileys Ridge police station called.” A couple of seconds pass before he continues, and in that time, my insides turn to ice. My brother knows.

“He asked if I had a sister, then told me an interesting story. At first, I didn’t believe him and argued he must be mistaken. There’s no way my sister would do anything illegal.” There’s a “but” coming. I can feel it. Why does having a bossy older brother feel like having two dads?

“A-ha, yep, go on.” There is no point in confirming or denying anything until I’ve heard what he has to say.

“But... Last night, Keana found photos of you climbing a tree on her camera roll.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. When I visited Finn a few weeks ago, I linked my account to my sister-in-law’s so we could airdrop photos, and I completely forgot to unlink myself afterwards.

“Ah, yeah. About that.” I groan and switch off the cooktop before I burn dinner and end up eating toast.

“My friend said you were with a man that night at the station.” My brother’s voice is muffled on the phone, like he’s trying to keep his voice quiet. I can hear the rustle of paper and pens.

“Yeah, Jude. He helped me out.”

“Tell me exactly what happened from the moment you met. Don’t leave out any details.”

Taking a deep breath, I fill him in on my tree-climbing adventures. I give Finn the PG version of events, leaving out the details of what happened between us in the car later. He can’t see me blush, but he’ll hear it in my voice. It’s none of his business, so it’s better if I avoid mentioning it at all.

“And now we’re doing community service together starting tomorrow.” *Why is he asking me about this?* “He was—” I was about to say nice, but Finn cuts me off.

“So, you like him, huh?”

“He was so nice to me, Finn, and yes, I do, but I don’t understand why you’re asking.” Finn doesn’t say a word. “Finn? Are you still there?” I ask, thinking he might have hung up.

“I’m here. I’m sorry you got into trouble. I bet it was terrifying,” he says. His tone is softer, which honestly frightens me more than if he lost his cool and started spitting fire.

“It’s an important cause, and—”

“Peyton.” He cuts me off abruptly. Finn never talks over the top of me, so whatever he has to say must be serious. My stomach flips.

“What?” I hate the hesitation in my voice, and it worries me.

“Because the place you are protesting belongs to my boss.”

Smoke begins to blow out of my ears as the reason for his call becomes clear. Me acting on my convictions is affecting my brother’s business.

“I didn’t know you worked for Regis Enterprises because you’re so damn secretive. You never tell me anything, yet now you’re calling to tell me off?” I glare at the phone, then start rubbing a spot of oily mess on the kitchen counter with a dishcloth.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” he says. “I’m looking out for you.”

I’m being unreasonable but I’m frustrated beyond belief. Finn knows I want to join his company, Camelot Security, but he won’t let me because he says it’s too dangerous. I love him, but I wish he’d stop trying to run my life from the sidelines.

“I’m doing the best I can,” I say, choked up and teary.

“Of course you are, sis. You better sit down because I need to tell you something. It’s about Jude.”

I’m anxious, but I try to keep things light. “Sure thing. So how do you know Jude?”

My brother knows loads of people through his work. I realize that in all the text conversations we've had over the past few days, he never mentioned his job. Maybe Jude worked for him? It would explain all the secrecy.

"Jude Regis is my boss."

"Huh?" I cough, choke, hiccup, and snot flies out of my nose. Jude Regis?

"Are you okay?" Finn asks, concerned.

"Jude lied?" My head is spinning. I'm so confused. The man I gave my body to was kind, and what Finn is saying doesn't mesh with the man I met.

"He did. It's been bugging me, and I was ready to pay him a visit but Logan talked me out of it," he says, referring to our brother who also works for Camelot Security.

My hands curl into fists, and I grit my teeth. "Why didn't he tell the cop who he was? He was the person with legal authority to press charges."

"My guess is, when the cop arrived, you were freaking out. If he'd shown the officer his ID, you would've flipped him the bird and stormed away. Am I right?"

"Yes, you are." I shake my head, unable to believe what I'm hearing.

My cheeks burn as I recall the terrifying ride to the station in the back of the cruiser. How grateful I was for Jude's calming presence and how he provided a sense of security despite the uncomfortable situation.

"Fuck." Finn blows out a big breath. "I understand how bad it looks, Peyton. But after hearing your side, I believe he made a mistake. Jude is a great person."

"At the police station, he told me the prosecutor owed him a favor." I shake my head in disbelief at the lengths he went to.

"I'll remember that. It's a good one." Finn chuckles to himself before remembering I'm roasting in my skin on the other end of the line. "Sounds to me like he concocted a story about

helping you out of a jam so he could spend more time with you.”

“Isn’t all this a bit extreme?” I ask.

“Absolutely. My best guess is that he’s crazy about you. You like him, right?”

“I do. I mean, I did.” I stumble over my answer because I’m not sure anymore. I thought Jude was awesome, but he’s a liar. “Why are you defending him?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you any of this because it’s confidential, but you need to hear it.”

A shiver of excitement runs up my spine, but my heart is locked in a battle with my head. I need more information. “I’m dying here. Can you just spit it out?”

Finn tells me that he and Keana are helping out Jude with his Elysium endeavor, which his family is opposed to because of the high cost and potential lack of financial return.

Jude has taken cues from the most advanced green projects in Northern Europe to design the resort. Elysium’s positive environmental influence will become an instructive example for students, engineers, and many other professions across the globe.

By the time Finn winds up the story, I feel genuinely sorry for Jude. He’s a maverick, ahead of his time, but nobody has confidence in him. He presumes I don’t, either.

“That explains why I couldn’t dig up any dirt on the project,” I muse.

“You won’t,” Finn says. “He’s straight up.”

“Except that he lied to me,” I state.

“Now you understand why. He’s a good guy and deceiving you won’t be easy for him.” Finn speaks softly.

His description of Jude is goddamn adorable. This situation has taken an unexpected turn. It’s complicated, and I’m left with a dilemma. When I don’t answer immediately, he asks, “What do you think?”

My heart speeds up, and a warm feeling of hope begins building in my heart. Maybe the situation isn't as bad as I thought. "I think the whole situation is nuts, but I'm grateful you told me."

"Good. I shouldn't have interfered, but you're my little sis, and I love you."

"Stop it. You're making me feel weird."

He chuckles. "Call me whenever you want, but remember everything I shared with you is a secret. So it will be interesting to see how Jude plays this."

"You mean when he decides to tell me the truth?"

"Exactly. Remember all the hours you whined when I was teaching you how to play chess?"

"Yeah." I laugh, but the irony of learning strategy isn't lost on me.

I'm playing in the big league now, and every move matters. Especially when it comes to matters of the heart. And when I think about the lengths Jude's gone to just to get a date with me, I blush.

"Don't you see? This situation gives you a fast and certain method to find out what he's made of."

My mood lightens because Finn's right. My overprotective brother is saving me months of getting-to-know-you time. Dozens of dates I don't need to go on to figure out if Jude is an asshole.

I'm already hooked on the man, but if we were dating for longer? My heart would shatter. Finn came through for me when it mattered most by protecting my heart.

"Sis, you're firmly in the driver's seat. It's up to you how to play the next move."

"Leave it to me, Finn. I'll figure it out."

"I'm here for you, always as your brother first. If Jude hurts you, you come to me. You got that?"

“Thank you, I will.” If the age difference were a problem, Finn would’ve said something.

If it doesn’t matter to him, he’ll back me up if Dad has difficulty with it. Realizing I have Finn’s support means the world to me, yet I have a ton of reasoning and strategizing to do before seeing Jude in the morning.

“You’ve got this, and remember we all love you. Call me if you need anything,” he says before hanging up.

What an adventure!

BIRDS & BEES

Peyton

I arrive at the location we agreed on five minutes early, but Jude has beaten me to it. He's pacing the parking lot with the phone glued to his ear. I thought I'd committed everything about him to memory, but seeing him in full daylight stuns me.

His thick hair is darker than I remember, and a sharp, chiseled jawline makes him look intimidating. He is taller than I remember, too. A white t-shirt stretches across his broad shoulders. Jeans hug his muscular thighs, and when I look at his ass... my core floods.

Thinking I could control my reactions when I'm around Jude was a mistake because the moment I lay eyes on him, I'm a goner.

I press the heels of my palms against my eyes to stop the image of delectable sexiness from burning my retinas. I'm sure there are a lot of sexy men out there in the world, but none of them have my attention. Jude takes the prize. My body, soul, and heart belong to him. If only I can hold my nerve for a little longer.

His gaze locks on mine when he sees me step out of my car. He takes long, confident strides to meet me. His bright blue eyes smolder with desire.

Electricity zings through my body as Jude ghosts his knuckles along my forearm. He's not touching anything more than the fine hairs on my arm, but his closeness makes me shiver.

"Kitten," he growls in a scratchy, warm voice that stirs desire, causing my thoughts to derail.

"Jude." My smile drops, and I suck in a breath when he wraps his fingers around my wrist.

It's swift and firm, and his body heat sears me. Is he going to kiss me? I'm torn between pulling back or leaning in. My traitorous body blazes with tension and lust.

Surrender or fight? How the hell will I hold my nerve when I know the pleasure he's capable of giving?

He rakes his gaze over my face. "Are you ready?"

He cups my jaw and slides his mouth over mine before I have a chance to ask *ready for what?* At the same time, he grips my hips and presses our bodies together. I exhale a moan into the kiss.

Gah! This man! I'm seriously screwed.

We break apart, and this time he asks, "Are you ready to get to work now?"

I dip my head in a nod. "Ready as I'll ever be." One more kiss and touch like that will lead to distraction, and we won't be picking up any trash.

"I've got all the gear we need in my car. Follow me," he says.

I slip my keys into my pocket and pull the visor of my cap low over my eyes as I trudge behind him. Jude stops at an old Land Cruiser with dents and scratches in the paintwork and opens the trunk. He's well-equipped with everything we need: heavy-duty garbage bags, gardening gloves, and a couple of tubs from the trunk.

Okay, then. We really are doing clean-up duty!

“You’ve thought of everything,” I say.

“Sure have.” He grins and flips the lid on a wicker picnic basket packed full of mouth-watering food.

“Ooh.” I shiver with excitement. “It’s like a date, except with excruciating punishment before we get to the good parts.”

He barks out a laugh. “We’ll get to the good parts, but for now, I’m happy to be here with you, doing something that matters.”

We begin walking, keeping our eyes on the ground as we collect items we find and place them into the trash bags. We talk as we walk and work. Before long, we’re both sweating from exertion.

My muscles ache, and I need a break. We stop in a clearing, and Jude pulls out a couple of bottles of cold water.

“I wish more people would do this work on a regular basis,” I say, taking a sip of water. “Then it would never build up as much.”

“True, but not everyone is as passionate about conservation as you are.”

“You mean as *we* are.” We’re on this adventure together. “Although, I’d love to do more for the environment than this.” I rattle the garbage bag for emphasis.

His eyes flash with amusement, and he shakes his head. “Anything we can do at any level helps.”

Our eyes connect, and I sense an opportunity for him to say something more, something deeper about why we’re here.

He has so many layers, and I can’t wait to explore them all. But I need to know how long it will take before he comes clean. Will it be hours? Weeks?

Jude looks away, gazing at a bush where birds are angrily chirping.

“Where are you going?”

“Something’s wrong. I’m going to investigate.” As he approaches the clump of bushes, the chirping grows louder.

He crouches low to the ground. Parting the thick, leafy branches, he pokes his head through the bush. The chirping becomes shrieking.

“What are you doing?” I can’t get close to him because the birds are swooping, attacking with their beaks and talons.

Jude steps forward, his body a barrier to the angry flock swooping and circling overhead. His forearms are covered with bloody scratches. I want to reach out to him and help, but I can’t get near him. My attention quickly shifts to his hands, where he’s holding a tiny baby bird. It’s fragile and doesn’t have feathers.

“It must’ve fallen out of its nest,” Jude says, holding it carefully. “It’s too weak to return to the nest without help.”

Jude stands his ground as he searches for the nest. He shields the bird from the relentless onslaught of the angry birds above. His grip stays firm around the small creature in his hands, chirping a faint plea for help until he eases it back into the nest.

The birds quiet down, and Jude emerges, swatting the air around him. He slaps a hand down on his forearm and winces when he kicks over a full bag of trash. It spreads across the forest floor, and he groans.

“Oh my gosh! Are you all right?”

Jude looks up with a pained expression. He’s a mess. A beautiful perfect mess. “I’m fine. It’s only a bee sting.” He presses down on the stinging spot.

He’s more than fine. This man who saved a baby bird from being eaten by predators has stolen my heart forever.

Jude

Alarmed, Peyton races to my side. “Is it bad?”

I shake my head. The sting is swelling, but I'm not allergic, so there's no real risk. "There's ointment in the backpack. It should help the swelling."

She finds the ointment and removes the cap, squeezing a dab onto her finger. "Let me see." She inspects my arm, applying the ointment and bandages the cuts. Her touch is tender, and she takes extra care with the skin clawed at by birds. "You don't want any of these to get infected."

She wraps a bandage around my arm twice, applying pressure to soothe the stinging sensation.

Staring at her from the corner of my eye, I grin, the bee sting already forgotten. "I'll be more careful next time. I rushed in without knowing what I was dealing with."

Her dark eyes glint with amusement. "Join the club. Rushing in without thinking is my specialty."

I laugh. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You were doing what you believed was right." The ironic thing is, we wouldn't have met if she hadn't rushed to hang the sign and I hadn't rushed to defend my property.

A chance meeting brought us together, and I'm falling in love with her.

"You did such a sweet thing saving the bird," Peyton says, her gaze soft and wistful.

I wonder how much longer I can keep up this charade. I've always considered myself a strong person, but not when it comes to her.

"Why don't we break for lunch?" she suggests. "It's hot, and I'm tired."

"Sounds good."

We head to the car and grab the picnic basket and a blanket.

I take the garbage bags and tie the tops. "I'll dispose of these."

Peyton glances around us, searching for a place to set up for lunch. "There's a clearing under that tree. I'll set up, and you

can meet me when you're ready." Warmth radiates from her smile.

I empty the trash in the nearest dumpster, putting the recyclables away first. As I walk back to the car, I see Peyton setting up our picnic lunch, and a wave of emotion sweeps over me.

I'm acting like a fool and feel like such an ass. I want Peyton in my life, and I want to make her happy. She isn't mine yet, and I'm making this whole thing worse by lying.

If I don't win her trust, I'll end up with more than a broken heart. Her brothers will pay me a visit and leave me with more than bruises. Fairly deserved too.

My only defense is that being in love is making me stupid. And as if to prove my point, the moment I see her smile, I know I can't continue without confessing.

As I get closer, I see Peyton take off her shoes on the grass and shake out the blanket. When I see where she's set up camp, I break into a run. "Peyton! Stop! Don't move!"

Peyton's head whips toward me. "What? What is it?"

"Poison ivy. Right there, beside the tree. You're about to step on it."

Peyton stops dead in her tracks, her eyes widening when her gaze locks onto the telltale glossy, waxy leaves of the poison ivy plant growing at her feet. "Whoa, that would have been a disaster." She scratches her arm as if by reflex or some long-forgotten childhood memory. "I owe you one. Your eagle eyes saved me from a nasty rash."

"You don't owe me anything. I'm just trying to watch out for you." Furious with myself, I grab the rug and shake off the grass before tucking it under my arm.

"You're right. We'll find another place to sit," she says.

"Let's just get out of this forest before either of us gets into any more trouble," I answer.

Peyton reaches for the picnic basket, but I ease it from her grip. She blinks, her eyes owlsh and round. "Aren't we a

pair?" She laughs. "I don't know whether hanging out in forests with you is good or bad."

I blow out a breath. That could have been a fucking disaster, and it's all my fault. It's time to end this. "I'm sorry. I take full responsibility for this mess," I say, shaking my head. "We shouldn't have come out here in the first place. It was a mistake. Let's go."

"You mean leave? But there's still so much ground to cover. We've only worked a couple of hours," she says indignantly.

"I should have done more to protect you," I tell her.

"Hey, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. I only need help spotting poisonous plants." The grin on her face makes my heart melt.

"You're more than capable of taking care of yourself, Peyton." I heave a sigh, shifting uncomfortably and running a hand nervously through my hair. "But I'm talking about something else."

Peyton's eyes narrow as she studies my face. "What do you mean?"

"I'm the one to blame for all this, and I never meant to cause you harm." I hear the begging quality of my voice, but I'm prepared to get on my knees if that's what it will take.

"What are you talking about?" Peyton crosses her arms over her chest.

We lock eyes. I'm crazy about her, but I can't keep this up any longer. I can't lie to her and then expect her to trust me.

I haven't stopped thinking about her since the moment we met, but I thought I wasn't good enough for her. I've even considered backing off and leaving her the hell alone, but I've failed miserably.

All I wanted to do all week was see her again. I don't want a fling. I want forever. I am addicted to her and ready to do whatever it takes.

"Come on, Jude. Spit it out." Her eyes fill with questions, and she blinks rapidly, making her long lashes flutter.

It causes me to think of other ways to make her eyes flutter.

Fuck.

“I want you to trust me, but I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve you because I lied to you about who I am.” I wait, fully expecting her to tear me a new one.

She inhales a deep breath and fixes her gaze on me. “Is that right?”

I glance up and see her eyes glinting with pure mischief. Laughter bubbles from her perfect lips.

She knows, and she’s been playing along this whole time.

I’m marrying this woman. As soon as fucking possible.

NO REGRETS

Peyton

“And who are you, exactly? Some kind of criminal?”

“Not exactly.”

“Am I in danger? Are you a serial killer?”

“No.” Jude shakes his head, his mouth agape. The surprised look on his face is priceless. He’s thrown off and confused. I feel a little mean, but teasing him is so much fun.

“What then? Why did you lie?”

“Because I wanted to get to know you better, and if I’d told you who I was when we met, you would never have given me the time of day.”

“So you lied to get me to go out with you?”

He shuffles forward, reaching his hand toward me, but I don’t move. He nods sheepishly. He’s drawing out the inevitable. It must be torture for him.

“So, who are you exactly?” I ask.

His hands drop by his side, and he gives me a sheepish look. "I'm Jude Regis."

I give him the once over, raking my gaze from top to toe. I'm enjoying myself a bit too much, but I can't keep torturing him for much longer. I smirk. "So you're the big bad wolf."

There isn't an ounce of surprise in my tone, and his eyes light up with the recognition that I've been toying with him.

"You already know? But how?" he asks, completely blindsided by my cavalier attitude.

"I have sources," I say, tapping the side of my nose. The poor man looks miserable, and besides, I want to get to the kissing parts.

He slaps his palm to his forehead. "Finn," he says with an exasperated sigh.

Jude seems so vulnerable as if he'll shatter if reject him. "Peyton, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me for being a jerk. Tell me what I need to do. I'll do anything."

He stops rambling when he realizes I'm not angry.

"Don't you think it's a pretty elaborate way to ask a woman out on a date?" I laugh.

Jude runs a hand through his disheveled hair and meets my gaze. "I feel like an asshole, but how else could I convince you to take a chance?"

"Isn't that a bit extreme? Slightly unreasonable?" I ask.

His eyes flare with the characteristic intensity I've grown used to. "I tried being reasonable. I didn't like it," he says, hinting at the tougher side of his personality.

I believe he has feelings for me, but I want to hear it from his lips. "A wealthy man like you could date anyone you want. Why me?"

Jude's eyes snap to mine, and his eyebrows lift in surprise. "You're no ordinary woman." The naked desire in his gaze makes me blush.

“I’m a different person when I’m with you. But to answer your question, and because I don’t want to mess around with misunderstandings, here it is.” He blows out a breath. “I don’t date. I’m a workaholic. Trust doesn’t come easy for me because everyone wants a piece of you when you have money. So I keep to myself, which makes me an awkward bastard.”

Jude’s confession melts my heart. I’d never thought about him being vulnerable to people using him because I’ve never met anyone as rich as him. “Jude. I owe you an apology.”

“For what?”

“I was quick to make you out to be a bad guy. When I read the environmental report, it sounded too good to be true and I was suspicious. But I was wrong. I should have persisted until I got an answer from the source instead of jumping to the wrong conclusions.”

Jude laughs, and his shoulders drop. “Actually, you’re right. There are a hell of a lot of asshole businessmen out there. That was part of why I tried to discourage you from protesting further and getting yourself into trouble.”

“Finn told me you had some great ideas, and I want to hear them.”

“Beautiful woman, there’s so much I want to share with you. So much I want to do. I love your passion and commitment. You have a bright future, Peyton, and I want to help you achieve your dreams.”

“Yeah, I do think I’m wasted in my current job.” I chuckle.

He gives me a knowing look. “You could have a strong voice with the right backing, gorgeous, and I believe we’ll make a strong team.”

“I can’t wait to hear more,” I say, relieved that he’s forgiven me like I’ve forgiven him. Our goals align, but everything is moving so fast that it’s no wonder we’re having a few hiccups.

I sense we’re reaching a different point in the conversation by the way his tone changes. The moment is laden with sexual tension, and this is not the time to discuss business.

“Jude,” I whisper. This man! He drives me crazy, staring at me with those soulful dark eyes.

He moves closer and brushes a strand of hair from my face, sending shivers down my spine. “I’m probably fucking this all up, but I can’t stop thinking about you, Peyton. You’re sexy as hell, you’re smart, and you know what you want.”

I take his hands in mine as he closes the distance between us. His cheeky grin warms my heart like a ray of sunshine. And I meet his smile with one of my own.

Suddenly, his expression changes to one of hesitation, as if he’s just thought of something else. “Are you sure I’m not too old for you?” He spits out the words as if they’re dirty, and his voice is rough, like he’s been eating gravel. “You’re definitely too good for me.”

Biting my lip, I shake my head. My heart leaps in my chest. It’s beating so fast. It’s like a bass drum thundering in my ears.

“Can you find it in your heart to give me a chance to prove my love? I promise I’m not an asshole,” he says.

Love? Be still, my beating heart. Does he mean it?

“Love? We hardly know each other.”

I should hate him for deceiving me, but I don’t. He’s taking pieces of my heart like they’re his property.

“It sounds crazy, but I know how I feel. I’ve never felt this way about another woman. I crave you. I need you. I can’t live without you.”

“Jude, you’re so dramatic.” I roll my eyes at his over-the-top antics.

“I’m serious, Peyton. I love you, and I would never do anything to hurt you.”

I agree things are moving fast, but I feel the same way about him. If this was the final hurdle to jump, it was an easy one.

“I’m falling in love with you, too,” I say softly. “Nothing is stopping us from being together if it’s what we both want.”

Suddenly, I'm aware of our closeness. He smells wonderful—like the sea. All clean, salty, and wild. His body is so close to mine that I feel the heat coming off his skin.

Jude cups my cheek, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. He looks into my eyes for what feels like an eternity. “You’re trembling. Why are you nervous?” he asks in a low voice.

I look into his eyes. I want him. I want him to hold me, touch me, and love me forever. “Because I want you to kiss me.”

“I’m never going to let you go,” he says before finally leaning in for a kiss.

The touch of his lips is as soft as velvet. His breath near my neck makes my skin tingle, and sparks run through my veins.

“You better not,” I whisper when we break apart. My heart pounds, and my knees are weak.

He stares at my mouth. “But I’m going to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss you,” he growls with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Here? Out in the open?”

“Yes.” He glances around in search of a suitable spot away from prying eyes. We haven’t come across anyone else, but that doesn’t mean we truly have privacy.

“Don’t you think we’re being a little risqué?”

“I don’t plan on sharing you.” A low rumble reverberates from his throat as he leans in and plants a kiss on my neck. “But you’re my little exhibitionist.”

His warm hand slips into mine, and he leads me through the forest. We wander down a hidden pathway until we reach a grove. Golden sunlight shimmers through the leaves of an ancient oak, creating a magical pattern on the grassy floor.

Carefully, Jude lays the blanket on the soft bed of grass. I let out a delighted giggle as we settle into our special spot.

My eyes lock on his. He’s close enough to feel his breath on my neck as his gaze wanders across my face, taking in each

quiver. I love how he licks his lips, not taking his eyes off me, but he's struggling to keep his composure.

"Kiss me," I plead.

His teeth graze my skin, nipping hard enough to make his claim. A flurry of sensations floods my body, and my need grows urgent. My cheeks flush with pleasure, and I desperately claw at his shirt.

The fabric gives way, and I splay my fingers on the smooth expanse of his stomach. Jude's movements are swift and purposeful. He rolls me onto my back, pressing his body against mine in a way that leaves no doubt that he's in charge.

Jude presses his lips to mine, kissing me with wild abandon. He lifts my top, lowers my bra cups, and kisses each nipple reverently before moving my top back in place to keep me warm.

His hands caress my body, his fingers gliding down my sides. He hooks his thumb along the edge of my waistband, tugging my pants loose enough to slip his hand inside my panties.

Steady fingers draw circles around my needy, pulsing bundle of nerves, teasing me with each brush. Every few passes, he slips a finger inside me. It's enough pressure to tantalize but not enough to make me come. It's sweet agony, too much and not enough.

"Your skin is like velvet," he says, his voice low and urgent.

Jude kisses his way down my chest and my ribs. He nips and kisses the slope of my belly, working his way lower until he runs out of skin, grabs hold of my pants, and pulls them down.

His palms glide up and down my thighs, teasing, caressing, getting closer and closer until his lips brush against my sex, and heat floods my body. Gripping my thighs, he lifts one leg over his shoulder and settles between my thighs.

He slides his tongue over my clit, drawing tiny circles. He drives me crazy with his perfect mouth. Everything about him is hot, and my thighs tremble when he plunges a thick finger

inside me. He places his lips around my pulsing bundle of nerves, tenderly sucking it into his mouth until I see stars.

I need him inside me urgently. I'm growing desperate, and the anticipation is almost unbearable.

I'm crazy about him and love every second we spend together. But more than that, I love everything he's doing, and I can't get enough.

Jude

Peyton's skin is hot. She's so turned on that her inner walls pulse and tighten around my fingers. Slick juices flow from her core and trickle down my wrist. As I circle my tongue around her clit, she arches her back, shaking and whimpering, as her climax slams into her.

Her muscles contract as a powerful orgasm racks her body, and ecstasy courses through her. The sounds she makes when she comes are music to my ears. I don't make promises lightly, but I will never grow tired of hearing her moans of pleasure.

I pause to savor her nectar, still sweet on my lips, before slowly making my way back up her body. "So sweet. My dirty sweet little kitten. My little exhibitionist."

She watches me, her eyes hooded with longing, as I roll a condom onto my rock-hard cock. This time, I came prepared.

"I want you," she says in a breathy moan.

Not wanting to keep the lady waiting, I sink inside her, and she cries out my name.

"You feel amazing," she purrs, like the perfect kitten.

"You. You're amazing," I say, turning the focus back onto her.

I slam into her, clamping my hands on her hips and driving hard into her heat. "Say it again. Tell me you want me."

I grab her top leg and arch it over my hip, opening her pussy to me. She rolls her hips, working to take me deeper. With every move, I watch her dusky core quiver invitingly around me, her breasts bouncing enticingly with each dip and sway.

Her eyes are glazed. The ecstasy on her face, eyes half closed, mouth slack, tells me she's enjoying the ride.

"Sexy little minx," I growl, desperately resisting the urge to lose myself in her. I need to wring another orgasm out of her before I let go.

Her moans grow louder and more intense. "I'm going to come," she breathes. "Jude!" Her body quivers as she whimpers my name.

I'm sweating and shaking as I grit my teeth and snap my hips, driving deeper into her slick heat. Her thighs tremble, and her head drops back as she reaches the peak of pleasure.

I slam my lips down on hers and kiss her, holding nothing back as I let go and join her on the other side of the wave. This perfect woman is mine.

OFFICE HOURS

Jude

As much as I'd love to laze around all day, anyone could walk past and see us. I gently untangle her from my embrace, gently clean her up with a couple of wipes, and then help her get dressed. We busy ourselves with the final packing tasks, stuffing everything into the trunk, and Peyton slips away to use the restroom.

I pull out my phone and find Finn's number. I take a long, deep breath before pressing the call button. This is something I dread doing, yet I know it has to be done so I can move on with my life.

When he answers, I explain the situation between Peyton and me. As expected, Finn doesn't sound surprised. I reassure him that Peyton knows who I am and all about Elysium.

"I'm going to offer her a role on the Elysium project," I tell Finn.

"Is that what this is about?" His tone cools. "Peyton wants to work for me, but it's too dangerous. She's comfortable in her job, so what makes you think she'll want to work for you?"

Frankly, I'm insulted. "Not that my personal life is any of your business, but I don't want her to work for me, but with me. She's comfortable in her current role, but underserved. Given the right opportunities she will thrive."

"I agree," he says, regaining the tone I've come to know over the past few years we've been working together. If this was a test, it sounds like I passed. "What are you calling me for? My blessing?"

As her brother, he has her best interests at heart, but I don't need his blessing. It isn't the Middle Ages. While I don't want our business or friendship to suffer if I date her, I can't deny my feelings for her. Despite my intention to take my time and reveal my feelings gently, it's time to lay my cards on the table.

"Finn, I want Peyton in my life full-time. And that means in my home, and my office, and everywhere else. I want her by my side permanently. You got it?"

"Got it," he says.

"Good. Don't start a fight with me because I'm taking private boxing lessons."

He barks out a laugh. I couldn't fight him, no matter how many lessons I took. He'd flatten me in a flash.

"Do your thing, Jude. I can't stop you. But if you hurt her, I'll..." He ends the call.

When I marry Peyton, my brother Rafe will be there with me. Possibly Finn, if he agrees. But first, I need to convince my girl to accept me.

Peyton

When I return from the bathroom, Jude is leaning against the car, his arms folded. A huge grin lights up his face.

“Peyton, there’s something I need to show you,” he says.

“Haven’t you had enough?” I ask, glancing at his pants.

“Never,” he growls in that way that makes me so hot for him. “Come to my office. I want to show you the plans for Elysium.”

A short while later, we arrive at his office. It’s Saturday afternoon, and the building is deserted. The sun is setting and turning the glass walls of the office a deep orange.

I follow him into his office. It is spacious and modern, with a large wooden desk as its centerpiece. We detour to the kitchen, where he invites me to the kitchen to get something to eat and drink while he attends to a couple of urgent matters.

I return with two steaming cups of coffee and spot an office chair in the corner. I wheel it to his large mahogany desk, my eyes transfixed on him as I watch him work. He adjusts the angle of his screen with a flick of his wrist so I can see better. Then he leans back in his chair and pats his muscular thighs.

“On my lap,” he says with a mischievous grin. “So you can see better.”

“Sitting on the boss’s lap?” I laugh. A thrill runs through me at this naughty roleplaying scenario.

“I’m not your boss, but yes, I want you to sit on my lap,” he says with a chuckle.

“Okay, as long as you promise to behave,” I tease.

He raises an eyebrow and replies, “Or what? You’ll report me to management?”

I settle myself onto his lap, and we share a laugh. “My favorite place,” I murmur, cuddling into his shoulder.

“What did you want to show me?” I ask. He slides an arm around my waist and kisses my neck.

“This is Elysium.” He turns on a promotional video but mutes the sound. “The resort will operate fully off-grid within five years of opening. The hotel and its adjacent services, including the greenhouse farm, will be completely self-sufficient.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” It’s the way of the future, but the setup costs are astronomical. It’s easy to see why he encountered pushback from his family, who are the other financial backers.

“The resort will generate electricity and water and manage their waste on-site. We’ve partnered with a company that manufactures non-biodegradable building materials. That’s what we’re using to build the turbines for the wind farm.”

Enraptured by his words, I lean forward, closer to the screen. “Keep going,” I say, encouraging him to tell me everything, captivated by the excitement in his voice.

“Elysium will focus on providing a “farm to table” service, employing local people and using locally sourced resources.”

“I can’t wait to see it in action. I studied environmental science but got bored. It was all Rats and Stats.” I laugh. “It wasn’t for me, but I wanted to be involved in a different capacity. I just didn’t know how.

“My experience was similar,” he replies. “I was studying business while working for Regis but felt over-stretched. After two years, I was reaching a point where I knew almost as much as the lecturers, so I decided to focus on running my own business.”

“What does it take to run a business like yours? I imagine a lot of it would be on-the-job training.”

“Dad and my uncles are good mentors, and there was no pressure from my family to finish college, so I didn’t. Now I hire the best people to help with the things I don’t know.”

I giggle, imagining him having the best of everything. He narrows his eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that? Do I sound arrogant?”

“A little,” I say, measuring my words with a pinch of my fingers. His lips turn up in a gentle smile.

“I’m not. My family were Italian immigrants. Everything we earned is from our hard work.”

“I admire that,” I say softly, and his eyes light up with pride. “You are down to earth.”

Jude laughs. “You keep on pumping up my tires, babe. You’re so good at it.”

“You’re kind-hearted and sweet, too,” I add.

He presses his index finger to his lips with a little wink and says, “Shh, don’t tell anyone.” We both burst out laughing at the same time. He stares into my eyes and asks softly, “It was the bird, wasn’t it?”

I shake my head and stare deeply into his eyes. “It’s everything about you,” I say softly.

We hold each other’s gaze for a long while, but the blare of an intercom system pulls us out of the moment.

“That was quick,” he says.

“Are you expecting someone?” I try to shuffle off his lap, but he stops me.

“A delivery, but I need to sign for it. I won’t be long.” Jude picks me up off his lap as if I weigh nothing, stands, and places me in the large leather office chair we were sharing.

I smile at him and keep scrolling through the architectural renderings on his computer. The company only submitted the bare bones information to receive their building permits. Basically, only the information requested and nothing more. I feel guilty for judging him harshly, but how could I know the difference?

On the surface, this project looked similar to others. Every developer says they can deliver a viable project with minimal impact on the environment. But they don’t, and we are left with the cleanup.

I did a little digging around Regis Enterprises before I met Jude. The company prides itself on sustainable buildings. The builders use locally sourced or recycled materials and hire local tradespeople and artisans. At the time, I assumed it was spin doctoring, but now I see things from another perspective.

“What do you think?” Jude asks when he returns.

“Incredible. I see the potential.” I look up from the screen.

My eyes widen in surprise as Jude approaches, a mountain of crimson roses blocking his face. I gasp in excitement and jump out of the chair to get a closer look. There are dozens upon dozens of lush blooms, the petals soft and inviting.

“Happy late Valentine’s Day,” he says with a smile before placing them on the desk and taking his seat again. Sliding onto his lap, I thread my hands behind his neck, feeling his warmth radiating through me.

“Happy Valentine’s Day to you, too.” I tilt my face to kiss him.

Jude grips my throat, slamming his lips onto mine. When he kisses me, it’s for a long time. He doesn’t hold back. It’s heady and delicious— this is no ordinary kiss.

When we finally break apart, he whispers. “I love you.”

Those words had never sounded as perfect. I feel them deep in my soul. “I love you too.”

He cups my face tenderly. “Thanks for taking a chance and letting me share my vision.”

“I love it, Jude.”

“Great. How would you like to see the original hotel I modeled it on? It’s in Rorvik.”

Rorvik is a small, oil-rich nation in Northern Europe. My brother Logan married into the royal family and lives in the capital, Ardense, with his wife, Princess Astrid.

“You want me to go to Rorvik with you?”

“Yes. See it for yourself, and you can visit your brother,” he suggests.

I’m reminded how we’re connected through my family and him working together once again.

“Yes. See the resort I based Elysium on for yourself. While we’re there, you can visit your brother.” Once again, I’m reminded of how we are connected through my family and him working together.

“I’m not sure if I can take leave from work. I’ll have to ask my boss.”

He grins. “Would you consider quitting and working on Elysium?”

“Work for you? Would you be my boss?” Our goals align. If we join forces, with my sense of purpose and commitment, and his resources, we can do amazing things.

“With me,” Jude says. “Not for me. You would be a part of the management team and run whichever department you want.”

I stare in disbelief. A billionaire boyfriend and a dream job all rolled into one.

“Is that a yes?” he asks.

I snap my mouth shut and nod.

“I could never boss you around. You’re too much of a badass,” he chuckles.

Lies. He is definitely the boss. The boss of my heart and the love of my life.

EPILOGUE 1 - EMERGENCY REPAIRS

Jude

One month later.

Peyton has changed my life for the better. I'm drawn to her fiercely independent spirit and inspired by her passion and dedication to everything she does. I relish every small moment we spend together, but since she started working for me, Peyton is more dedicated to her work than ever.

These days, I spend less time working and more time stopping to smell the proverbial roses. Which usually means staring at her like a love-struck teen.

We are seated in the departure lounge at the international airport. Our flight to Rorvik was delayed, so we are killing time while waiting to board. While I stare at airplanes preparing for take-off, Peyton's eyes are fixed on her laptop, and her fingers are flying across the keyboard.

She's so good at everything she does that I'm tempted to put her in charge of security. She'd get a kick out of being her brother's boss. But I'll keep that ace up my sleeve for when I propose, which I plan to do when we get to the hotel.

I turn my attention to the announcements echoing over the public address system. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell need to board ASAP, or they risk missing their flight. The next announcement is for our flight, which is now delayed by an hour.

Peyton's eyes snap to mine, and she grins mischievously. "Don't say it," she quips. "I know you hate flying with other people and offered to charter a jet."

I did, but she blew me off each time, insisting the money would be better spent doing something good for other people. Her giant heart is another one of the many reasons why I adore her.

Peyton walks her fingers up my arm, then rakes her nails down, sending a thrill straight to my groin. "I'm sorry the flight is delayed. I've got some sore spots that need attention. Can you help me?"

"Oh yeah? Where exactly?" I ask, raking my gaze over her body.

"I'll show you all my sore spots when we're neatly tucked away in first class, and you can rub them better," she says with a wink.

"That would be my pleasure, kitten. But why wait? We have an hour and a private changeroom in the first-class lounge." She bites her lip but doesn't resist as I take her hand and lead her to the changeroom.

Once we are safely locked inside, I kiss her up against the wall. I slide my hand down to check and make sure she's ready. She's soaked. My fingers part her folds, and I slide them back and forth through her slickness. "You're so wet."

His warm breath feathers over my neck, sending chills through my body. My dick is so ready to plunge inside. She's perfect. My little kitten is slick and wet and ready for me. I thrust

inside her, feeling her slick wetness kiss my balls, making my cock throb inside her. She moans, and the sound is pure heaven.

She moans her encouragement as she tightens her grip on my shoulders. She loves what I'm doing because she presses herself closer, rolling her hips, taking me deeper. The look of ecstasy on her face, her eyes are half closed, her jaw soft, tells me she's close.

Her inner walls begin to flutter. She arches her back, and from somewhere down low, she moans. A shudder ripples through her body as she finds her release.

Burying my face in her shoulder to muffle the sound, I groan when my orgasm finally hits. Intense pleasure rockets through every nerve of my body.

I rest my forehead against hers, waiting for our breathing to return to normal. "I love you," I whisper.

"I love you too," she says, and my heart explodes.

This woman belongs to me. She's fucking mine.

Peyton

We are locked in an embrace for what feels like an eternity. When we break apart, I shiver from the goosebumps he leaves in his wake. I love him so much. I want to spend every waking moment together. I want to fall asleep with him next to me every night for the rest of my life.

I follow him out of the changeroom, barely believing what just happened. Jude pushes me out of my comfort zone in the most delicious ways, encouraging the wildness I always knew was in my heart. But he does it in a way that makes sense and makes me a better person.

A naughtier one, too. But it's so much fun.

EPILOGUE 2 - VALENTINE'S DAY

Peyton

ONE YEAR LATER

We are back in the same hotel in Rorvik that we stayed in last year, though this time, it's for a vacation, not a research trip. Located within the arctic wilderness, the hotel is perched atop crystal-clear waters at the base of a glacier. The bay is tucked into the curving shore of an almost-frozen fjord.

It's February, and the sun sets early, so we plan to meet Logan and Astrid in the hotel dining room at nine for dinner. I sat at the window the night before, watching in awe as the Aurora Borealis painted the sky with shades of electric blue and green streaks.

Jude is sitting in a plush armchair with his nose buried in a book. Whatever he's reading has him rapt because the view outside the window is breathtaking, yet he's barely noticed. I am transfixed by the view of the beautiful, frozen landscape.

I'm in my own version of heaven. I'm staring at a dashing handsome alpha male, feeling warm and toasty, even though it's freezing outside and everything is covered in ice.

I sneak a look at the cover. It's one of the books my friend Cleary wrote in secret. She outed herself to us as author Anita Dix in one of our wine chats, and I couldn't be more excited for her.

While Jude is immersed in reading, I check the group chat for updates. Because of the time zone difference, I'm a bit delayed, but all my friends are already sharing their Valentine's Day plans. As I scroll through the messages, I ponder on how much our lives changed in the year since we made the Galentines Day Pact.

A year after Devyn walked into a swanky hotel with a goat by her side, her life changed for the better. Now it's filled with more love and laughter than she ever thought possible.

Cleary is up to her eyeballs, researching her next book. It's about a tattoo artist, and I can't wait to read it.

Mandy, who was typically shy, decided to go for it and book a boudoir photography shoot. She took a chance, and it paid off - she found her confidence, plus a lot more with the photographer, Zach. We're so happy for her.

Things didn't go as planned for Tabitha. Her attempt at erotic dancing came to a sudden halt when she caught a mob boss' eye. Marco Dean refused to let his curvy little soulmate strip for any other men, and Tabitha refused to let the surly mob boss walk all over her. After intense negotiations, Tabitha ended up quitting her Accounting job in Colorado and moved to Las Vegas to become Marco's personal stripper, accountant, and mafia princess. It's a match made in heaven.

Cordy swears she's given up drinking Moscato and making decisions while drunk, but knowing her, that will never pan out. She didn't quite conquer her fear of nature, but she did face it and bring the dominant, grumpy Deacon out of the woods with her. They settled somewhere outside of Seattle, where Deacon leads outdoor expeditions, and she does her best to avoid them.

Jude snaps the book shut with a dramatic flourish and lets out a deep breath.

“What did you think of the book?” I ask. Cleary’s imagination is out of this world. I’ve read all three of her assassin romance books and loved them.

Jude cocks an eyebrow. “It was sexy, suspenseful, and surprisingly emotional. I’m impressed.”

“She’s talented, and I’m excited for her because she’s found the confidence to do book signings.”

“When is her next signing?” he asks. “I’ll fly you there in the private jet.”

I sigh with pleasure. Life with a billionaire is full of surprises.

Jude

“Who were you texting?”

“One of my friends,” she says, switching off the phone and leaving it on the table.

She walks to my armchair and sits on my lap. But I pick her up and press her against the window, kissing her the entire time. As I pull her clothes off, I kiss each smooth, warm curve of her body. She is breathing hard, her legs are spread open, and I work my tongue between her legs. She is so wound up that her body is throwing off sparks.

I don’t let up until she’s crying out with pleasure—and then, after it’s over, I make her come again.

“Oh my God,” she gasps as she catches her breath. “How are you so good at that?”

“I’m good at other things, too, you know,” I say, moving up to kiss her breasts. She laughs and pulls off my shirt. I kick my pants off and remove my boxers, throwing them on the floor.

Wrapping her fingers around my shaft, she strokes me. She draws her hand down my shaft, then all the way up and over the sensitive head. The sight makes me even harder, and a thick pearl of pre-come appears just for her.

I stare, open-mouthed, unable to look away. Then she licks her lips. My pulse races. Lowering my face, I murmur against the sensitive skin of her throat. “Turn around.”

I press her against the cool glass, facing out to view, her back to me. The beautiful, frozen landscape, where the air itself seems to sparkle with the light refracted from ice crystals, is nothing compared to Peyton’s beauty.

“You want this?” I growl. She mewls, arching her back, offering me a perfect view of her glistening folds. “You want my cock?”

“Yes.” She hisses when I enter her slick channel. We fuck with her pressed against the window. It’s her safe way of pretending she’s performing even though we both know no one can see in.

Even though I tease Peyton about being my little exhibitionist, that kind of talk is strictly for our private playtime. She is mine. I adore her, and I am not sharing her with anyone.

* * *

Dear Reader,

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, for reading [Wild at Heart](#). My goal with writing is to lift your spirits and make you smile. If you enjoyed the book, you can help an independent author like me by leaving a review.

GALENTINES CHRONICLES



Valentine's Day? This group of single besties hasn't celebrated since, well...they don't want to talk about that. But this year looks a whole lot different. Thanks to a bottle of wine and a ridiculous Galentine's Day pact, they're conquering their fears, one outlandish adventure at a time. Love wasn't supposed to be in the cards, but they'll tumble headlong into it anyway when they meet the men of their dreams in the last places they expected.

Seven of your favorite instalove authors are taking you on a rom-com adventure to remember this Galentine's Day. Buckle up. These feisty heroines are going down in infamy!

Check out the entire series: <http://geni.us/Galentines2023>

Curvy Cheeky Charmer by [Eve London](#) - <https://geni.us/CurvyCheekyCharmer>

Hot Mess Wedding by [Kat Baxter](#) - https://mybook.to/hotmess_wed

Heart of Gold by Violet Rae - <https://geni.us/GCheartofgold>

Risking It All by [Mayra Statham](#) - <https://mybook.to/riskingit>

Stubborn Little Miss by Loni Ree - <http://mybook.to/StubbornLittleMiss>

Pretty Little Mess by [Nichole Rose](#) - <http://mybook.to/PrettyLittleMess>

Wild at Heart by [Fern Fraser](#) - <https://geni.us/WildGal>

FERN FRASER



USA Today Bestselling Author Fern Fraser writes light-hearted, high-heat contemporary short romances.

Fern's fun, fast-paced romances feature women who know what they want. Her heroes are over-the-top alphas who instantly fall head-over-heels in love. Full of heart, suspense, action, and laughs, Fern's romances give you all the feels in half the time.

[Fern Fraser](#): All the Feels in Half the Time.

My website <https://fernfraserauthor.com/>

Follow me on [Amazon](#).

Follow me on [Bookbub](#)

Follow me on [Facebook](#)

When you sign up for my mailing list, you can access exclusive previews - plus sales, new releases, promotions, and freebies.

Sign up here – [NEWSLETTER](#).

Join [Fern Fraser's Book Babes](#) where you can talk to me, as well as connect with other readers.

Would you like early access to my books? Join the [Advanced Reader Team](#) here—<https://booksprout.co/author/18838/fern-fraser>