



Yours to
PROTECT

BODYGUARD TAKES ON A WHOLE NEW MEANING

CATE ASHTON

YOURS TO PROTECT

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Yours to Protect

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For My Family and Friends

Your support over the last year has meant the world to me.

Thank you, thank you.

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Books By Cate Ashton

Home & Heart Channel's resident good girl, Autumn Atwood, leaves NSFW voicemail for former co-star Ben Townsend. Is it an affair or wishful thinking?

Hey baby. I miss you. The days we don't film together always leaves me in a state of longing. It's hard to concentrate on my scenes. The anticipation of the next time I'll see you builds all day. I think about our gazes meeting across the room, that secret heat between us. And I go a little crazy. Like now, as I slip into the bed in your trailer, completely naked. Thinking about you all day has me so turned on. And I thought maybe I could come here and take care of myself. Would you like that, baby? To hear me come all over my hand while I'm in your bed. While I'm thinking about your cock filling me. Oh God, it feels so good. I'm so slippery. So sensitive. I wish it was you touching me. Your cock teasing me until I'm begging for you to fuck me. I want it hard. I want to hear our bodies coming together. I want it messy and rough and.... and...oh my God, I'm coming, Ben. So...fucking...good...Oh...

Mmmm, find me tomorrow and we can turn my solo act into a duet.

AUTUMN

“Hey Autumn! I’ve got a big cock for you!”

Clearly big sunglasses, a ball cap, and an oversized hoodie is a shit disguise. It’s been just over a week since my elicited voicemail, that was for my ex’s ears only, was released and this is hardly the worst thing that’s been hurled at me. At first, I was mortified. Humiliated. I ignored all the jabs, kept my head down. Then I got angry. And mouthy.

“Don’t Autumn!” My publicist snaps at me through the phone at my ear. “Ignore him.”

“Hold on, Maren.”

I hear her yell at me as I stop and face the douchebag who is wearing a smug smile at the edge of the airport bar.

“Let me see it,” I say as I take off my glasses and eye his crotch.

His smile disappears. “What?”

“You said you’ve got a big cock. Well, whip it out. Let’s see it.”

He looks around the crowded airport, his face turning red. “Um...here?”

“Yeah, why not? You feel comfortable announcing to the whole Austin airport how big your cock is so it’s time to put your money where your mouth is.”

“Um...” He swallows visibly as his eyes dart to the people that have started to gather around us.

“It better be at least ten inches. That’s all this pussy takes.”

“Autumn!” I hear Maren scream from the phone in my hand as gasps and giggles surround me.

Douchebag practically looks green now. I glance at his hand holding his beer and see a ring.

“You’re married?”

Panic fills his face. “Look—”

“What would she think about your little proposal? Got kids too, I bet. You got the whole dad bod thing going on.” I wave my hand at his paunchy stomach. “A daughter?”

He starts to turn around, trying to escape me.

“I seriously hope your daughter never knows her dad sexually harasses women for fun!” I yell at a level to be heard over the small circle that’s formed around us. I don’t have to look to see that most people have their phones out and recording. “Maybe you should try being a stand-up husband and father instead of a dickwad!”

A rouse of applause comes up and I give a curtsy then put on my sunglasses and put my phone back to my ear. “Sorry, Maren, that’ll be viral in about half an hour.”

She sighs. “You’re a serious PR nightmare. How am I going to convince the Home & Heart Channel to keep you on if you shout out the word pussy in the middle of an airport?”

I cringe. I didn’t really help my case out with that one. “Sorry, I was in the moment.”

“I’m probably going to get another call from Ed ranting how the porn industry keeps calling him.”

I bite my lip not to laugh. I mean, it’s not good. Not at all. It’s more a laugh of how ridiculous my life has become. How I’m on the verge of losing it all. My agent doesn’t sugarcoat it with me either. Ed told me to fix this situation, or my selection of auditions will be between The Bimbo Games and Humping Laura.

“Where the hell is your security, by the way?”

“They should be at baggage claim. I haven’t made it there yet.” My hand starts to shake, and I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep a grip on my phone. It’s only a matter of time before the panic will start to lace my voice. “Listen, I gotta stop in the little girl’s room so I’m going to let you go. I’ll touch base later, love you.”

I hang up before she can say anything else and increase my pace to the single occupant restroom where I’ll have some privacy. As soon as the door is closed and locked behind me, I drop everything and empty my stomach inside the toilet. When I’m done, I slump against the wall and pull my knees up to my chest and rest my forehead on them. I don’t want to even think about the fact that I’m sitting on the floor in a public restroom.

I might get angry and mouthy, but then the adrenaline fades and this is where I end up – shaking on the floor of a bathroom.

I fucking hate Ben Townsend.

While I’m getting harassed and called a stalker and homewrecker, my asshole ex is playing the victim. Claiming his phone was stolen yet making no comment on the fact that the voicemail is nine years old. By letting everyone believe I’m trying to steal him from his pop-star girlfriend, her loyal fans have gone bat-shit crazy. I’ve lost count on how many death threats I’ve gotten at this point.

I hear my phone buzzing in my purse, but I don’t touch it. I’m guessing the videos people made are already hitting social media. I take a few more minutes, focusing on calming the raging emotions flowing through me before I stand up. Time to face the music. After washing my hands extra well, I splash my face with water, thankful I didn’t wear make-up to further disguise myself. I pull out my toothbrush from my suitcase and give my teeth a quick cleansing as my phone buzzes again.

Once I feel human, I pull out my phone. It immediately starts ringing again. It’s Gage. I look in the mirror, pull in a deep breath and put on my best publicity smile then answer.

“Hey Gage!”

“Jesus, Autumn, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” I should win an Oscar for how smooth and convincing my voice is.

“Then why the hell aren’t you answering your phone? We were about to jump security to get to you.”

“Sorry, I had to duck into the restroom.”

He heaves a relieved sigh. “Are you okay? Really?” His voice is softer this time, worried.

“I’m guessing my little conversation is already viral.”

“On its way. I have alerts set on your name and my phone’s lighting up like a 90’s rave.”

“Just another day in Autumn’s world.”

There’s a pause and I know he’s concerned. My eyes start to sting. Gage and I went to high school together and though we haven’t really seen each other since then, we’ve kept in touch through social media over the years. I needed out of Los Angeles fast after the shit hit the fan, and I’ve heard from others in the industry about how chill Austin is about celebrities in its midst. It seemed like a good place to hide out for a while. I knew Gage and his private security company, *Personally Yours*, was just what I needed to handle the fallout of my sudden scandal.

“We’re at carousel three,” Gage says, all business. “Jackson is the big guy standing to the right of me. You need to go to him first and make a show of being happy to see him. Wasn’t really planning to start the relationship stuff now, but since eyes are already on you, we have to sell it.”

Not only do I need security, I need to diffuse the stalker-slash-homewrecker rumors and get my reputation back before I’m cancelled. So, I went to Gage about getting a fake boyfriend/bodyguard combo. He agreed it was a good idea, but since he’d fallen in love, he couldn’t be that guy for me. He offered his business partner instead.

“I’m an actor, Gage. I think I can handle a happy homecoming. Just make sure your boy is up to task.”

Gage chuckles. “See you soon, Atwood.”

I hang up and dig into my purse for my emergency make-up bag and put a little on before squaring my shoulders and giving myself one last look. Satisfied that I look ready for a reunion with my boyfriend, I grab my carry-on and leave the restroom.

Thankfully, the earlier crowd has dispersed. Not that I believe for one minute they’ve forgotten about me. I get to the escalator down to baggage claim. I scan the crowd below, looking for Gage. I haven’t seen him in person in so long, but I know from pictures that he’s only gotten hotter. I’d developed a small crush on him during his years in the military, but that was solely based on the shirtless photos he posted. The Army did him well, that’s for sure.

An arm raises and waves and I see that it’s Gage. Yep, just as handsome as his pictures. I move my gaze over to the man standing next to him — my fake boyfriend.

Holy hell.

My heart takes off, beating double time as I soak him in. Gage is tall, but this man has a good two or three inches on him. His shoulders are broader, his chest thicker. His black hair is short, but slightly longer and styled on top. He’s wearing a black T-shirt and it fits him perfectly. Tight across his chest and biceps, but loose enough to not look like he’s showing off. I see a hint of ink on his soft brown skin peeking out of the sleeve of his shirt that immediately piques my curiosity. I move my gaze to his face and a jolt of heat hits me as I realize he’s staring at me intently. I can’t make out his features clearly from here, but he’s got a strong jaw that has more of a five o’clock shadow than a full beard. Then there’s his eyes. I don’t know what color they are, but they aren’t brown. I can practically see them glitter from here.

I wrack my brain to find an actor comparison for him. It’s what I do when I meet new people, find an actor or character that they remind me of, either in looks or personality. But no one is jumping out at me. No, this man is definitely all his own. And I don’t know what to do with that.

You act like you do, Autumn.

I swallow my sudden nervousness and paste a huge smile on my face.

Show time.

JACKSON

This is a mistake.

I knew it when D asked me to do it. I have to blame the almost two days of insomnia I was experiencing at the time. Because only sleep deprivation would have me agreeing to play boyfriend to an actress.

And yet, here I am, in the middle of baggage claim waiting on my fake girlfriend, Autumn Atwood.

“Maybe Aiden should take this job.”

D swings a, *‘What the fuck?’* gaze at me. “Autumn’s plane literally just landed.”

“D...Gage, I told you I didn’t want to do this.”

I met Gage Díaz when we were both fresh out of boot camp and have been friends ever since. Calling each other by our last names became habit, though I still prefer Jackson over my first name, Noah. Even after we left the service, we continued to go by our surnames, but since D went and fell in love, he told me he was going to stop introducing himself by his last name. I know he doesn’t mind if I still call him D, but I want to call him by his preference. So, I’m doing my best to get used to calling him Gage on the regular.

Gage runs a hand through his hair. “We’ve set up everything. Autumn’s publicist even put out a bogus story on how you two have been in a long-distance relationship.”

“Yeah, but my name was never mentioned. There’s no pictures. It could be Aiden.”

Gage stares at me, honest confusion on his face before he turns away, his jaw clenching. Yeah, he might want to punch me a little right now too. He looks back at me, “What’s going on? Why are you pulling this in the eleventh hour?”

Gage is my best friend, my only family, but there are aspects of my life I haven’t told him about. About how I was constantly surrounded by people who weren’t who they said they were. About how I had to play a part to survive. And this job is reminding of a life I’ve done my damndest to forget.

“If you want a bodyguard, I’m your man. All this acting stuff. I thought I could handle it, but...I don’t know.”

Gage blows out a breath. “Look, man, I don’t want to ask you to do something you don’t want to, but the reason I want you on this job is because I trust you. Autumn is an old friend, and I don’t just want anyone with her. It’s not that I don’t trust our employees, but I know you’ll protect Autumn with all you have. More than that, you’ll make Autumn feel safe. I know she’ll feel comfortable with you.”

Shit. I know he’s not guilt-tripping me, but he’s hitting me right where he knows it’s going to be hard to say no. I take a lot of pride in my work. And I’ve put a lot of work in this particular gig already. We have Autumn’s temporary Austin home all set up with cameras and I’ve done lots of research on the actress herself.

Autumn Atwood rose to fame on the teen drama, *Sunset Beach*, at the age of twenty. The drama was a surprise hit that ran for five years, and her girl-next-door character carried over onto the Home & Heart Channel after the show ended. Autumn has starred in one of the channel’s Christmas movies every year for the last four years – her good girl persona solidified.

But Autumn Atwood is no good girl.

Like the rest of the world, I heard that voicemail of hers.

A flash of desire suddenly sparks through me. I didn’t want to listen to it, but I had to be fully informed. And damn,

the woman has a mouth on her. I fucking love it – which is another reason I have doubts about this job.

I'm attracted as hell to Autumn Atwood.

With every project I watched, her beauty grew and grew. I would immediately get lost in her expressive whiskey-colored eyes, and all the ways she could deliver a smile had me aching to know how her lips tasted. Then I heard the voicemail and all I wanted to do is take that dirty mouth of hers and make it mine. Show her exactly how to use it.

My body tightens with need at the thought.

But my job is to keep the client safe. I don't get personal. So, how the hell am I supposed to stay impersonal when I have to touch her and kiss her in public? How am I not going to want to do it behind closed doors?

This job has disaster written all over it. And I haven't even met her in person.

"I really appreciate the trust you're placing in me and normally I wouldn't do this, but...I just don't think this job is for me. We should be able to get through this pick up without any issues then we can place Aiden in. I think he'll be a good fit."

Gage sighs heavily. "Okay, man, if you're sure. Aiden's single and he has that whole star-quarterback look about him, he'll work. He even mentioned being a fan of hers so there could be some chemistry there."

A sharp pang spears my gut as I picture Aiden touching Autumn, kissing her. The very thought of seeing pictures of them all over each other makes me want to punch something. And I fucking suggested it.

There's an uproar of shouts and applause that goes up somewhere in the terminal. The Austin airport isn't very big so a sound that loud can easily carry. My gut clenches again, but this time it's my protection instincts kicking in. I look at Gage and he looks at me, a frown marring his mouth.

He looks at his phone. "Her plane landed ten minutes ago."

Which means it's been enough time for her deplane. Whatever just happened I'm ninety-five percent certain Autumn Atwood is the cause of it. A few more minutes pass and there's no sign of her, but the people flooding into the baggage claim have a charged energy to them now. They are pouring down the escalators, talking excitedly.

Gage gets a ping on his phone, and he starts swiping at the screen as I keep an eye on the crowds. I inch closer to hear what they're saying.

"I still can't believe that happened," one woman says to another.

"I know. That guy was such a tool. I can't believe he would harass her like that in the middle of the airport."

I suddenly see red. What the fuck happened to Autumn?

Gage hits my arm. "Check this out," he says as he hands me his phone with a video queued up. I hit play and see Autumn go to town on this guy who must have said something about his cock. The video didn't catch the beginning of the interaction, but whatever happened, Autumn wasn't going to take it. She was calm and collected yet ripped him right to shreds.

She's a wildcat.

And there's no way I'm letting someone else protect her. She'd chew Aiden up and spit him out.

I hand the phone back to Gage. "I'm going to go find her."

Before I can get a step, he stops me. "Hold on. Let me get a hold of her. We can't go charge security."

I know I can't, but it doesn't mean I won't. To hell with the consequences. "I don't like this."

My body is tight with tension as I watch Gage try her cell and she doesn't answer. I want to see that little wildcat sweeping down the escalator with her head up high after that successful counterattack.

"You know she walked away. Let's give her a minute." Gage takes in all the people around us. There's still a lot of

buzz about the encounter and I have a feeling many of them are sticking around to catch another glimpse of Autumn.

“I think you need to go to the car,” Gage says.

“What?”

“We can get by with one friend picking her up, but it’ll look a little weird that her boyfriend isn’t here. If we’re going to get Aiden then you need to go to car and not be seen, because we’re definitely going to be seen now. This video will be hitting the mainstream news sites any time now.”

“We’re not bringing in Aiden. I’m going to do it.”

Gage blinks at me. “I don’t understand. You just said-”

“Yeah, I changed my mind. Last-minute jitters, but I’m good now. I’ve got this.”

“You sure? No turning back after this.”

Am I sure? About pretending to be Autumn’s boyfriend... no, not really. But I am sure that no one can protect Autumn like me.

“I’m sure. Try her again.”

He does and this time Autumn answers. Relief hits me like a Mack truck. From what I gather from the bits I can overhear is she hid away in a bathroom.

“We’re at carousel three,” Gage tells her. “Jackson is the big guy standing to the right of me. You need to go to him first and make a show of being happy to see him. Wasn’t really planning to start the relationship stuff now, but since eyes are already on you, we have to sell it.”

My nerves kick in. I know how to be a *bodyguard*. I know how to assess situations and prepare and plan accordingly. I know how to protect those who are preyed on. I’ve been doing it long before I entered the military and started this business with Gage. The only acting I’ve done is to deceive the deceivers. But *boyfriend* is a different story. Can I do soft smiles and loving eyes? Probably not.

I can do lust though. And it wouldn’t even be acting.

I keep my gaze on the top of the escalator. Every second that goes by feels like an eternity. I don't like that she's taking this long. That tells me the encounter affected her way more than she's letting on.

A woman wearing sunglasses and a black hoodie, with long blonde hair spilling down over her shoulders comes into view. My heart slams against my chest. A mixture of relief and panic rushes through my body. She's here.

Finally.

The thought jars me, or what it really means, so I ignore it.

Autumn looks around until her gaze stops on me and Gage. Though I can't see her eyes, I feel the moment they land on me specifically. How she's assessing me, the man who will be her fake boyfriend.

Suddenly, she smiles. It feels off. Then it hits me, it's not real. She's realized eyes are on her and she's got to sell this reunion. As she gets off the escalator, she whips off her sunglasses and zeros her gaze on me, her smile widening as a look of pure happiness comes over her expression.

And I feel it right in the gut.

Damn, she's good. So much so that I can't help but to return the smile. Then she starts to run right toward me. Taking her cue, I move, striding her way. She leaves her suitcase behind right before she launches herself at me. I catch her and pull her close.

Having her in my arms feels unreal. It sinks in that I don't really know her. That the woman I've been watching on the screen for the past ten days isn't the same one in my arms right now. And I desperately want to know the woman who feels this perfect pressed against my body.

She buries her face into my neck. "Thanks for doing this."

I tighten my hold and nuzzle my face into her neck. "I've got you."

And I do. I'm going to protect her with everything in me.

Her body instantly relaxes, and I feel a sob break free. Only one. Silent. She burrows her face further into me, making sure her face isn't seen. Her breath brushes my skin as she takes several calming breaths. "Don't let go."

Never.

I swing her around in a circle, hoping it looks like a reunion scene right out of the movies. Once I feel that she's calmed, I whisper, "Ready?"

She nods and pulls back, the power of her whiskey-colored gaze on me hits like a round of shots. I'm instantly drunk. On her.

Which is the only thing that can explain what I do next.

I bring my hands to her cheeks and lean in. Her eyes widen in surprise for a split second before I press my forehead to hers.

"Breathe."

She lets out a long exhale and as soon as her body relaxes into mine again, I kiss her.

AUTUMN

I've kissed dozens of men at this point in my career. A kiss hardly means anything to me anymore. But Jackson's mouth on mine is unlike any kiss I've had before. I don't know if it's the fact that he's surprised me or the fact that he's kissing me fully and deeply...but I'm feeling it everywhere.

And I don't want it to end. Ever.

A little moan escapes my throat as I tangle my tongue with his but before I can sink fully into the kiss, it's over.

Jackson pulls away and immediately tucks me into his chest, which I'm thankful for. I need a minute, because if I look at him now, it will probably be in a 'stars in my eyes' kind of way. And I need to look like I've kissed him countless times.

He maneuvers me until I'm facing Gage. Gage looks a little shell-shocked, his gaze darting between us, before he pastes a smile on his face and opens his arms to me.

"Hey," I say softly. "It's so good to see you."

He gives me a quick, reassuring squeeze before he releases me though he keeps his hands on my arms. Our hug will definitely come off as friendlier than the one I shared with Jackson.

"Hey, Atwood. Looks like you still know how to chase trouble."

I laugh. "I told you years ago. I don't chase it. Trouble chases me. I'm just shit at running."

He throws his head back and laughs. “Well, don’t you worry. Jackson here is a sharpshooter. He’ll cut off the trouble at the pass.”

My heart melts at that. I don’t know if this is how Gage always runs his business or if I’m special because we’re friends, but it means the world to me at all the lengths he’s willing to go. I look at Jackson. Green. His eyes are green. They remind me of the clear sun-glittered water of a cenote I visited in Mexico. And those beautiful eyes are studying me, his jaw tense. I wish I knew him. Maybe then I would have some sort of insight on what’s going on in his head. I’m asking a lot of him, not only to protect me, but to be an actor as well. Not many would agree. And yet, he knocked it out of the park right at the start.

“Let’s grab your stuff,” Gage says, breaking us out of our stare down.

Jackson closes in and throws an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in. I stiffen then my acting skills take over and I cuddle into him before looking up at him from under my lashes. He’s looking down at me, and smiles before pressing his lips against my forehead. I clutch his waist, not just for appearances sake, but because if he keeps doing this, I’m going to be a puddle at his feet. His touches and smiles, that soul-melting kiss...they’re hitting me harder than my last orgasm.

We make idle chit-chat as we wait for my other suitcase though I have no idea how I’m keeping up with the roar of my body responding to being pressed up against Jackson. Every cell inside me feels like it’s running around in chaos. I’m hot. My heart is racing. My skin is prickly.

Gage grabs my suitcase, Jackson has hold of my carry-on and we head out of the airport. Jackson keeps his arm around me all the way to the car. He opens the backseat door to a huge black SUV with dark tinted windows. He gestures for me to get in the backseat then goes around gets in the front passenger seat. His attention alert as Gage puts my luggage in the back. He’s no longer the affectionate boyfriend – he’s all bodyguard.

The backseat suddenly feels even more isolating.

Gage gets in the driver's seat and as soon as his door shuts, we all let out a sigh of relief. As if keeping up the charade took all we had. We don't talk as Gage maneuvers us out of the airport parking lot. Both guys staying alert and vigilant.

"D," Jackson says after about ten minutes of silence. "Maroon sedan, three back, right lane."

"Yeah, I see him," Gage says. "Fucker was waiting right outside of the airport."

I start to look back.

"Don't move," Jackson barks, his booming voice vibrating throughout the car. The force of it has me flinching before I freeze in place.

Yep, the sweet guy from the airport is gone.

Jackson pulls out his phone, swipes at his screen then places it at his ear. "ETA forty minutes. Be ready," he says sharply then hangs up. Gage reaches over and hits Jackson's arm with just enough force to show he's unhappy then gives Jackson a warning look. Not sure what's going on, but I don't like being in the dark.

"What does that mean?"

"We're doing a bait and switch so we can get you to your house safely," Jackson says though he doesn't look back at me.

I push my sunglasses up into my hair like a makeshift headband. "I can't believe they found me this fast. Though I'm not sure why I'm surprised by anything at this point."

"Media already got wind you were coming into town and after your stunt in the airport, now the secret of when is gone."

"My stunt? You think I enjoyed that?"

I see Jackson's jaw clench before he looks out the passenger window. "I didn't say that."

"You want me to stay silent and take all their insults." My voice raises.

He looks over his shoulder at me, his eyes narrowed. “Did I fucking say that?”

“You implied it.” Seriously, where is the guy who held me tightly and told me he’s got me then kissed the living hell out of me?

His mouth tightens before he turns back around. “Cover was blown. That’s all I meant.”

We ride the rest of the way in mostly silence except for Gage and Jackson exchanging quick glances and updating about our tail. Eventually, we pull into a gated community and up to a house where the garage door is open.

“Whose house is this?” I ask because all the silence is about to kill me. And I really hate not being in the know.

“A former client,” Gage answers. “He’s offering us his wife’s car so we can get out of here easily.”

We pull into the garage and there’s a soccer mom looking SUV already inside. A woman stands next to it with an excited but sweet smile on her lips. Her look is very suburban mom with her soft-curved hair styled into a messy bun and wearing high-end athleisure wear. I can’t tell if she’s more *Real Housewives* or “Cool” Mom from *Mean Girls*. Yet her expression tells me she’s neither. It’s far too genuine for either of those roles. She reminds me of a younger and more modern version of Kitty Forman from *That 70’s Show*.

“And does the car come with its very own soccer mom?”

Gage chuckles. “For today, but only in looks. That’s Everleigh.”

Everleigh is Gage’s girlfriend and the reason why Gage isn’t stepping in as my bodyguard. She must be part of the bait and switch. We get out and once the garage door closes Gage makes a beeline for her.

“Damn, baby, you look hot.”

Her eyes spark as they wrap their arms around each other at the same time. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, maybe we should do a little suburban mom/delivery guy role-playing later.”

“Fuck, D—Gage. Could you at least whisper that shit?” Jackson says as he goes to the back of the vehicle to remove my luggage.

Everleigh blushes, but she doesn't look too embarrassed. She whispers something to Gage, and he lets out a little growl before kissing her. “You got yourself a promise,” he mutters softly, but not too softly.

I blow out a hard breath and look away. Jesus, those two just raised the temperature in here. I love that Gage is happy but seeing them together...I hate to admit it, but I'm a little jealous. My only hot and heavy, gotta have you now, relationship was Ben. And I was twenty and exploring my sexuality every chance I got. The fact that we had to keep things secret added another layer of hotness to it. After the hotness turned to a nightmare, I didn't trust relationships the same, not to mention that I was now famous so dating got a lot trickier.

I turn to Jackson, still at the back of the vehicle. “Why do you call him D sometimes?”

He opens the hatch to the Mom-SUV so he can move over my luggage. “Because that's what I called him in the military, D or Díaz. But now that he's pussy-whipped, he wants to be called Gage. I'm trying.”

“Hey, I heard that. And if you think it's an insult, you're wrong,” Gage yells from the front of the garage.

Jackson cracks a smile and shakes his head. I look between him and Gage, who is grinning himself. It really seems like they have a strong friendship between them. And Gage clearly trusts Jackson with my unconventional job, which means I should be able to trust him too. Actually doing that though...

I look back at Jackson and the carefree expression from a second ago is gone and he's concentrating on adjusting my luggage in the new car. Instant trust isn't something I can

afford to give anymore so if Jackson wants it, he's going to have to earn it.

He turns to me then with that stern expression still on his face. "Get in." He hooks a thumb toward the back of the SUV. Surely, he doesn't mean the back. I go to the backseat passenger door and open it to find a child seat with a baby-sized doll strapped in. And the other passenger seat has a high-back booster seat with an older dummy kid in it, a hat on its head to conceal its fakeness. I look at Jackson.

"The back."

I slam the door and return to the back of the car and glance inside. My luggage is stuffed in a vertical line down the middle of the back, leaving two small slivers of space on each side. This isn't one of those giant bus-like SUVs. This is a mid-size with a third row that is only suitable for children.

"You want me to get in the trunk?"

"It's not the trunk, it's the back with the seats down."

"It's an SUV. That *is* the trunk."

"It's not the trunk."

I cross my arms and glare at him, not moving.

His jaw works in clear annoyance before he blows out a breath. "Come on, wildcat, just get in."

The nickname sucks the breath from me, and I have to stop myself from laughing out loud. That was so on point. Or at least it would have been years ago when I let that side of me come out and play. It almost makes me want to get into the car without further argument. Almost.

When I don't move, Jackson suddenly closes the space between us and leans down until his face is inches from mine. "Get. In. The. Fucking. Car."

If he thinks I'm scared of the rough, barely contained control in his voice, he's got another think coming. If he wants a wildcat, I'll show him one.

“Autumn,” Gage says gently, before I can bare my claws. “You won’t be back there long, I promise. Everleigh is going to drive you to your place and I’m going to do a decoy run to a hotel.”

I break my glare from Jackson and look at Gage, now at my side, then at Everleigh, who is watching me with doe-wide eyes before giving me a smile that’s sympathetic yet encouraging.

“Can you at least give me some more room and move my luggage over?”

“No, I’m coming in there with you. Unless you’d rather snuggle up with me?” He drops the stern bodyguard look and those jewel-like eyes practically glitter with a mischief – and maybe a little heat – that catches me off guard.

Being pressed next to Jackson’s body wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. But his hot and cold attitude is not something I’m interested in getting closer to.

“No, thanks. I can still taste your lunch. I’d rather not spend a whole car ride smelling it too.”

He presses his lips together and I can’t tell if he’s trying not to laugh or if he’s annoyed. He nods toward the car, and I crawl into the small space doing my best to look comfortable and dignified. He then moves into the space on the other side of my luggage. I can’t help but to smile as he grunts and groans as he struggles to fit comfortably. At least he’s suffering more than I am.

“Shut the damn gate and let’s get going,” he barks out.

Gage chuckles and hits the button, closing us in. The driver’s seat door opens, but instead of Everleigh getting in, I hear her and Gage kissing.

“Everleigh, stop sucking face and get in the car!” Jackson snaps.

“Hey, watch it,” Gage snaps back and I wish I could see his expression. I imagine it’s murderous for talking to his girl that way. His voice then softens as he says to Everleigh, “Be careful, baby. I’ll see you soon.”

The door finally shuts and we're soon backing out of the garage. After we're out of the neighborhood and on the way, Jackson asks her if our little friend stayed put and she ensures him they did.

I can see his face since the suitcase isn't pushed this far up, and his expression is tight and annoyed. I would swear that the man who held me and told me he had me was a completely different man.

"You know, I really should give you my agent's number," I tell him.

His gaze jumps to mine. "Why?"

"Because it takes talent to go from tender airport boyfriend to rude jackass in the span of two minutes."

His mouth twists and I wait to see if he has a good comeback. Instead, he shrugs.

"Oh, never mind. My ex has that role down pat and, honestly, he's not that talented."

Jackson's expression instantly hardens. "I'm nothing like your fucking ex."

His words light me up again. God, I hope he's right. Except how many times have I hoped they'd be different, in one way or another? "Every man is like my ex eventually."

"Maybe you're shit at choosing who you date."

My stomach knots at that. He's not wrong. I don't even trust myself anymore. Not that I'm going to admit that.

"Maybe men are just shit."

"Oh my God, if you two don't stop bickering, I'm going to pull this car over right now," Everleigh yells at us from the front.

Surprising the hell out of me, Jackson bursts out laughing. "Taking the suburban mom role a little seriously there aren't you, Leigh-Leigh?"

"Well, if you two are going to act like annoying brats then yeah. And Leigh-leigh? Really?"

“Thought I’d give it a try. D – Gage always growls at me when I call you by your name.”

“Oh yeah?” She sounds awfully pleased by the fact that Gage gets all territorial over her.

“I tried out Ev once and D snapped at me for that too. I thought I’d try something really different.”

“Ugh, yeah, don’t call me Ev. My ex called me that.”

Hmm, sounds like there’s a story there. I don’t know much about Everleigh other than she’s a travel nurse that moved in next door to Gage and that’s how they met.

“Ah, at least I understand that one,” Jackson says.

“I suppose I can let Leigh-Leigh slide even though it’s ridiculous. I kinda like the idea of you having kids and them calling me Aunt Leigh-Leigh.”

Jackson barks out another laugh. Man, it’s a really sexy sound. I don’t get him. One minute he’s all growly bodyguard then he’s teasing his friend’s girlfriend with a nickname a two-year old would come up with.

“What?” He says and I realize I must be wearing an incredulous expression on my face.

“I don’t get you.”

“You don’t have to get me. You just need to listen and obey me.”

Only if it’s in a king-sized bed.

Jeez, where did that come from? A line like that usually has me running in the opposite direction, instead I’m fantasizing of all the gratifying ways my surly and sexy bodyguard could order me around the bedroom.

Ugh, what is wrong with me? I turn my head so I’m staring at the roof of the car. “Everleigh, I know we haven’t officially met yet, but can you tell me how much longer it’ll be?”

She laughs softly. “Pulling into the neighborhood now.”

“No new friends following us, Leigh-Leigh?”

“Nothing, but I’ll go the route you told me to and make sure before going to the house.”

I suppress a groan. Or at least I thought I did. Everleigh is laughing again. “Don’t worry, Autumn. I stocked the kitchen with lots of wine.”

“Oh my God, I love you!”

“All part of my secret plan to make you my new best friend.”

“Consider us BFFs, Leigh-Leigh.”

I’m really good at putting on my actor face in any given situation. I’m a professional, after all. So, the fact that I’m acting like a petulant child is really pissing me off. I’m pretty sure I wore ‘annoyed bitch’ on my face the whole time Jackson gave me a tour of the house. It really is beautiful, with floor to ceiling windows in the living room and a master bedroom with a bird’s eye view of Lake Austin. It deserved some oohs and ahhs from me and I couldn’t dredge up one.

Now we’ve gone in separate directions, and I’m settled in a chaise lounge on the back patio, listening to the soothing sound of the infinity edge pool’s waterfall with a glass of chilled white wine in my hand. Everleigh gave me a very heavy-handed pour which I appreciate. I really want to get to know the woman who makes Gage happy and has an easy camaraderie with Jackson. How do you go from getting his barks and grunts to his jokes and laughs? Even if I do find his barks and grunts as sexy as I do annoying.

There’s seriously something wrong with me.

I don’t even know why I’m bothered by his Jekyll and Hyde behavior between the airport and car. Of all people, I should understand he was playing a part. I was playing along with him. Except his words, his hug...his kiss. It all felt genuine. And I needed real in that moment. The fact that it wasn’t...

I shake off the thought. It doesn't matter.

"I'm really sorry I've been such a bitch and not even properly introduced myself."

Everleigh waves off my apology with her wine glass. "It's fine, we're BFFs now." She looks at me then. "And if you think I didn't take that declaration seriously then think again. I used to rearrange my Thursday nights around *Sunset Beach*. I always thought we'd be besties one day."

I laugh and lift my glass in a salute. "To new BFFs."

Her eyes light up as she clinks my glass. "Okay, the fangirl in me just gushed a little. Don't worry, I won't let her out. I'm cool."

"Cool enough for me to call you Leigh-Leigh?"

Everleigh cringe-laughs as she rolls her eyes. "Please don't. I don't think Gage will growl at you for calling me Everleigh."

"I have to say hearing Gage growl at Jackson for snapping at you was pretty awesome. I've never seen that side of him before."

"I'm pretty fond of his growly side." She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively

"You two are neighbors, right? How long have you been together now?"

"A few months. I'm a travel nurse and moved to San Antonio in early summer."

Gage lives in San Antonio, where we grew up, and I was elated when he told me was coming to Austin today to see me and help get me settled with Jackson. And he wanted me to meet Everleigh.

"You guys seem pretty serious, if you don't mind me saying. Is this a long-term thing or only while you're in town?"

"Oh, we're long-term. I'm so in love with him, there's no way I'm walking away from this. We'll figure it all out when I

get to the end of my contract, but we're committed to one another."

Another spike of jealousy rises in me. She's so sure. Of her feelings, of his. I've never had that. That sureness, that trust. My relationships have been one shitshow after another.

"So, what can you tell me about my faux-boyfriend?"

"Honestly, I don't know Jackson too well yet. Gage and I only went all in on our relationship just over a week ago. We've kept to ourselves through most of our time together, but the first time I met Jackson, we immediately hit it off. I've hung out with him a couple times this week because he was in San Antonio. He's a good guy, Autumn. Kind of a goofball at times. I'm not sure where all this alphahole is coming from, but I've never seen him in work-mode before. He's a good friend to Gage, really protective of him. Once y'all get on the right footing, you'll see."

Goofball? I guess I got a glimpse of it with his whole Leigh-Leigh conversation. Was that the real Jackson? Was that the same man who told me he had me?

A nervous little flutter takes flight in my stomach. And I hate it. Because I know exactly what it is. Hope. And usually when hope blooms, I'm inevitably disappointed. And I'm so tired of being disappointed. I honestly don't know how much more my soul can take.

JACKSON

I've put myself in a lot of dangerous situations in my life. I learned to take them head on, whether I liked it or not. Whether it scared the shit out of me or not. I faced it. But today one five-foot-four actress who kisses like a dream come true has me hiding away in my room like a sullen teenager.

I'm checking all the safety measures we put in place even though I already did that before we picked up Autumn at the airport. I look over every camera angle on the monitors set up in my room, giving a slight adjustment to the ones on the back patio where the girls are drinking wine. They seem to be getting along well. Autumn is certainly being more friendly to her than she was me.

Notifications pop up on my phone and monitor, telling me Gage is here. I'm satisfied that no one is getting close to this house without me knowing it.

Gage enters and I watch on the monitor as he heads straight to Everleigh. He sits on the chaise, pulling her legs over his lap so she's almost sitting on top of him. Then he kisses the hell out of her. You'd think he'd been away from her for two days instead of two hours.

I glance at Autumn and she's watching with her mouth slightly agape. I better go break them up before they give her a show. Once those two get started...

"There's four bedrooms in this house. Go find one," I say as I step onto the patio.

Everleigh giggles as she breaks the kiss. Gage looks tempted. The asshole. Not long ago, he was denying there was anything more than sex between them and now he's a proud card-carrying boyfriend. If I'd known he was going to be this ridiculous, I might not have pushed him to admit his feelings. Okay, that's a lie. It was clear the moment I saw the two of them together they were meant for each other, and I like to see Gage happy.

"I was kidding, dude," I say when that tempted look remains on his face.

I glance over at Autumn and she's blinking her gaze away from the couple, a slight blush in her cheeks. What was she thinking? Surely their show of affection didn't embarrass her. I wouldn't think the dirty mouthed woman from the voicemail would turn prudish over some sexy PDA.

She takes a big gulp of her wine before she says, "If you and Gage are going to fuck like bunnies before you leave, please avoid my room. It would bum me out hard if my room saw sex before I did."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say something flirty, but I stop it before I can. I'm not here to flirt. I'm certainly not here to help her break in her bed properly – no matter how much I want to.

Everleigh laughs. "I think we can control ourselves."

Gage looks seriously crestfallen by Everleigh's comment for a good couple of seconds before he looks at Autumn. "It looks like your reunion with Jackson is trending more than your interaction with that airport asshat. However, both events happening within minutes of each other has the internet lit up."

Autumn rolls her eyes and takes another deep sip of wine. "Wonderful."

Everleigh is on her phone now, watching a video. "Whoa. That kiss is hot!" She looks at me and wiggles her brows. "Well played, sir."

Autumn holds out her hand and takes the phone. As she watches the video, her cheeks redden again, this time a much

deeper shade.

“Everyone wants to know who Jackson is,” Everleigh says and looks at me again. “And if he’s packing ten inches.”

Jesus Christ.

Autumn looks at me with wide eyes then her gaze flicks down to my crotch. And fuck if my cock doesn’t twitch and immediately start thickening. Her flushed face, darkening eyes, and wet lips send a slew of fantasies fast-forwarding through my mind.

Of her with those plump lips around my cock. Of her naked and spread eagle on that chaise. Of her sweet mouth telling me exactly how much she loves my tongue between her legs.

Shit. Now I’m so turned on it hurts. And I need her to stop looking at my dick or I’ll be tempted to make one of those fantasies come true.

“Go ahead, take it all in.”

Her gaze snaps up to mine, a stunned expression on her face. And I don’t blame her. That’s not what I meant to say at all. My mouth apparently was still watching the porno in my mind.

The shock disappears quickly though. “Don’t worry, I could...I mean, did.” The devilish smirk she gives me tells me that little slip was on purpose.

I turn away, pretending to be annoyed and not even more turned on at the thought of her taking all of me. My dick is full on hard now and it’s not unnoticeable. I take a deep breath in and focus my mind on anything but Autumn Atwood.

“Well, um, on that note, we need to get out of here,” Gage says.

“What? You’re leaving?” There is a slight panic to Autumn’s voice, and I turn back slightly to see the disappointment on her face. “But Everleigh and I are drinking wine and getting to know each other. Plus, I haven’t even had a chance to catch up with you.”

“Sorry, Atwood, but we have to get the mom mobile back. Plus, I have meeting. We’ll have time to get together before you go back to L.A.”

She narrows her eyes at him. “I know that voice. That’s your, ‘let’s lie to Autumn so I don’t get in detention again’ voice.”

Gage throws his head back and laughs. “Autumn, you got me in detention a lot.”

“Psh. It wasn’t that much. You make me sound like a juvenile delinquent or something. I was a sweet lamb.”

Gage snorts. “More like a spitting llama.”

Autumn laughs at that. Full out, throws her head back and laughs hard and loudly. There’s nothing inherently sexy about it, except the pure joy that takes over her expression. That in this moment, she completely let go. She’s purely herself.

“Man, I’ve missed you,” she says affectionately.

Gage moves over to her chaise and pulls her into a side hug. “Me too, Atwood. And honestly, it was a pleasure to serve detention with you. You only spit on those who truly deserved it.”

Even though it’s completely platonic, I really don’t like Gage’s arm around Autumn. I don’t like how easy it is for him to touch her. That he gets her smiles and laughs. That he knows her, and her secrets. I want those things. I want them to be mine. Only mine.

Hell, what is wrong with me? I can’t be having ‘mine’ thoughts about a woman I met a few hours ago. And I especially can’t be having them for a client.

“And I love your girl,” she says, smiling at Everleigh before she looks at Gage. “Did she tell you we’re already BFFs?”

There’s enough looseness to Autumn’s voice to tell me that the wine has started to kick in.

Gage shakes his head, smiling. “Why am I not surprised? She tell you she’s been fangirling ever since I told her I knew

you?”

“She’s been keeping her fangirl under control. Because she’s cool like that, right?” Autumn winks at Everleigh.

“Right. I’m totally cool. The coolest,” Everleigh says as she finishes off her wine in a quick swallow. Then she looks at Gage. “Do we really have to go? Getting drunk with Autumn Atwood sounds way more fun than sitting in a hotel room while you’re in a meeting.”

“Babe, you know you want to be sober for what comes after the meeting. Maybe before the meeting too, if we hurry.”

Everleigh’s gaze sparks with excitement.

“Oh my God, you two are horndogs.” Autumn pushes Gage away from her. “Go! Go fuck and be merry.”

Gage laughs and gives her another hug before standing and coming over to me while the girls hug and say good-bye.

“Everything all good here?”

“Yeah, everything is set up and working properly.”

“Ready for this one?” Gage nods his head toward Autumn. “She can be a handful as you can see.”

“I can handle her,” I say with more confidence than I feel.

Gage chuckles and gives me a fist bump. “Hopefully, she doesn’t handle you first.”

Autumn Atwood is going to be the death of me.

After Gage and Everleigh left, Autumn gave me a ‘get lost’ glance as she poured a fresh glass of wine. So, I left her on the patio and disappeared into my room and buried myself in work that had nothing to do with this current job. An hour later, movement on the pool camera grabs my attention. Autumn is peeling off her clothes and stepping into the pool completely naked. In broad daylight.

We might be secluded here, but we aren't devoid of neighbors. Just what she needs after the day of attention she's gotten is some nude pictures ending up on the internet. I swear, this woman is a walking scandal.

I get up and find a towel then head to the back patio. "What the hell are you doing?"

She's at the infinity wall, a fresh glass of wine in her hand as she gazes out at the view. She turns at the sound of my voice. She's wearing sunglasses which might conceal her identity some, but it's not nearly enough.

"Swimming."

"Naked?"

"You can't tell I'm naked under the water."

"You stripped down where anyone could see."

"How do you know?"

"I installed cameras." I point above me to the camera aimed right at the pool and to the other two on the patio.

She angles her head above me. I don't have a good read on what she's thinking, if she's upset or not. Finally, the right side of her mouth quirks up. "Enjoy the view?"

Christ, this woman. She seems determined to push every one of my buttons.

"Don't you have a swimsuit?"

"I do. But I like the feel of the water on my skin."

And just like that I'm hard all over again. Now all I can think about is her body, slick and sleek, moving through the water. Fuck me.

"It's daylight and there are neighbors. You aren't fully hidden."

She sighs as she glances around. "No one knows it's me."

"It doesn't fucking matter, Autumn! Your body can still end up on the internet. And eventually, they'll figure out it's

you. Get out of the damn pool right now and put on a swimsuit.”

I might not be able to see her eyes, but from the way her jaw tightens and her shoulders tense, I know I’ve pissed her off. I don’t care. She doesn’t say anything. But she doesn’t move either.

“I’ll come in there and get you, wildcat.”

That smirk of her returns, but I don’t think she’s amused. I think she’s interested in seeing if I’ll follow up on my threat.

I drop the towel at the edge of the pool as I toe off my shoes. Then I grab the back of my shirt and pull it over my head. Her mouth forms an O before that interested smirk returns. She leans back against the wall, spreading her arms along it as if she’s ready for a show. The pose makes her tits bob along the surface of the water, her nipples teasing the ripples.

I bring my hands to the button of my jeans and pop it open. She licks her lips, and I can practically feel her gaze on me as I unzip the zipper. There’s no hiding my erection tenting my boxer briefs as my jeans part. She’s breathing harder now. I can see her taut nipples breaking the surface more.

Fuck. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this siren of a woman. I should have, considering her voicemail. If I get into that water, then I’m giving in to exactly what she wants. I’ll just be like those poor sailors who dove in after the siren’s song.

I zip up and button my jeans back. Her head jerks slightly and I know she’s looking back up at my face trying to figure out why I changed my mind.

“I can’t help you if you aren’t going to help yourself. You want to avoid any more scandal then get yourself out of the pool and put some clothes on. But if you want to play into the image the media is conjuring up then go ahead. Enjoy your swim.”

I pick up my shirt and shoes and go back into the house. I return to my room and watch the security footage. She’s still

on the wall, but I can tell that all that bravado she had earlier is gone. And I hate myself for taking it from her. But she hired me to protect her and that means even from herself.

She takes a big sip from her wine glass before she moves across the pool. She sets her glass down and reaches for the towel. She does her best to keep as much of herself hidden as she gets out of the pool, but the camera has a front and center picture of her. Of her fucking perfect tits, not large, but not small. Her sweet hourglass figure. And what looks to be an almost bare pussy.

My God, she's gorgeous.

While I shouldn't, I soak up every one of these few seconds before she wraps the towel around her. I could rewind and pause. I could grip my cock and give it the release it's dying for, but I don't. Just watching her this much already feels like an invasion of privacy, even if I am only doing my job.

I watch as she grabs her glass, leaving behind the empty bottle she shared with Everleigh on the table between the loungers and goes to the kitchen. She grabs a few things from the refrigerator and pantry then picks up another full bottle of wine before heading through the hallway and into her bedroom. I hear the door close with soft finality.

I lean back in my chair and run my hands through my hair.

Tomorrow, we're going to have to press the reset button. This back and forth hot and cold isn't going to work. Especially the hot. We have to squash this heat between us. Smother it. I'm here to protect her, not be her fuck toy.

It's midnight when I finally give up on Autumn emerging from her room again. If she tapped into that second bottle of wine, then I imagine she's passed out by now. I probably should check on her, but I think it's best if I let things be for now.

I shut off the lights to my room, only the dim glow of the monitor fills the space. I head to my bathroom and brush my teeth then undress and pull on my sweatpants. I usually sleep

nude or in my boxer briefs, but since I'm basically on duty all night, it's better if I'm a little more dressed. I head over to my monitor to put it to sleep when I see movement in the hallway. Autumn's walking toward the living room, a wineglass dangling from her fingertips. Well, at least she hasn't drunk it all yet. She's wearing what looks like a swimsuit cover-up. It's a dark sari style dress.

Please God, be wearing a swimsuit underneath.

Her walk down the hall is steady enough, but every once in a while, there looks to be a slight sway to it. I sit back down. So much for sleep. I need to make sure she doesn't accidentally drown herself. I should probably go out there and act like a lifeguard, but she clearly wants this moment to herself, and I need to leave her to it. If she hadn't been drinking, I'd even turn off the monitor and leave her to her privacy.

I huff a laugh. I wish I could say it's the bodyguard in me that keeps me watching. No, I want to watch her. I want to see her in her private moment. I want to see *her*. With no walls up. With the actress stripped away. I want to see the real Autumn Atwood.

She stands at the edge of the pool, staring out into the darkness. Her cover-up still wrapped around her body. What is she thinking?

Finally, she moves. She brings the wineglass up and takes a sip then bends down and sets it at the edge of the pool. Then she turns and faces the camera. Her head tips up and she looks right into it. There's no smirk. No seductive look. If anything, I would say this is the most honest expression I've seen on her face yet. But is it? Or is she a really good actress?

She pulls at the belt at her waist and the dress opens up. Fuck me. She's naked.

She shrugs her shoulders and eases the cover-up off and lets it fall at her feet. As much as I want to soak up her gorgeous body, I keep my gaze on her face. There's still none of the teasing seduction she put on this afternoon. She simply stares at me. Daring me to watch. Then she turns and eases

herself into the pool. She dives under, her sweet ass breaking the surface before she's fully submerged. I sit on the edge of my chair, waiting for her come up for air. She swims to the edge of the pool, in the same place she was earlier. She stands at the wall again, looking out at the view. Except there's nothing to see. The moon is starting a new phase, it's barely a sliver in the sky. It's just her and the darkness.

She stays there for a while then dives back under. I watch as she swims laps back and forth across the pool. Sometimes she uses the freestyle stroke, but mostly she swims underwater. She goes for so long that I start to worry if she's exerting herself too much considering her probable state of drunkenness. She finally stops going back and forth, breaking the surface, breathing hard. Her body is fully under the water, but I can see her chest moving up and down quickly. She leans her head against the edge and closes her eyes.

“What are you chasing, Autumn?”

Trouble chases me. I'm just shit at running.

Who is this woman? Is she the siren who leaves a sexy voicemail for her lover or is she America's sweetheart?

When her breathing finally gets back to normal, she slowly swims back to the infinity wall. She faces out again, giving me her back. Her heart-shaped ass is pushed out enough that I can barely see the outline of it beneath the dark surface. I want to feel that delicious ass in my hands. I want to grip it tight, squeeze it as she eases herself down on my cock. Show her exactly how I like it while those sweet tits bounce in my face.

Shit.

I push back from the desk and run my hands over my scruff and through my hair. My cock is tenting my sweatpants and I want to yank it out and fuck it with my hand so badly. But I can't. It's wrong.

I see movement on the screen and look back fully at it. Autumn is now facing the camera. Not only that, but she's staring right at it as she slowly moves her arms through the water, like they're in some sort of slow dance.

I like the feel of the water on my skin.

I watch as she sways them through the water, over and over. Seeming to simply enjoy the feel. Then they fully submerge into the water. It's hard to tell exactly what she's doing, but it seems like she's moving them up and down her torso. Every once in a while, I see her fingertips break the surface to touch her the tops of her breasts, but never her nipples.

I look back at her face and she's still watching the camera. Her expression isn't quite as blank as it was earlier, there's a softness to it. A surrender.

"Touch yourself," I whisper to the screen.

As if she heard me, her thumbs move over her nipples. A barely there touch before they sink beneath the surface again. I wish like hell the pool light was on so I could see her. The way her arm moves, I'm pretty sure she has those slender fingers on her pussy.

My heart is pounding against my chest. I need to see her come undone.

"Please."

But she doesn't submit to my whispered command. Her arms come up and start swaying in the water again, skimming her skin as they pass by her body. The look of surrender is still in her gaze. She wants to. She wants to give in. Or...

Does she want me to give in?

I lean closer to the screen and there's almost a desperation to her expression. Then she sinks her whole body underneath the water before immediately coming back up, this time standing fully bringing those gorgeous tits on full display. Eyes closed, she pushes her hands through her hair before running them down her face, getting rid of any excess water. Then she opens her eyes. Staring right at me. She continues to run her hands down her face, over her collarbone, and slowly down.

My cock is throbbing and before I can fully process what I'm doing, I'm shoving my sweatpants down. Her mouth parts

ever so slightly as her fingertips graze over her nipples. I see her chest hitch at the touch, and I grip my cock and slowly start pumping it.

It might be wrong and maybe I'm telling myself this is what she wants because it's what I want, but something tells me I'm not being solely selfish. She's looking at the camera. She knows I'm watching. She wants me at her mercy.

And I am.

She continues to softly caress herself, her arm never sinking far beneath the surface. As much as I want her to slip her fingers in the folds of her pussy, just watching her in this almost innocent dance of light touches is more erotic than I ever thought it would be. Next time her hands come up above the surface, she lets the water she holds slip down and over her breasts.

She bites her lip, and my dick hardens even more, pulsing with hot tingles. She's turned on. She likes the thought of having me like this. Jerking off to her sweet body. To her seductively innocent dance.

She closes her eyes, and her head falls back as she drips water down her body again. Then she looks right at the camera, licks her lips before she takes her tits in her hands and tweaks her nipples. I'm lost. I jerk my cock as a rush of heat flows through me and cum spills over my hand. I keep my eyes on her as I work myself over and over until I'm fully depleted.

As if she knows what I've done, she sinks into the water, and I see her shadow push off the wall then emerge on the other side where the steps are. She doesn't look at the camera as she gets out. Simply wraps herself back in her cover-up and heads back inside. I turn off the monitor so there's no light whatsoever in the room and listen as she comes down the hallway. There's a pause before I hear the closing of her door.

How in the world am I going to survive this woman?

AUTUMN

I bring the covers over my head as if it's a memory eraser. Unfortunately, it doesn't chase away the memory of touching myself in the pool last night while I stared at a camera, hoping Jackson was on the other side watching.

“Why Autumn?”

Gah, I'm so stupid. Why would I do that with the man I have a business relationship with? The same one I got pissed at for playing hot and cold then I turn around and do the same thing. What was I expecting to happen while I paraded around naked and touched myself? For him to come outside and take off those pants like he refused to do in the afternoon? To kiss me senseless again? To make me forget that my life is falling apart at the seams?

No, that wasn't my aim, not that I would have turned any of that down. I mostly just wanted him to see me. To want me. I wanted to imagine he was seeing me, the real me.

Not that I really know who that is anymore.

But yesterday when he gave me that nickname, it lit something inside me. I felt like that girl from the voicemail. That free-spirited girl, the wildcat, who wanted to live life to the fullest. I wanted to experience that safe feeling of being in a relationship that allowed me to be myself and explore my sexual nature again.

Not that the safe feeling lasted back then.

I was only twenty when I met Ben Townsend. The whole *Sunset Beach* cast was a bunch of fresh-faced actors that felt lucky enough to get their own television series. We never fathomed that by the third aired episode, our fame would be launched. Suddenly, we couldn't go anywhere without being recognized.

The chemistry between me and Ben was off the charts. We barely made it through the first month of filming before we were ripping our clothes off each other. We kept it on the down low through production, but eventually our agents learned of our relationship. They told us to keep it under wraps because it would be better for publicity and fan interest. Plus, if we broke up then it wouldn't affect production or the fan reaction. So, that's what we did.

And now I wish we never had. Because no one believes that the voicemail is nine years old and not from the past year when Ben and I were filming Home & Heart's latest Christmas movie, *Snowed In With You*.

I wasn't exactly looking forward to working with Ben again, but the fans drove our reunion and my hands were tied. After we broke up during *Sunset Beach*, Ben was always the perfect gentleman in front of everyone, but as soon as we were alone it was all insults and nasty remarks. In the final season he started dating someone else and finally he left me alone. To my complete shock, before we started filming *Snowed In*, he apologized for his behavior, claiming he was sober now and had grown up a lot. Filming with him ended up being a better experience than I ever expected, almost like he was the guy I originally fell for, and we made Home & Heart's most successful movie yet.

I should have known it was all bullshit. A leopard can't change its spots.

I throw off the covers and grab my phone from the nightstand and run through my messages, ignoring all the social media notifications. My agent has sent several texts in all caps and considering it's early in California that means he started working before his fourth cup of coffee. His pissyness is especially fragile first thing in the morning. He's having a

shit fit about my performance in the airport and because of it he's getting even more calls about me starring in adult films. I focus on the last two messages of his tirade.

Ed: I'm hearing rumors from H&H and they aren't good. WE NEED TO FIX THIS OR CONSIDER THOSE CONTRACTS CANCELLED!!

Ed: YOU NEED TO CALL ME!!

I snort at the last one. Like I'm going to talk to him right now.

Me: I'll call Sylvia Davis and see if I can smooth some ruffled feathers. I'm absolutely not calling you when you ALL CAPS me. Drink more coffee, Ed. I'll keep you posted.

Ed: YOU'RE A PAIN IN MY ASS!!

Me: Love you too!

I scroll through my contacts and find Sylvia's contact. Sylvia is the CEO of the Home & Heart Channel and the few times we've met, we hit it off. Maybe if I talk to her, I can salvage my contracts with them. If I can't keep them, then I don't know what's going to become of my career.

My contact number is a direct line to her office. Her assistant puts me through as soon as I say my name. One good thing about being a part of a scandal is apparently you get to skip the appointment line.

"Autumn, wish I could say it's a surprise to hear from you." Sylvia's voice is smooth, but direct.

"Hello, Ms. Davis. Thank you so much for taking my call."

She gives this humming sound and I'm not sure if that's a good sign or not. "You've given me a hell of a week, Autumn. You're a PR nightmare I don't need. The easiest thing for me to do is terminate your contract."

I swallow and close my eyes. "I'm sure it is."

It's true, as much as I hate it. I make family friendly Christmas movies for them and now I'm famous for an X-

rated voicemail, stalking, potential cheating, and an explicit airport tirade. Not exactly Home & Heart material.

I open my mouth to plead my case, but she cuts me off.

“But I’m holding off,” she says. “For now.”

A rush of air comes out of me as I say, “Really?”

I probably shouldn’t question it, but I’m curious at what’s holding her back.

“Your publicist is worth every penny you’re paying her,” she says. “Your airport outburst has earned you some positive publicity.”

“It has?”

“Putting that guy in his place has garnered you a lot of sympathy and support. Have you not been online lately?”

“No, I’m kind of avoiding it right now.”

“Well, you’re trending. In a good way. You’ve inspired a hashtag urging women to call out their harassers.”

“Really? What is it?”

“Hashtag ten inches of respect.”

I choke on my own breath. “Oh my God! Um, that’s a good thing? Really? Seems sort of counterintuitive.”

“What can I say? The internet has a sense of humor. Honestly, if I fire you, I’m going to look like the jerk here.”

Ah, so this isn’t about me or even women getting respect. This is about their image.

“I see.”

She sighs. “Autumn, the thing is...I really don’t want to fire you. I believe your statement about the voicemail being old and that you and Ben were previously involved. We wanted him for *Snowed In* because we knew it would make us a lot of money after all the fan support. But I don’t know, he reeks of desperation. What you did in the airport was really brave, and I commend you for it. And if I’m being honest, what you said was pretty fucking funny.”

My mouth falls open. I've never heard Sylvia cuss before today, not that I didn't think she didn't, but there's not a lot of cursing that goes on behind the scenes at Home & Heart.

"I want to support you. I genuinely do. But I have a board of directors that's mostly men and well...they aren't crazy about your image. We could take a big hit with your next movie, or it could go big because of all this. I've convinced them so far that it's in our best interest not to terminate the contracts we already have in place, but I don't know how much I can hold them off if things don't turn around soon."

"I completely understand, and I really appreciate your support and candor. I want this behind me as much as you do, I promise. I'm laying low in Austin and hoping the heat will die down."

"I've seen pictures with you and your boyfriend."

I don't say anything, waiting to see if she comments more.

"You two look cute together."

"Thanks. He's amazing, really." I make sure my voice is appropriately love-struck.

Maren created a story that Jackson and I had met last year through a mutual friend, and we've been in a long-distance relationship, even when Ben and I were filming together. That we kept it under wraps until we knew we wanted to try to make a true go of it.

"It's good to see you happy, even through all this. But maybe keep your public interactions a little more PG. Some sweet, wholesome pictures will probably go a long way. That kiss was a little much."

"I will. And thank you, Ms. Davis. I promise I won't let you down."

"I'm expecting you not to."

On that note, we end our call and I sit back in my chair and let out a huge breath. I have a second chance. Now I need not to screw it up.

An hour later, I'm showered, dressed, and amazingly don't look like death warmed over. I leave my room armed with my laptop and the novel I started last night, well restarted. I've lost how many times I've read, *Enemy Mine*.

Jackson's door is open, but I don't see him inside. I make my way to the kitchen and almost break into tears when I see he's made coffee. There's a Post-it note on the carafe that says he went for a run.

I blow out a relieved breath. At least I don't have to deal with him and what happened last night before my first cup of coffee. I find the mugs and pour myself some. During my shower, I decided the best way to handle our fake relationship is to look at it like a script. We need to play out scenes, block them out - all the touches and kisses and romantic looks will be carefully placed. No surprises.

I gather everything and head out to the patio to work out some ideas. I settle into one of the pool chaise loungers and get started. When I think I have a good start planned out, I set my laptop aside and pick up my book. Reading a romance novel, a very spicy one too, while drinking wine with a very hot bodyguard across the hall was clearly a very bad idea last night. My body, and imagination, went into overdrive.

Not wanting to think about my idiocy, I open my book and dive into another world. It isn't long before Camilla and Nick are steaming up the page and my body is tingling. I reach over and grab my coffee and take a sip. It's cold, but I probably don't need anything heating me up any more than I already am anyway.

"Morning."

I jump at the sound of Jackson's voice at my shoulder. My coffee sloshes and spills over my bare legs as I toss my book aside, not wanting it to get wet.

"Shit! Are you okay?"

Before I can reply, Jackson has ripped off his shirt and is using it to wipe off the coffee off my legs.

“Is it burning?”

Am I burning? Hell yes, I am. Jackson is touching me with all his sculpted ab muscles and strong biceps on display. My body is literally on fire. And now I have a detailed view of the tattoo I saw from the pool. It’s a quarter sleeve depicting armor over his shoulder and down his bicep with a smaller portion crawling onto his pec just over where his heart lies. The artist made it look like the skin has been peeled away to reveal the armor underneath. There’s nothing particularly ornate or beautiful about the armor itself other than the artist’s amazing talent. No coat of arms or symbols of any sort. It’s simple, rugged - its only purpose is to protect.

I might not know him well, but I know this tattoo fits him perfectly. Protector. Guarded.

“Autumn!”

I snap out of my thoughts and realize why he’s so frantic. “It was cold. I’m fine.”

He stops drying me off and stares at me, annoyance snapping his brows together before he stands up straight. “You could have mentioned that sooner.”

“Sorry, you surprised me.”

A hard sigh leaves him before he snaps his shirt and puts it over his head and back on his body. There are clear sweat marks at the neck and armpits and now several brown spots dotting the chest area where he cleaned up the coffee.

“How was your run?”

“Good.” he says gruffly. Nothing about his demeanor is giving away that he watched me last night. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he was already asleep.

“I’m going to shower,” he says.

“Hey, can we talk first?” I ask before he can walk away.

His eyes widen a fraction and when his gaze quickly flicks down to my chest before coming back my face, my stomach twists. He watched me. My cheeks start to burn and I'm sure he'll notice, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I acknowledge it.

"Sit." I point to the chaise next to me.

He stiffens and it calms me a little that he seems unsure. Yet he doesn't argue and sits. "What's up?"

"Home & Heart is keeping my contracts intact for now. Apparently, what I said at the airport sparked a lot of support against sexual harassment."

His mouth cracks into a grin. "Yeah, I saw."

I shake my head. "I haven't even looked at it. The H&H CEO told me about it. Hey, I'm all for a positive movement in women's rights, and anything that will keep my career alive. But I can't have any more bad press. I need to show the world I'm living a Home & Heart life."

"What are you getting at?"

"You and I need to be caught by the camera, in wholesome ways. Being lovey-dovey and romantic. No more kisses."

An amused expression fills his face. "You want to be romantic without kissing?"

"Well, there can be kisses. It needs to be Home & Heart kissing. Sweet pecks. Not 'I'm devouring her face' kisses."

He throws his head back and laughs. "I did not devour your face."

I was not expecting his laugh. Or how sexy it was. Or the way it sinks into my chest.

"I...look you know what I mean. Movie kisses. Not real kisses. Not that that kiss was real." Oh God, I need to stop talking.

He's looking at me again, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"No tongue, okay?"

He gives his lips a quick swipe then presses them together, trying not to smile - and failing. “No tongue. Gotcha.”

“I’m serious!”

He throws up his hands in surrender. “My tongue will stay out of your mouth. Scout’s honor.”

I eye him. “Were you even a scout?”

“No comment.”

I find myself smiling. “I was thinking we should look at this as a script. Plan out our outings and how we interact together.”

His expression sobers and I immediately miss his playfulness. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, this is a job. It’s only right to treat it like one.”

Yes, a professional line. Right. That’s exactly what we need. So, why did his agreement create a big ball of disappointment in the pit of my stomach?

It doesn’t matter. I give him my best acting smile. “Okay, good. I’m glad we’re on the same page about that.”

His eyes narrow, but then he gives me another nod before saying he’s going to shower. When he gets up, he notices my book on the ground where I tossed it. He bends and picks it up. The cover is discreet, not giving away the true spiciness inside. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow and a crooked grin.

“This isn’t very Home & Heart material.”

“How would you know?”

“I’ve read it.”

“You’ve read a romance novel?”

He shrugs. “I’ve read the whole series, wildcat. It’s a bit more than a romance, wouldn’t you think? It’s pretty erotic.”

He’s not wrong. It’s about an assassin and the FBI agent she falls in love with. There’s a lot of forbidden and kink

aspects in it.

“I didn’t exactly peg you for a romance novel type.”

“The first book came out during my last year in the military. The guys that had girls back home kept talking about how this book was making all of them hot and bothered. And when they went on leave...let’s just say that two of the women got pregnant. When a book is that potent, there’s no way I wasn’t going to check it out.” He nods toward the well-worn book as he hands it back to me. “Guessing this isn’t the first time you’ve read it.”

“No, I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve read it. I love it so much.” I run my hand down the cover. “You know they’re making a television series out of it?”

His brows shoot up. “Oh really? It better be on a streaming service. The knife play scene is important. Would hate to see it cut.”

My heart picks up at the mention of the erotic scene, the first time the protagonists get together. That was the scene I read before I went to the pool last night. To say it’s potent is an understatement.

“I would hope they’re doing it justice. I’ve tried to get a hold of the audition pages, but they aren’t interested in sending them to me.”

He tips his head. “Why not? You’d make a badass Camilla.”

I laugh at that. “I’m the Home & Heart girl. Not an assassin.”

“No, you’re an actress. You can be anyone you want to be.”

“With this blonde hair and a slew of G-rated Christmas movies under my belt? That’s not what they want.”

“Hair color can change, wildcat.”

With that, he walks off. I wish it were as simple as changing my hair color. The blonde isn’t even real, just a

product of *Sunset Beach* that I've never gotten rid of. No, I'm typecast. If I were them, I wouldn't consider me either.

But the fact that Jackson thinks I'd make a good Camilla... it creates a hope that maybe I can be more than Home & Heart's go-to girl.

But as I've learned, hope is a dangerous thing.

JACKSON

By the time I was out of the shower and joined her back on the patio, Autumn already had our “script” together. It includes holding hands as much as possible, at least five tender touches (examples including: putting her hair behind her ear, a gentle touch to the face, an arm around her shoulders, and a kiss to the cheek), at least three genuine moments of laughter between us, and only one kiss on the lips. She even gave us topic ideas to talk about, which felt like they were stolen from an ice-breaker game.

While I think this script idea is good, this feels way more stilted than I thought it would. But it’ll be good. We need this to keep the professionalism between us - a line we definitely crossed last night.

Even if we aren’t acknowledging that line.

I was sure she was going to mention it this morning when she asked me to sit and talk. And I’m pretty sure my reaction let her know I watched her. I wanted to bring it up, but it seemed she wanted to forget it. I already deleted the file. I’m the only one seeing the security feed right now, but there’s no way I want to take a chance of anyone, especially Gage, seeing it for whatever reason. That was for my eyes only. That moment was ours and ours alone.

We decided Top Golf would be a good place to try out our first public date. We called ahead, but the staff is still a little starstruck. We’ve settled in a bay on the top level and Autumn has already given our waitress an autograph even though we

haven't even gotten our drinks yet. There's excited chatter all around and looks from other bays, even a steady stream of people "walking by."

I don't like it. I asked for a bay on the end of the aisle so there's only one side I have to keep an eye on, and I've positioned myself on the couch where I can clearly see if anyone that's not an employee approach.

"Relax," Autumn says as she snuggles into my side, holding a menu in her hand.

"The whole place knows you're here now. We should ask for a different waitress. This one can't seem to keep her mouth shut."

"No, it's fine. She's a fan. She'll be protective."

I doubt that.

"Hey," she says and takes my chin in her hand. She moves my head so I'll look at her then her thumb slowly caresses my cheek. "It'll be okay."

I sincerely hope she's right because I would hate for those gorgeous brown eyes to fill with disappointment.

"The real question is, do you want queso fries?" She wiggles her eyebrows excitedly and I can't help but to crack a smile. Then she smiles too. And it's like a punch of sunshine.

The woman really is beautiful. I love how right now her whiskey-colored eyes are scotch light, but when she's mad or turned on, they're bourbon dark. But mostly, right now, I love how genuine she seems. Even though I know her sweet look is all for show. It's hard not to imagine that some of it isn't real. Which is a dangerous thought. One I need to ignore.

"Queso fries is a must. And chicken wings."

She scrunches her nose at that.

"What? You don't like wings?"

"No, I do. They're just ugly to eat."

"So?"

“Well, when your picture can be taken at any moment without your permission, you learn not to eat things that make you look—”

“Human?”

She laughs at that. “Yeah, basically.”

I shake my head. “We’re ordering wings and you’re going to enjoy the hell out of them.”

She rolls her eyes, but in a good-natured way. “Okay, fine.”

The waitress returns and she impresses me when she brings a divider marking off the area by our bay as private. I guess Autumn was right. She gives us our drinks and takes our order then tells us that the people at the bay next to us are almost out of time and when they leave, that bay will remain empty to give us more privacy.

“Told you she would take care of us,” Autumn says when the waitress is gone.

“I have to say, she surprised me.”

“She’s probably not the one who blabbed. Or she did out of excitement then realized her mistake. True fans...well true normal fans, only want to be your friend. They hope that you’ll walk away remembering them, at the very least.”

“And the not normal fans?”

“Well, there’s the true psychos and there’s no explaining them. Then there’s the ones that feel you owe them something. Like if they’re friendly to you or they’ve had a hard life, then you should do something for them.”

“That sucks. Does that happen often?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. The ones with the hard luck stories are harder, because I want to sympathize. But they’re mostly there for freebies or money. That or they won’t stop after one thing.”

After everything I grew up with, I don’t like not knowing if someone is genuine or playing me. And actors to me are just

a legit form of con-men and women. I've never given much thought about the actor being played, especially by the people who claim to love them.

“Come on, let's play the game.”

We get everything set up and Autumn goes first. She's quiet, and I can't tell where her mind is at. She said she hasn't been to a Top Golf before, so I have no idea if she's ever hit a golf ball before. With us being in the last bay, most of the holes are at an angle. She picks a club and puts a ball on the tee. She lines up and her stance is pretty good. I don't know a lot about golf myself, but I know enough to hit the ball off the tee at Top Golf. She pulls back and hits the ball with a solid whack. Her swing and hit are a thing of beauty, at least to me, and the ball curves through the air and makes it in one of the center holes.

“Um, damn.”

She turns to me then with a big smile on her face. “When you play a rich socialite daughter for five years, you learn a few things about golf.”

I now recall some golf course scenes in *Sunset Beach*. “I see that. You're going to kick my ass, aren't you?”

“Probably. Is that a problem?”

It's on the tip of my tongue to come back with some sort of teasing and slightly sexual remark, but I hold back. We have a good, casual vibe going between us and I don't want to screw it up. But we do need a tender touch moment, so I get up and walk over to her. I give a piece of her hair a gentle tug then run my hand down her arm.

“Not a problem at all, wildcat.” I lean in and kiss the top of her head.

When I pull back, there's a slight pink hue to her cheeks as she gives me a shy smile. She moves away so I can have my turn. I hit the shit out of the ball because I have the muscle behind it, but there's no finesse and the ball stays on the green, never finding one of the holes.

We have some fun banter as we take turns, I even make her laugh twice and I'm pretty sure it was genuine. She kicks my ass, as expected, and while I'm not a sore loser, I am competitive, so when our food arrives, I'm thankful for the break from losing.

"So, chicken wings are a no go, but queso fries are okay?" I ask as I look down at the mess of fries covered in melted cheese, pico de gallo, guacamole, and sour cream.

"I can eat those with a fork." She demonstrates by taking a fry off the plate with a fork and setting on her own then cutting it in half before putting it in her mouth. It's perfectly neat.

I grab one and drop it in my mouth then give her a little wave with my messy fingers. She shakes her head. "You have your way. I have mine."

We continue to eat, and I've downed three wings while she still hasn't touched them.

"Come on, try a wing."

She doesn't look happy, but she takes one and puts it on her plate. Then she studies it.

"You are not dissecting that thing with your fork." She looks at me with an annoyed expression. "Move over there," I say gesturing toward another part of the couch where her back will be to the rest of the place. She does then looks at me expectantly.

"Now people can only see your back."

"You can see me."

"You think I'm going to judge you for eating wings? I probably have sauce all over my mouth."

The side of her mouth quirks up. "You do have a little bit..." She hesitates then she reaches over and touches her thumb to the corner of my mouth and gently swipes. She looks at the sauce on her thumb and I have a feeling she's contemplating licking it away, but to my disappointment she wipes it with her napkin.

She finally picks up her wing but looks at me before she puts it to her mouth. “You aren’t going to watch me, are you?”

I laugh when I realize that’s exactly what I’m doing so I pick up a wing. “Nope, I’m going to eat.” I avert my gaze and tear into my chicken. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her hesitate another second before she starts eating. I don’t watch and we eat in companionable silence for a while. It isn’t until she picks up the last wing and she’s dropped her guard some that I watch her.

She isn’t dainty, but she’s still careful not to be too messy. She isn’t one to leave meat on the bone though. She makes sure she gets every morsel there is. Eating chicken wings isn’t sexy, but Autumn Atwood eating them absolutely is. The way her tongue darts out to get any sauce that’s left on her mouth, fuck. When she finally has it all devoured, she sets it down and proceeds to lick the sauce off her fingertips. My body goes on high alert and my dick takes over my brain.

That’s the only explanation for what I do.

My hand darts out and grabs her by the wrist. I hear a small, surprised inhale as I bring her hand closer to me. I meet her gaze and her eyes are a rich bourbon hue.

“You missed one,” I say as I suck her saucy thumb into my mouth.

Her nostrils flare and she gasps as I twirl my tongue around her thumb, taking in the tangy sauce. She leans forward slightly; I give her thumb a hard suck and a sexy breathy moan leaves her.

She swallows. “Um, I said no tongue.”

I slowly release her thumb, giving it a little nibble before it leaves my mouth. “I said I would keep my tongue out of your mouth.”

I give her what is probably a very wolfish smile as she pulls her hand out of mine. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are glazed over with desire. She’s absolutely beautiful.

She clears her throat. “Right. Maybe finger sucking should be off script too. Not very Home & Heart.” She gives me a

wiry grin.

I laugh, but she's right. What was I thinking? I wasn't, which was the problem. "Yeah, probably not. Sorry."

"So, um, want to start a new game?"

A different kind of game maybe.

"If you do."

She thinks on it. "No, I think we're good for today. We can go home now."

We settle our bill and Lisa, our waitress, gets a photo with Autumn, gushing over her a little more. I think we're finally about to break free when Lisa slips Autumn an USB stick and tells her she's a musician. She leads it like she just wants Autumn to enjoy it, but I know she's secretly hoping that Autumn will help her get heard.

Autumn handles it like a champ, but I can tell her acting smile has taken over. I want to wring that little brat's neck for ruining Autumn's night. I take her hand, and go into bodyguard mode, leading her out of the situation as quickly as possible. She squeezes my hand and I stop and look back at her. I'm practically dragging her at this point. She gives me this sweet smile with a hint of amusement on it. But it's not real. It's all for show. I smile back and swing an arm around her shoulder, and we continue out at a normal pace.

Once we're in the car though, the mood changes. We don't talk and she keeps her gaze out the window almost the whole time. I take a couple of wrong way detours before I'm finally confident we're not being followed and head home.

When we get back, she grabs water from the fridge. "I'm going to bed."

I nod, not knowing what else to say. At the entrance of the hallway, she stops. She half turns her face back toward me but doesn't look at me fully. "Um...the footage from last night... you won't..."

"It's already deleted."

She stiffens at that before she gives a sharp nod. “Thank you.”

With that she turns to leave. I hate that she doesn't trust me to not exploit her. Though why would she? Not only do we barely know each other, but she asked me to keep things PG then I went and sucked her finger into my mouth.

At least we could laugh about it. We seemed to have gotten over our bumpy first impressions and now on the right footing. I feel confident that we can have a good working relationship. I just need to not forget that's what this is which means no more sucking and licking her fingers. Or any other part of her body.

No matter how much I want to.

AUTUMN

“We look ridiculous.” Jackson grumbles as he carefully adjusts himself in his seat.

I give him my best serious expression. “What? There’s nothing ridiculous about a huge swan shaped paddle boat.”

He gives me side-eye even though I can’t fully see his eyes behind his sunglasses. I can’t help it, I burst out laughing. Jackson is a big guy. At least, six-three is my guess. And with me sitting here at five-four, we probably do look a little ridiculous. I’m pretty sure our swan is listing a little on his side.

“Come on, it’s the perfect innocent outing. Very Home & Heart. I think I made a movie where my co-star and I were on a paddleboat. Or was it a kayak? Canoe? I don’t remember. But I do remember that the scene called for us to fall in the water. And do you know how cold bodies of water are in Canada? Even in the summer? Really freaking cold.”

He laughs softly at that.

“Seriously, I had a wetsuit on underneath my dress and it was still freezing. That was not a fun day at all.”

“Then I hope that means you don’t want us to fall in the water during this outing.”

“If it gets any hotter, I’m diving in.”

Sweat is pouring down the back of my neck already. Texas in August is no joke. The main reason I picked this outing was because it involved water.

“Actually, swimming isn’t allowed on this lake.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Well, damn. Don’t need to be breaking any laws. This outing has to be all PG.”

We paddle a little in silence, but he keeps sneaking glances at me.

“Can I ask you a question?” he finally says.

“Sure.”

“Why are you so determined to keep making these Home & Heart movies?”

“Because they’re my bread and butter. I have a guaranteed job every year, sometimes two. I’ve done a Valentine and summer-based movie too.”

“Do you need the money that badly?”

“Not exactly. But being an actor isn’t only about making the movie. I have to hire a personal trainer and a ton of other people that help me look young and fresh. Then there’s headshots, and a million other things that add up. Not to mention that living in L.A. is expensive as hell. I need to remain relevant, or the scripts stop pouring in. I’m the only actor from *Sunset Beach* that has had steady work since the show ended and I’ve already lost several considerations due to this scandal, I can’t afford to lose anymore. I could be cancelled for this.”

He snorts at that. “That’s ridiculous. People have literally launched careers due to sex tapes. There are far more scandalous things actors have done than a dirty voicemail.”

“Yeah, but they aren’t Home & Heart’s go-to girl. I built a career on being the girl next door.”

He looks at me then. “But that’s not who you are.”

His words pierce me like an arrow to the heart. It hurts, but only because he’s right. It’s not that I’m not a nice person or anything or don’t fit the good girl image at all, but I like

pushing boundaries. My fans would be shocked to know I was in detention almost every week in high school. Because I dared to wear something against dress code. Or defaced some asshole's locker because he thought it was funny to lift a girl's skirt in the hallway. I used to be fearless. Not anymore.

Does Jackson really see past the facade I've erected?

"And who do you think I am?"

He stares at me for a beat before looking ahead. "That's what I'm trying to figure out. Are you really the girl that's shit at running away from trouble, or do you like to run toward it? Or is it something else?"

I raise my eyebrows. "And what is that?"

"You tell me."

"Oh no, you have an idea. I'd like to hear it."

"I don't know. Maybe that you like the satisfaction in making waves. Not for the glory though. For the justice."

I suck in a breath. "Why would you think that?"

He shrugs. "From what Gage said, I'm guessing you got in trouble in high school because you were trying to right a wrong. Any wave causing I've seen in the media seems to come after you or someone was attacked first. And I've seen the charities you donate to, all related to some sort of social injustice."

"Aren't most charities about helping social injustice?"

"There's cancer and illnesses, but you haven't donated to those. Mostly it's been violence against women." I feel his eyes move over me and I know what he'll ask next. And I'll have to decide how much I want to tell him.

"Has someone hurt you, Autumn?"

Yes. But I'm one of the lucky ones.

"I'm a woman in Hollywood so I've had to dodge, or endure, the occasional inappropriate touch or comment or invitation. But no, thankfully, I haven't experienced what you're probably thinking."

I stop there. Saying more would cut too close to a part of myself that I'm not sure I'm ready to reveal. I open my mouth to tell him then shut it.

“What is it?”

I sigh and decide I can at least address about what he originally wanted to know. “My sister ended up running away with her horrible boyfriend when she was seventeen. From there it was years of abuse. She'd come home with a black eye then run back to him when he begged and promised he would change. That's what prompted a lot of my anger and stunts in high school, and the charities. I couldn't stand assholes like that.”

If I couldn't help her, then I could help others. Or at least deliver a little payback.

“Jesus. I'm sorry, Autumn.”

“Thanks. It was hard to watch. My parents were so consumed by her drama that I practically lived in the school theater department.” I glance at him. “I kind of resented her too. I was pissed that she kept going back to him. I swore I'd never let that happen to me.”

Then it turned out, I was as weak as she was.

We fall into silence as we slowly pedal through the water. His pinky finger touches my hand next to his then slowly his whole hand takes mine. And we stay like that for a long while, just moving in the water and holding hands. And it's perfect.

“You should audition for Camilla.” His voice breaks the silence, and our hands break apart so he can adjust the hat on his head. As much as I miss his touch, the break from the heavy subject feels good.

I roll my eyes. “I already told you, I tried. I'm not the right fit.”

“Was that before or after the voicemail?”

“Before.”

“Maybe they'll have a different view of you now.” A smirk forms on his lips.

“Except my reputation is in shreds. Directors and producers are hesitant to work with you until a scandal is way in the past. They can’t risk anything messing up all the money they’re putting into it. Besides, I’d hate to ruin this. The book deserves to be a hit. You know the author lives here?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, we’ve never met in person, but we’ve emailed and messaged each other for years. We’re friends.”

He glances at me. “You’ve totally fangirled on her, haven’t you?”

I scrunch up my nose. “I totally did the first time I DM’ed her.”

He chuckles. “The famous actress all silly over an author. That’s kinda funny.”

“Authors have fans too, you know? Funny enough, I don’t think she even knew who I was at first, so it was all on my end. I was more nervous about contacting her than I was meeting Chris Evans.”

He jerks so suddenly, it rocks the swan and I grip the side to get my balance. “Wait. You’ve met Captain America?”

I laugh as my heart settles back to normal. That’s what got him so twitchy? “Yeah.”

He gapes at me.

I shrug. “He was nice.”

He’s still staring at me.

“Jackson, I think you’re either having a stroke or seriously fanboying right now.”

He shakes his head and laughs. “I have to admit, if I met Captain America, I’d probably lose my cool. Or the Falcon. Or Hawkeye. Damn, the things he can do with a bow and arrow. Fucking impressive. That shit is harder than it looks.”

“Um, you know they’re actors and not actual superheroes, right?”

He presses his finger to his lips and leans in. “Shh, don’t ruin it for me.”

I laugh. I love seeing this side of him, teasing and light. “Well, it’s good to know you’re human after all.”

He scrunches his brows at me. “What do you mean?”

“Just that you’re so...in control. Nothing seems to faze you so it’s cool to know that you’d go gaga over some big screen superheroes.”

His expression sobers and I can practically feel the intensity of his stare. “Trust me, I’m human.”

The low potency of his voice makes my body suddenly feel tingly all over. I really want to yank those glasses off him so I can see his eyes. See if those gorgeous greens have deepened to a dark emerald.

I blow out a breath and face forward. “I know. I didn’t mean...anyway...as much as I’d love to be in this series, it’s not in the cards for me.”

“Are you happy making Home & Heart movies?”

“Back to this? Does it matter?”

“Answer the question.”

“I was.”

“And now?”

I shrug. “The scripts are basically the same, just a different trope. I suppose it’s gotten a little tiring. But I feel like I need to get past all this messiness before I try to shake-up my career. Or I could end up with nothing.”

He looks like he wants to argue with me, but he sighs instead. “Okay, can I ask you another question? It’s something that’s been bothering me about this whole voicemail thing.”

“Do I get to ask you any?”

“No.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“You mentioned that the men you’ve dated are eventually like your ex. If they’re all douchebags, why aren’t any of them speaking out about that voicemail? Dragging your love life through the mud for a little attention.”

Wow, he isn’t pulling punches today. And I totally didn’t miss the fact that he is deflecting away from himself.

“You’re getting awfully personal.”

“That’s my job. If we want this scandal to go away, we need to make sure there’s nothing else coming your way. Is another ex going to show up with their own voicemail or video or sexual tale?”

Ah, yes. His job. Of course, that’s why he wants to know. It’s not about getting to know me. Not that I want to talk about my exes as a ‘get to know you’ topic. Even if there’s a part of me that would love for him to really know me, even the ugly bits. And I haven’t wanted anyone see me like that since things ended with Ben.

“No, because I haven’t done that with any other man.”

His brows snap together. “What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t...vocal like that with other men.” I can’t quite believe I’ve confessed that.

He shifts so he’s looking at me more fully, rocking the boat slightly. “You’re telling me that of all the boyfriends you’ve had since you were, what twenty-one? That you never once had dirty talk with them?”

“Well, it’s not like there’s been a ton, but no, not like that. More your typical stuff like, more, yes, that feels good.”

“Autumn, it’s been what, eight years since you two broke-up?”

I’m well aware, but when you’ve been shamed and used by the one person you thought you could trust - and you weren’t that great at trusting men to begin with - it changes you. Jackson’s gotten a lot of my truths today. I’m not sure if I’m ready to reveal all, but I can give him the Cliff’s Notes version.

“I ended up being more cautious about my relationships as my fame rose. Not that being cautious helped me pick better men.”

“What did they do to you?”

“It’s not really what they did to me. They only wanted to be with me for the fame or wanted to clean up their image. In the end, none of them really wanted to be with me. So, I held back. And it’s a good thing I did.”

“Why is Ben different?”

“Because we were young and experiencing our first real break in the business. It was exciting and sexy, especially since we had to keep our relationship quiet. We had each other during the craziness.”

Until the craziness changed him. Or revealed his true colors.

“What happened?”

Everything happened. I don’t like thinking of myself in that first year after my fame hit. How my relationship with Ben went in a direction I never anticipated. That I let myself be the one person I swore I never would be.

I go with the bare minimum of the truth. “The excitement fizzled.”

There’s something about the silence that falls between us. It’s charged. Uncomfortable. And not in a good way.

“That’s it?”

I glance his way and he’s looking at me, his expression tight.

“Yeah.” I smile, hoping to lighten this sudden weighty feeling between us.

His mouth flattens and he looks forward. “Why isn’t he denying your affair is years old, Autumn?”

I don’t like the accusing way he’s asking me the question. Does he really believe I would have an affair with a man with a girlfriend, and a very public one at that.

“I don’t know.”

I really don’t. Other than Ben is a controlling, self-absorbed bastard. But I’m not going to sit here and defend my innocence to Jackson. If he hasn’t gotten to know me well enough this past week, and after all I’ve told him on this swan, then there’s nothing for me to say.

“There has to be something.” He seems to want to say more, but bites off the words. His peddling becomes jerkier as he tries to increase his speed. What the hell? Why is he upset? If anyone, I’m the hurt party here.

I blow out a frustrated breath as I look ahead. I see a few people lining the bridge. It could be no one or it could be paparazzi. I almost hope for it to be. I want to get back to the hand holding and teasing we had earlier.

I take his hand in mine, “Hey, relax. We’re supposed to be having a romantic day out. It’s time to drop all the heavy talk. We’re approaching a bridge and I can’t have you looking upset. Smile at me and kiss my hand.”

He looks back at me, his expression slowly softens, but I can still feel the tension in his body. He leans into me a little as he brings our hands up to his mouth. He gives it a light kiss and it shouldn’t make me feel as good as it does, but it does, like a balm on the wound. He doesn’t immediately let our hands drop. Instead, his lips brush my skin again then I feel the warm, silky feel of his tongue. I gasp at the contact, but I don’t snatch my hand away.

“That wasn’t very PG.”

He lets our hands fall between us. “I know.”

I don’t like the flatness of his voice. I don’t like this feeling that he’s playing with me. “Then why did you do it?”

Finally, he shrugs and looks away. “I wanted to surprise you. I know I’m seeing the real Autumn when you’re caught off-guard. Not the actress.”

I have to physically stop myself from jerking from the sting of his words. I turn my gaze away from him, tears burning my eyes. It isn’t like I don’t know that people assume

I'm always acting. It's actually very common. But it's never hurt me before. Not like it does coming from Jackson's mouth. After everything we talked about, after everything I confessed to him, he still doesn't think I'm real? That I'm acting with him? I've been more real with him than anyone.

Maybe he's right not to believe me. When is the last time I've truly been myself? And this right here is why. Because when I am real, it's thrown back in my face.

"Let's turn around. I'm getting tired."

I feel his gaze on me, but I keep mine straight ahead and concentrate on peddling us in a circle back toward the dock. As we start to emerge back from under the bridge, Jackson takes my hand. My instinct is to shake it off, but I don't. I'm an actor, after all. It's what I do best.

Major Fatal Attraction vibes from Autumn Atwood's latest NSFW voicemail.

I've waited and waited for you. Thinking of all the ways I want you to touch me. Of all the ways I want to touch you. And every minute that passed, I got more and more turned on. I'm throbbing for you. And you're not here.

Now I have no choice but to take care of myself. At least my, um, not so little vibrating friend never stands me up.

Mmmm, no. He always treats me so well. Oh...damn...he makes me feel good. I'm so wet.

As good as this is...I want you between my legs. I want your tongue. Your cock. Fucking me until I cream all over you.

But no...you're not here. Now you get to listen as another cock gets me off. You get to hear how good it fills me. How...it...makes me crazy. Oh God...

Mmmm, did you like that, baby? Maybe think twice about standing me up.

JACKSON

A loud squeal behind me has me grabbing Autumn, immediately wrapping my arm around her shoulders, and pulling her close. It's the most I've touched her in a week.

"Relax. It's just people having fun."

There's a slight annoyance to Autumn's voice as she tries to subtly pull away before she remembers I'm her "boyfriend." I still tighten my hold on her, selfishly enjoying having her pressed next to me. Though that's not the only reason I'm keeping her close. The food and wine festival we're at is not exactly the posh event I was convinced would be a good PR move to attend, but more a day drinking festival. It only started three hours ago, and people are already on their way to wasted and going crazy to the DJ's electric beat.

I turn to see a group of women, laughing obnoxiously at who knows what, their drinks sloshing. We haven't been recognized, but I have a feeling it's only a matter of time.

This was a horrible idea, especially after the shitty week it's been.

Another voicemail was leaked. Autumn lost the Home & Heart contract. Ben remains silent about their prior relationship while his singer girlfriend, Hilarie Ray, posts subtle jabs at Autumn on social media. The media has labeled Autumn as a stalker. Oh, and Autumn pretty much hates me. Not that she's been acting like she hates me. No, she's simply acting.

All. The. Time.

And out of everything that's rained down on us this past week, that last one is killing me the most.

The friendly conversations, the laughter, the smiles...it's all fake. There's no spark in her eyes. The fight, the mischief - her inner wildcat - it's all gone. She's merely a character of herself.

I hate it. I hate even more that I'm responsible for it.

I accused her of not being real with me after all she told me on that swan. Yeah, it was a shitty thing to do, but she lied to me about her relationship with Ben and it pissed me off. Not only do I hate being played, but my gut is telling me Ben is behind this and if Autumn were honest with me, I could figure out why.

A couple walks in front of us, the woman sipping on a yard-long frozen wine drink stumbles and almost bumps into us, but I quickly maneuver us away.

"This place is hot mess. We shouldn't be here."

"Haven't you heard? I'm the very definition of hot mess. This is the perfect place for me." She smiles up at me, but it's forced, strained, and for once I'm glad I can't see her eyes and the lack of emotion that's surely in them.

She's been calm and collected through everything this week and it doesn't feel right. Just once I wish she'd let the wildcat loose and rage, even if it's only in front of me. But I suppose I lost that right after the swan.

"Autumn..."

"Oooh, look, that sign is perfect for a picture."

She points at a giant sign of the letters ATX. She pulls me over and hugs me to her while she gets her phone in selfie mode. "Smile, Jackson."

I do and she tilts the camera a few ways grabbing several shots. "Pull me into you and kiss the side of my face. Like you adore me."

As if that's hard.

I do exactly as she says. I place a lingering kiss at her temple – savoring this moment where I can touch and kiss her. She looks up at me and I run a hand down her cheek, gently rubbing my thumb over her bottom lip.

There's a catch in her breath and I've finally broken through her actor's mask. Maybe this is what I should have been doing, seducing her into being real with me again.

Except it would only cause another set of troubles. The main reason I haven't manned up and apologized is because the professional line between us is deep and dark now, the way it needs to be.

We pull away from each other and move so other people can take pictures in front of the sign. She says she needs to go to the restroom and asks me to get her another drink.

“I'm not leaving you.”

“Jackson, I don't think anything is going to happen to me while I wait for a porta-potty. Now be a good boyfriend and get me a drink. We'll meet at that tree.”

Before I can protest, she walks away to the insane bathroom lines. I head to the even longer drink lines. I still haven't gotten to the front when I feel a buzz on my phone. I glance at it to see a notification that Autumn's made an Instagram post. I open it to see she's posted a few of our pictures in front of the sign.

Fuck! What in the world is she thinking posting that now?

I abandon the line and make a beeline for the tree. She's leaning against it, looking at her phone.

“You need to delete that post now. Are you crazy?”

She looks at me and smirks. “Most people seem to think so.”

I ignore the jab at herself. “You were supposed to post after we left. That was our deal.”

She shrugs. “I forgot.”

“Bullshit. Now everyone knows you’re here and what you’re wearing. You just made yourself a target.”

She looks up at me, her expression defiant. I would be totally enjoying seeing this spark of life back in her too if it didn’t put her in danger.

“And if I don’t care?”

“But you do,” I say softly, reverently.

Her mouth flattens and after a moment, her body slumps and she turns back to her phone. After another few moments she says, “Done, but it already has fifty likes and several comments.”

“It’s better than two-hundred.”

I take her phone from her and put it in my backpack then take off my ball cap. “Put this on. It’ll help disguise you.”

She huffs. “Jackson-”

I lean in, stealing what she was going to say from her mouth. “Please, Autumn.” I nuzzle her nose with mine. “Besides, you’re already getting red here.”

I shift away and her mouth is slightly parted. I’m tempted to kiss her. I could and it would be all for appearances. But that’s not why I would do it. Which is exactly why I step back and put the hat on her head.

I grin at her. “Pretend you’re Camilla hiding from Nick.”

She sighs. “Will you stop with the Camilla thing. Not gonna happen.”

She pulls the hat off and bites down on the brim as she gathers her hair into a ponytail. She takes the cap and pulls her hair through the hole and settles the hat back on her head.

“Why not? You’re not trying to please Home & Heart anymore.”

She gives me a side-eye look. “Thanks for the reminder.”

Before I can respond, she grabs my hand and pulls me toward the crowd in front of the stage. “Let’s go dance.”

“I don’t dance.”

That’s a lie. I enjoy dancing. But the thought of Autumn’s body pressed into mine, moving and swaying has me breaking into a sweat that has nothing to do with the sun beating down on us.

She makes this motion that tells me she probably rolled her eyes. “Fine, don’t dance. You can stand there and ogle my ass like a good boyfriend.”

I eye the crowd as we get closer. “I’m not sure this is a good idea. It’s really packed.”

“All the more reason to dance with me. You can protect me and be seen canoodling me at the same time.”

“Canoodling? Can’t say I’ve ever canoodled before.”

“Sure you have. You canoodled me in the picture earlier.”

“Is that what that was?”

She looks up at me, her head tilting. “Are you trying to be cute?”

“Wildcat, I am cute.” I gesture at myself and give her a cocky smile.

She stares at me, not in a perusal way. More like she doesn’t know how to take me. I haven’t exactly been playful with her much.

“Don’t call me that.” Her voice is soft, but firm with a hint of hurt behind it.

“I thought you liked it.”

“I did. I don’t anymore.”

With that she releases my hand and walks into the crowd, raising her arms and moving her hips to the music.

That’s probably the most honest thing she’s said since the swan. It’s time to apologize and get all this behind us. I follow her into the crowd and place my hands on her hips and turn her to me.

From the hard set of her jaw, I know she's upset. Her body stiffens under my touch as if she wants to pull away.

"You'll always be a wildcat. My wildcat."

It wasn't what I planned to say, but I hate that it feels like she's not just rejecting a nickname, but a part of herself. Several moments pass then her body relaxes as she moves into me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Autumn, I—"

She sways her hips into mine. "Dance with me, Jackson."

There's a hint of pleading in her voice that I can't deny so I grip her hips tighter and move my body with hers. We move together seamlessly, finding the rhythm perfectly together.

"I thought you couldn't dance."

"I didn't say I couldn't. I said I don't."

I catch a hint of a smile on her lips before she moves into me, my leg slipping between hers as our hips move to the music. Fuck, she feels good. This week has killed me. I've missed our public outings where I could touch her freely. I shouldn't. They're supposed to be part of my job – supposed to be fake. They never are. As much as I pretend they are. Which is exactly what I'm doing now – pretending it's all for show.

My hands roam over her body, her hands do the same. I feather my lips along her face – her cheeks, her temple. I'm so lost in her I barely hear the music. It's only me and her and a thousand barely-there touches. It feels like we're in our own little bubble and nothing can touch us.

She looks up at me and the need to see her eyes is too much to resist. I ease her sunglasses off her face. Her whiskey eyes are stripped of the act and pure Autumn is looking at me. There's fire and desire and want and I'm just greedy enough to take advantage. I lean in and brush my lips with hers then wait to see if she wants more. Her body surges into mine as she takes my lips in a breath-stealing kiss and the world fades away.

This isn't a movie kiss. This isn't fake. This is pure us.

Our kiss is needy, both of us seeking as much of each other as we can, and it's blazing hotter than the Texas sun. I don't want it to end.

But all bubbles eventually burst.

A moaning fills the air, and it's not coming from either of us. No, it's projected from the speakers. As the DJ transitions songs, a moaning sound cuts in and out, mixed with a pulsating beat. Then words are featured into the beat and moans.

I've waited...waited for you.

Throbbing for you.

Between my legs.

Makes me crazy. Crazy...crazy...crazy

So fucking good.

Makes me crazy. Crazy...crazy...crazy

We both still and break our kiss, her face is white as a sheet. That motherfucker made a song out of Autumn's voicemail.

The sound of Autumn's climax, loud and dirty and sexy as hell, fills the air. The fact that so many people know how she sounds when she comes, pisses me the fuck off.

Then the DJ says, "Shout out to Autumn Atwood out there somewhere! You make a good re-mix!"

The crowd goes nuts with some cheering, but there's a bunch of boos too. Shit.

I grip her hand and start to pull her through the crowd. The air immediately changes around us as people start looking around. I stay focused on getting her out, but I can feel the intensity of the crowd grow. Then as if a spotlight shines on us, we're discovered.

"Crazy!"

"Stalker!"

“Whore!”

“Hey baby, I’ll remix with you!”

People start closing in on us. Some are shouting her name and crude obscenities; some simply want to capture the moment with their phones up recording and taking pictures. I pull her closer, but the crowd pushes in on us. I shout for them to get out of the way, but they only seem to close in more.

Suddenly, she’s jarred and lunges forward, her grip breaking away from mine. She stumbles to the ground and my heart slams into my chest as I watch people surround her, taking videos instead of helping her up.

“Jackson!”

Shit, she could easily be trampled if this gets more out of hand. I elbow my way to her, and she’s cradling an arm to her chest while protecting her head with her other arm. I pull her up and tuck her into my chest.

“I’ve got you, wildcat.”

The crowd seems to come to their senses and backs away. We’re able to walk away easily though obscenities are still being thrown our way. Three burly men in black shirts with security written on it rush up to us and keep the crowd away though it doesn’t seem necessary anymore. However, the damage has been done.

I glance down at Autumn and notice she’s still cradling one of her arms. “Are you okay? What happened to your arm?”

“I braced myself when I fell.” She holds her arm up and her wrist is already swelling up.

“Can you take us to an EMT?” I ask one of the security guys.

He nods and leads us to a med tent.

“I’m fine, Jackson.”

“You’re not fine. Let’s get it checked out.” I gesture to a chair, and she reluctantly sits. An EMT comes over and when

she extends her arm for him to look over her wrist, her hand is shaking. Her whole body is shaking. I squat down next to her and take her free hand into mine.

“You’re safe now.” I squeeze her hand.

She looks at me and tears are welled up in her eyes, but I can tell she’s fighting to not let them fall. I lean in and lightly press my lips against hers. “I’m right here with you. I’m not going to leave you. I promise.”

She releases a shuddering breath and leans into my soft kiss.

I hold her free hand the whole time the EMT examines her then splints her wrist and bandages it. We’ll need to get X-rays to find out if she fractured it. Autumn doesn’t want to go to the hospital, but I’m not hearing it. It’s a flurry of activity after that and my phone has been blowing up, but I’ve ignored it, wanting to give Autumn all my attention. It isn’t until she’s taken to get X-rayed and they refuse to let me go with her that I have a moment alone. I look at my notifications, I have missed calls from Autumn’s publicist and Gage, plus countless texts.

I’m not in the mood to talk, but I swipe on Gage’s name.

He answers on one ring. “What the fuck, man!?! Where have you been? Is she okay?”

“Been a little busy. I’m at the hospital. She’s fine, but she fell and hurt her wrist. Thankfully, it isn’t worse than that. She’s getting it X-rayed now.”

“Damn. What were you even doing at a concert?!”

“Technically, it wasn’t a concert.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about technicalities right now. The hell, Jackson!?”

“You think that I don’t know it was a bad idea? You think I’m not kicking myself for giving in? I tried to talk her out of it, but it was a PR move. I wasn’t expecting the DJ to make a fucking song out of her voicemail.”

“He’s already released a statement apologizing for the stir it caused.”

“Fuck him! D, she could have been trampled. People were calling her names. It was horrible.”

I run a hand through my hair and it’s shaking. My hands don’t shake. Ever. But I don’t think I’ll ever get the image of her body disappearing in the cluster of people out of my mind.

“It’s my fault. I let my guard down.”

Gage sighs, his voice calmer. “J, I don’t think anyone would have predicted this. Don’t beat yourself up. Her publicist is blowing up my phone since she’s not answering hers.”

“Yeah, mine too. Tell her she’s fine and we’ll update her later. I just want to get Autumn out of here as soon as possible.”

“You want me to come in?”

“No. We’re good.”

“Everleigh’s worried so...”

I don’t hear another word because they wheel Autumn back into the room. “Hey, she’s back. I gotta go. I’ll be in touch.”

I hang up before he can respond. Autumn gives me a small smile and it hits me right in the gut. She’s put on a brave face since we left the festival, but I know the situation shook her up.

“Hey there, wildcat.”

She doesn’t say anything, but she takes my hand. The nurses are still fussing around her when the doctor comes in to examine her. We learn her wrist isn’t broken, but there’s some minor torn ligaments and they give her a brace to wear for a couple of weeks.

This would have never happened if I hadn’t left her to go to the bathroom alone. She never would have posted that picture. I should have gotten her out then. Instead, I danced

with her. More than that, I lost myself in her. I forgot about my job. I forgot about the danger.

Not again. Never again.

AUTUMN

Whore.

Crazy.

Stalker.

I cry out and jerk awake, pain jolts through my wrist. I groan and cradle it with my hand as sudden light bursts into the darkness.

“Autumn!” I see a figure come to me from the lighted doorway. “Are you okay?”

The sound of Jackson’s voice instantly grounds me. He took me to his apartment in town because it was closer to the hospital. I’m safe. Not at the festival surrounded by bodies.

My stomach rolls at the thought. Logically I know the situation could have been far worse, but in the moment, it was scary. All the shouts, all the people closing in on me, it was like being pulled underwater.

The same feeling suddenly comes over me again. I press my hand to my chest, drawing in deep breaths, but my lungs burn. I can’t breathe. I can’t...

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m here.”

The voice is muffled.

A hand touches my back, slowly rubbing up and down. “You’re safe, Autumn. You’re having a panic attack. Try to slow your breaths. Deep breath in, slowly out. Can you do that with me?”

I feel his body slowly inhale against mine then deeply exhale. I try to follow his lead. I squeeze my eyes shut. I'm okay. I'm safe. I'm with Jackson. I concentrate on his voice, his words slowly becoming clearer as he murmurs words of encouragement. The panic ebbs and my breathing calms.

"Feeling better?"

I nod. "Yeah, I think I'm okay now. Thank you."

He keeps rubbing my back and I lean into his soothing yet electric touch. I don't think Jackson's touch will ever not spark something inside me.

"That feels amazing."

He makes this humming noise then leans in until my shoulder is resting against his chest. "How's your wrist?"

"It's throbbing a bit. Pain meds must be wearing off."

"There's more on the nightstand."

As wonderful as those sounds, the last round knocked me out. Though probably some of the sleepiness came from the adrenaline crash. I barely remember the short drive here and him immediately steering me to his bed before I was out like a light.

"Maybe some over-the-counter pain meds."

"Okay, be right back."

As soon as his body heat is gone, I immediately miss it. So much so that tears burn my eyes and I want to call him back. It's ridiculous, I know it is, but I also don't care. Tonight, I need him. I simply need him.

He returns with the pills and a glass of water. He must notice my distress because he rushes to my side.

"What is it?"

I shake my head. "It's silly."

"I don't care. What's wrong?"

I take the pills and water from him and take them then hand the water back. He sets it down, never taking his

concerned gaze from me. “Autumn? What is it?”

“I...I missed you.”

He stares at me for a moment as if the words are taking time to sink in then his expression immediately softens. He sits next to me and pulls me back into his chest. “I’m here.”

“Stay.”

I feel his body tighten behind mine, but he nods. I close my eyes and relax into him. “Touch me again, Jackson. It felt so good.”

He exhales shakily, but his hand resumes its slow movements on my back. I close my eyes and let it soothe me, but after a while it’s not enough. I want his touch everywhere.

“More. Touch me more.”

His hand stills for a moment before moving again. He applies more pressure, his hand moving along my back then to my shoulders before moving to my neck, his fingers massaging the base of my neck and sinking into my hair. I let my head fall into his hand and moan. Each movement slowly stoking a fire inside me. I ache for more. His hands on my breasts, pinching my aching nipples. His fingers slipping inside me.

“More, Jackson. I need more.”

His hand pauses again before his hand slips to my shoulder, and he massages me with a firm touch. I don’t know if he’s going for a slow seduction or refusing to acknowledge what I really want. So, I show him.

I take his hand and move it to my breast.

“I can’t go back to sleep with only the memory of them surrounding me. Chase away the nightmares, Jackson. Please. Make me feel good.”

His breathing becomes more erratic, but his hand doesn’t move. I stop breathing. If he denies me, I don’t know how I’ll handle it – not tonight.

A sound I can only describe as his control snapping leaves his throat. His mouth sinks onto the curve of my neck and his hand cups my breast.

I moan as I give his mouth more room to explore. His tongue swirls over my skin before sucking so hard I wonder if he'll leave a mark. Then he peppers small, sensual kisses all over my neck and shoulder.

His fingers pinch my nipple and I arch into his touch. "Yes..."

Every touch, every kiss, it's making me crazy. My body is practically crawling out of itself for release. I almost wonder if he plans to make me come like this. He hasn't even touched my bare breast, though thankfully I'd shed my bra and shorts before I fell asleep.

As if he senses what I was thinking, his hand slips under my shirt and finally touches me skin to skin.

"Jackson...yes...more..."

I roll my hips telling him right where I want his touch. His hand trails down over my panties. He strokes me over the wet material, and it feels far better than my dreams.

"I need to feel you on my skin."

He nips the skin at my collar with a sexy growl. His fingers slip under my panties and as soon as he touches me, my hips thrust off the bed.

"Fuck...yes..."

He groans into my neck. "You're so wet, wildcat."

For you. Only you.

I want to say the words, but I can't push them past my lips. I'm too used to holding back, but for the first time in years, I truly don't want to. I just don't think I can.

"Is this what you want, wildcat?"

I moan, moving into his touch.

"Give me your words."

Fiery tingles rocket through me as he moves his fingers over my slick pussy.

“Yes...just like that. It’s so good.”

“Come on, wildcat. You can do better than that. I want your beautiful, filthy mouth.”

Fuck, he’s going to be the death of me. A fierce shiver rolls through me and I know it’s not going to be long before I come.

“Harder. Jackson, make me come. Please...now.”

He applies pressure to my clit as he moves his hand faster and that’s all it takes. My climax crashes and flows over me in heated waves. It washes over me completely, filling me with a kind of satisfaction and peace I haven’t felt in a long time.

We slump into each other, our breathing labored. I want to kiss him. I want to take his cock into my body. I want to tell him so many things. Things I haven’t said to a man in a long time.

But I don’t.

He removes his hand from my panties and shifts us until we’re spooning each other, his hard cock pressing into my backside. I wiggle into it, loving the feel of it. Loving his body next to mine.

“Stay,” I say, knowing too well that he’ll try to leave as some sort of chivalrous gesture.

He reaches over, taking my arm in his hand, careful of my wrist. “I’m not going anywhere. Sleep, wildcat.”

Peace fills me and I close my eyes.

I wake up, disappointed to see Jackson’s not next to me, but I hear the shower going. I slowly sit-up, wincing at the twinge of pain in my wrist. My whole arm feels stiff.

I glance at the water glass on the nightstand, but there's no pill bottle. Jackson had probably gotten it from the kitchen. I grab the glass and head out of the room.

I don't know what I expected Jackson's place to look like, but it's not this. A living room void of any decorations, only a sofa, coffee table, and television. His kitchen only has a toaster and coffeemaker on the countertop. I find the ibuprofen bottle next to the fridge and take a couple of pills.

I roam back into the living room. Is his San Antonio place as bland or does it reflect his personality? Or is he not into decorating? Though I feel like Jackson's the kind of guy that would want a piece of himself in his living space.

There's another door in the hallway back to the bedroom. Curious, I turn the knob and open it to peek in.

But a peek won't do because I found Jackson. His office is where he lives.

The walls are filled with accolades from his time in the Army and various other pictures. Most are of him with his unit. Then there are a few of only him and Gage. One of them holding up a framed picture with the name of their company on it.

On his desk are several more pictures, including an unframed picture of him, Gage, and Everleigh. Considering Everleigh told me they haven't hung out for very long, this picture must be recent, which is probably why it doesn't have a frame yet. I look at the others and they're of a couple with a young child at various ages. One as a toddler, one as young child, and the last one the child is probably a pre-teen. The woman is beautiful with big bright light-colored eyes, they look to be somewhere between blue and green. She has long strawberry-blonde hair and a perfect smile. She's a total Grace Kelly with an old-school glamour about her you don't see anymore. The man next to her...holy hell. He has mid-length hair that falls in loose corkscrew curls around his head, giving me serious Lenny Kravitz and Jason Momoa vibes. The comparison kinda cracks me up since both actors had

relationships with the same woman, but my celebrity trivia knowledge isn't what's important now.

He's big, like Jackson, but his muscles are bulkier, his shoulders broader with a full sleeve of tattoos on one arm. His eyes are brown and his skin a little darker than Jackson's, but the resemblance between them is uncanny. Jeez, no wonder Jackson is so handsome. The gorgeous genes are strong in his family.

"My parents," a voice says from behind me.

I jerk to standing, my cheeks burning from getting caught snooping. He's leaning against the door jamb, dressed only in a pair of low-slung sweatpants, his hair damp and curling at the ends. My gaze sweeps over his tattoo and this hectic feeling fills my stomach. It's beautiful. So utterly him. I want to touch it. I want to touch all of him. And last night he touched me. I had those lips on my skin. Those fingers bringing me pleasure.

Now my cheeks are burning for a whole other reason.

I blink and glance at the picture again. "Yeah, you look a lot like your dad. He could be an action hero, and your mom looks like a model. They'd be an instant success in Hollywood."

"Just a football player and cheerleader. They met in college."

"Did he play professionally?"

"Nah, he was a firefighter."

I smile at that. "Ah, I see the protect and serve genes run in the family."

He shrugs, a sad smile playing on his lips. My stomach suddenly drops. I look around the room and there's no pictures of him and his parents as an adult. He said was a fireman, past tense. I look back at him. "Did something happen to them?"

He takes a moment before answering, his gaze on the ground. "They died in a car accident when I was twelve."

I press a hand to my heart. "I'm so sorry, Jackson."

He shrugs. "It was a long time ago."

"That doesn't mean that it still doesn't hurt."

He gives a small nod.

"Were you in the accident too?"

"No, I was at school."

"What happened to you? Who took you in?"

"No one. I entered the foster system."

"What? What about your family?"

"There was none. No will. My parents were only children. I never knew any of my grandparents."

"That's crazy. No distant cousins or friends of your parents? Were you adopted?"

"Do you see any other family pictures in here?"

I can't believe this. How could he not have been adopted? Or have no family? I know older kids have a harder time, but it seems unlikely that a family wouldn't have fallen in love with him.

"There had to have been someone." I don't mean to say the words out loud and when Jackson lets out a bitter laugh, I hate I even thought them, much less said them.

"Autumn, my story is already written, and it has no Hollywood ending. There was no one. I bounced from home to home until I turned eighteen. Then I inherited my parents' estate, and it wasn't much, but it was enough for me to get a place of my own long enough to get my GED. Then I joined the Army and let them pay for college."

I go to him and place a hand on his folded arms. "Who says that isn't a Hollywood ending?"

His expression tightens in this mixture of anger and agony. "You think I'm proud of the struggles I've had to endure to get where I am? Fuck no. My life fucking sucked. All the people I was taught to trust were the very ones I couldn't. When it's easy for someone to mask their true self, it's hard to trust

what's real and what's not. I had to learn to play the game. My life was ugly and twisted and doesn't deserve some Hollywood shine on it."

His words break my heart as my gaze goes to his tattoo. I have a feeling his tattoo has very much to do with the ugly and twisted parts. I wrap my arms around his waist, hugging him to me. He's stiff and unmoving so I kiss his chest. He lets out a sigh that has him relaxing into me but doesn't hug me back. "I don't want your pity."

I look up at him. "This isn't pity. This is one friend comforting another."

"Friends? Is that what we are? Friends don't play actor instead of being real."

I drop my arms and step away from him. Looks like we're finally going to have it out. "Yeah, because you hurt my feelings. I told you things I haven't told anyone, and you threw it in my face."

"Because you were still holding back. There's something you aren't telling me."

"Oh, and you're ready to tell me about those ugly and twisted parts of your life?"

His jaw ticks in answer.

"Right. Maybe I'm not ready to tell you all my ugly and twisted parts either."

He sighs and looks down. Then he reaches out and takes my uninjured hand, his thumb rubbing over my fingers. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I hate that I did. It's been killing me. I don't..."

"Trust easily. Yeah, I get that now." I sigh. "I don't either. Not anymore." I step fully into him, wrapping his arm around my waist as I wrap mine around his. "Maybe we can work on that together."

I watch as a war of emotions play over his face before he quietly says, "I'd like that."

His gaze drops to my lips. I stop breathing. So does he.

Suddenly, I'm tired of fighting this pull between us. I lift on my toes for the kiss I know we both want. As I close in, he grips my hips and pushes me an arm's length away.

"Autumn, last night-

"If you say it was a mistake, I might have to hurt you."

His mouth flattens. "It can't happen again." He sighs and pushes his hand through his hair. "I want us to trust each other, and I want to be your friend. But my job is to keep you safe, and I can't be distracted from that again."

My heart stutters in my chest. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that being your bodyguard takes top priority over everything. Over being the fake boyfriend. Over a friendship. Over...anything. I have to stay focused."

"Do you really think that if you weren't kissing me at the festival things would have turned out differently? Jackson, that song would have been played even if you were standing over me like the secret service."

"We should have never been there in the first place. I knew it. But I wanted you to drop your act so desperately I gave in. And look what happened?! You were almost trampled, and you got injured." He jerks away from me, anger vibrating from him.

"Jackson-" I reach out to him, but he flinches and backs away until he's fully in the hallway.

"No, Autumn. I can't have you hurt again. *I fucking can't.*"

The fierce pain in his voice takes my breath away. I can't remember the last time I felt so...cherished.

"I want to get back to where we were before I put my foot in my mouth on that swan. Where we're friends and the fake boyfriend role is strictly that. A role. G-rated. We can't cross the line again."

I don't even understand how this man's words can pierce my heart in one moment then crush it in the next. It should piss me off, but it only makes me realize that he cares for me.

Enough that all logic has fled his brain. There's no arguing with him now if he can't see past his own fears.

“Okay.”

He blinks at me. His expression wary and maybe a little disappointed.

“If that's what you want. Think about this though, Jackson. How are we going to build trust with each other if you plan to turn off our friendship the moment something goes wrong?”

He opens his mouth then shuts it without saying a word. Maybe logic will make a reappearance soon. I turn to walk away, but he grabs my elbow before I can leave.

“Nothing's going to go wrong. Not this way.”

I wish I was naïve enough to believe that. That the worst of this scandal is behind us. That we'll be able to be friends without wanting more – without acting on it. No, it feels like we're on a collision course and the real question is will we be strong enough to survive it together? And with our hearts intact.

JACKSON

It's been a week since the festival and Autumn's wrist seems to have improved quite a bit. She doesn't move it as gingerly or wince in pain anymore. If only I could rid myself of constantly thinking about her coming apart in my arms as easily.

I should have never touched her, but there was no way I could deny her request. I understood what she needed. Hell, I needed it too, but I knew if I crossed that line I'd never go back.

Autumn's not acting around me anymore, but it feels like what happened at my apartment still hangs between us. She's not wrong about what she said that day. How can I ask her to trust me if I throw our friendship away at the first sign of trouble? But I need her to understand that her safety must come first.

Thankfully, the media onslaught has died down since the festival. She's garnered some sympathy though she's still labeled a stalker. We've kept out of the public eye, mostly for Autumn to heal, but to also let the gossip die down. We've binged movies and television series. And except for the sexual tension that lights up between us every time we lock eyes, it's been good.

My phone pings telling me that there's someone at the gate. I open the app and see an unfamiliar vehicle. I press the button to speak through the intercom. "Yes?"

"Delivery for Maggie Caldwell."

Maggie Caldwell is Autumn's alias. It's a mash-up of two of her Home & Heart characters. I wish she would give me a head's up when she places orders. I buzz him in and tell him to leave everything at the door. The last thing I need is for him to recognize me then Autumn's location is discovered.

I knock at her door. "Your delivery is here."

She yells that she'll be out in a minute. I check the app and when the delivery guy has left the property, I go to the door to see Autumn's ordered groceries. As I pull everything out in the kitchen, Autumn comes in. "Oh, good. I hope you know how to work a grill because we're barbequing today."

I glance up and everything in me stills. She's wearing a swimsuit cover-up, different than the one I've seen before. This one is short and black sheer, revealing hints of the red bikini she's wearing underneath. It seems like I'll be spending the next few hours fighting a constant boner. Fuck my life.

I ignore my lusting body and meet her gaze. "Is that right? And what are we cooking?"

She smiles and it's a gorgeous sight to see. After all that time of getting her fake smiles, every real one feels like a gift.

"A little surf and turf. Some grilled pineapple. And yummy drinks."

"I think I can handle that."

"Good. Now get your swimsuit on." She comes around to my side of the kitchen counter and starts organizing the groceries.

"I'm swimming too?"

"If you want. I just want you shirtless and looking hot as sin."

I raise my eyebrows at that.

"Maren has ordered me back on social media. My boyfriend and I are having a Sunday Funday."

Before I can question her, she shoos me off to change. When I return, she hands me a plate of the pre-sliced

pineapple she bought and tells me to get the grill going and start with those. The house has an impressive outdoor kitchen, and it doesn't take long to finish the pineapple. As I'm plating it again, Autumn sets down a pan of raw steaks and seasoned shrimp on the counter next to me. I look up and promptly can't breathe.

Her cover-up is gone, and her little red bikini is dead set on shredding every ounce of my willpower.

Lord, help me.

“What?”

I tear my gaze from the scraps of material barely covering her tits and meet her gaze.

“What?”

“You just said, Lord, help me.”

I said that out loud?

“I didn't.”

She raises her brows at me letting me know she knows I'm a damn liar.

“Fuck, wildcat. You look hot as hell. How am I supposed to keep my hands off you?”

She smirks as she reaches out and presses a finger to my chest, that tiny touch searing.

“You're not.”

Fuck. Me.

She moves her finger down over my abs and I feel the scrape of material from her brace. I glance down and gently take her wrist in my hand. I slowly unfasten it and pull it off. The swelling is gone and the slight bruising she had is barely noticeable. I drag a finger over her skin and she inhales loudly. I stop. “Sorry, did I hurt you?”

Our gazes lock. She visibly swallows. “No. You surprised me.”

I glance back at her wrist. “Can I...?” I lift my hand again and she nods.

I move my finger lightly over her wrist again. She flinches a tiny bit, but a glance at her face reveals she isn't in pain. Her amber gaze is dark, smoldering. Her breathing increases as I continue to move over her skin. I want to kiss every inch of her arm. Have my lips erase all her pain. Instead, I take my hand away and gently put her brace back on.

“How does it feel?”

“Better. Only really notice it when I move it certain ways. I wouldn't even wear the brace, but Maren wants it in the pictures to keep the sympathy going.”

I nod and she clears her throat then points at the grilled pineapple. “That looks amazing.” She breaks a ring into two and takes a bite into it. She closes her eyes and moans and I feel that moan right in my dick.

“Mmm, delicious.” She picks up the other half slice in one hand and her phone in the other. She sidles up to me and places the pineapple at my lips. She smooths the fruit over my lips. Her tongue slipping out and swiping over her own lips as if she can taste it. “Open up.”

It takes all my willpower not to moan at the sensual sound of her voice. I open my mouth and she slips part of the pineapple inside. Our gazes lock and the blazing August sun has nothing on the heat between us. I take a bite. It's super tender as a burst of sweetness with a hint of smoky char fills my mouth.

I start to lick my lips, but she leans in. I pull back before she can touch her lips to mine. “What are you doing?”

She blinks, but I see a flash of hurt in her eyes before it's gone. “Taking pictures.”

What? I look over and see her phone is extended out in her other hand. “We don't need to kiss. It's just a picture.”

Because one kiss from her might be the end of me.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t going to kiss you. Just make it look like it.”

I reluctantly nod. She gets into pose again and leans in until our lips are centimeters from each other. I hear her phone click through several photos then she pulls away and looks through them. She shakes her head. “They look posed. You’re all stiff.”

You have no idea.

I glance at the pics and she’s right. She doesn’t look quite at ease either. We try again and the results are the same.

She purses her lips, utterly annoyed. “You had to go and make things all weird with your anti-kiss rule.”

I snatch the phone out of her hand and bring up the camera then slip my hand behind her neck and drag her body into mine. She lets out a squeak of surprise, her whiskey eyes going wide.

I curl my hand into her hair, causing her head to lift to mine. “I need the anti-kiss rule. If I start to kiss you, I’m not going to stop. I’ll kiss every fucking inch of your body then tear those damn strings holding your suit together and fuck you so hard that neither one of us will be able to breathe.”

I tighten my hold in her hair and she shudders, a broken moan leaving her lips. I’m so hard I can’t see straight and all I want is to do everything I just said. Instead, I lean in and touch my nose against hers then step away.

I hand her phone back to her. “Here. Those should look real.”

She looks at me confused as she takes her phone then as what I said sinks in, her expression transforms to annoyed. “Are you kidding me?”

I smile at her and shrug. “You wanted a good picture.”

She narrows her gaze at me then glances at her phone. She swipes through the pictures before looking back at me. “Good job. I’ll have to remember that tactic.”

She tosses a sexy smirk my way before turning around and heading back into the house. “Get those steaks going. I’m starving.”

Ah, hell. What have I done?

The afternoon is pure torture. Autumn’s body is practically plastered to mine the whole time. We feed each other. We faux kiss. I can barely keep our poses PG-13 and I have no one to blame but myself. Autumn’s giving as good as she got.

We’re now in the pool loungers which thankfully forces space between us. She’s flipping through the first two *Enemy Mine* books and has a notebook handy, making notes. The author contacted her after her incident at the festival and loved the idea of Autumn playing Camilla. This spark of motivation finally had Autumn seriously trying to get an audition.

She’s been speaking to the author and her agent every day, and yesterday she finally had a breakthrough. She told me one of the casting directors is intrigued by Autumn’s interest, even though the rest of the execs don’t want to touch her with a ten-foot pole. The casting director said to have Autumn send an audition tape in and she’ll make sure it gets seen. If they like it, then hopefully Autumn will get a proper audition. Since then, Autumn’s been on the phone non-stop making arrangements.

“Have you found a videographer you want to hire yet?” I ask her.

“Oh, yes. Filming on Saturday.”

“Autumn, that’s six days away. You were supposed to let me vet him before you made the appointment.”

She waves her hand at me, never taking her eyes from her book. “I don’t have time for all that. He came recommended by Ed. He should be fine.”

“Fine doesn’t cut it. Send me all his information and where you’ll be filming this.”

She salutes in answer, still not looking up. Considering she hasn't touched her notebook in a while, I'm guessing she's lost in a scene and annoyed I'm interrupting.

“What part are you reading?”

She ignores me, but her body jerks slightly so I know she heard me. I wait.

“The sex club scene.”

Jesus. So much for space turning down the temperature between us. Now I can totally see Autumn as Camilla and all the kinky and hot things she did in that scene. Hell, I don't even need to picture her as Camilla. I imagine Autumn more than willing to explore that side of herself, her sweet filthy mouth demanding pleasure – and I'm the guy giving her everything she asks for.

“Did you know that this place is real? Cara told me that she learned about it when she was traveling in Europe.”

“Think she went?”

Autumn set down the book. “She said once she explained she was an author, they wouldn't let her in. She ended up secretly interviewing people who did go.”

“You know there's one in Austin.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret it. Knowing Autumn, she might beg me to go. For research, of course.

Her attention snaps to me. “What? A sex club?”

Yep. Interest is piqued. It's too late to backtrack now.

I shrug. “The sex part isn't explicitly advertised.”

“Is that even legal?”

“It's not a brothel or anything. The owner goes to great lengths to make sure everything is on the up and up and consensual.”

Her eyes are bright and full of curiosity. “How do you know so much? Have you been there before?”

“No, but *Personally Yours* started out as their primary security and now we contract on occasion. We had to make sure we weren’t getting ourselves into anything illegal.”

Her jaw drops. “Are you kidding me?”

“No.”

She sits up and I can feel the excitement bouncing off her. “Tell me about it. Is it some underground thing?”

I laugh. “Far from it.” I pick up my phone and bring up the website. The home page shows a picture of a large mansion that’s part modern, part southern charm lit in a golden glow against the night sky. I show it to her.

“Fantasy Gardens,” she reads. “It looks like a hotel or event venue.”

“You’re not far off. It was built about thirty years ago for the main purpose of being a wedding venue. It was popular for a while, but the owner ended up selling it to the current owner whose made it into...”

“Into?”

“Your fantasy.”

A flare of desire and interest light up her whiskey eyes before she looks back down at my phone, scrolling eagerly through the site. “There’s even spa services.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty much a spa resort.”

“And the fantasy part?”

“There’s a secret site for that.”

She raises her eyebrows and hands the phone over for me to show her. I take it and look through the website. “You know how Disney does the hidden Mickeys in their movies and parks?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the website has a hidden door, so to speak, to take you to the fantasy site. It moves around, I’ll have to find it.”

When I spot it, I lean over and show her the screen. “See that shape?”

She squints at the screen. “It looks like a masquerade mask.”

“Touch it.”

She does and the screen transforms to a black screen with a red mask on the screen that seems to glow. She presses the mask again and it brings up a form where you enter your full name, date of birth, home and email address.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. That’s the initial process. If you get past this, then you’ll be asked to provide your social security number to do a thorough background check. If you agree to that and everything checks out, then you’ll answer questions about your fantasies and things you like or want to explore at Fantasy Gardens.”

“And after that?”

“You wait. If Fantasy Gardens is hosting an event or theme that correlates to your fantasy list, then you’ll get an invitation.”

“Wow. That’s a lot. It’s impressive. I can’t believe this has stayed a secret.”

“The best unkept secret in central Texas. Patrons have to sign a lot of paperwork saying they’ll keep quiet about what goes on there. For the most part, that’s what people want. They don’t necessarily want their fantasies made public knowledge. Fantasy Gardens ensures their patron’s privacy too unless it becomes a criminal issue.”

“This is insane.” Fascination laces her voice. “I wonder if Cara knows about this place.”

“She might have heard of it but doesn’t know about the fantasy aspect. The place holds a few masquerade balls every year. It’s a very coveted invitation.”

“And how do you get invited to that?”

“Owner’s discretion.”

“And who is the owner?”

I give her a half smile. “Sorry, wildcat. I get paid the big bucks to keep that information to myself.”

“Well, I have to say, this has been more exciting than the scene I was reading.”

I raise my brows at that. “If I recall, that scene was quite exciting.”

She makes a humming sound and picks up her drink, wrapping her lips around the straw. I don’t think she’s being purposely seductive, yet she is. She’s gazing out over the view, looking beautiful and contemplative. I want to take a picture of her like this. Unaware of her surroundings and simply lost in thought.

Normally, I wouldn’t think twice about taking a picture of something that catches my eye, but taking a picture of her, it feels too much like a confession. If she catches me, she’ll know how much she captivates me.

And just when I’ve talked myself out of it, I aim my phone at her and snap a picture. She looks at me, an unasked question in her intoxicating eyes.

“I’ll text it to you. Maybe you can use it for your post,” I say though I have no plans of sending it.

“Oh. Thanks.”

She looks back to the view. “Speaking of pictures. There’s one last shot I want, and the sun is in the perfect spot.”

I look out to the setting sun. It’s large and orange and probably about a half hour from being fully set. There aren’t any clouds so the sky is purely blue and orange.

“What’s your idea?”

“We’re getting in the pool. I want a sexy silhouette picture.”

Sexy. Of course. Have any of the pictures we’ve taken today not been sexy? But in the pool, she’ll be all wet and

slippery – and tempting.

She instructs me into the pool and adjusts the tripod to get us in the right spot. She tells me which direction to face, and that she'll come in and face me. She doesn't say anything else about how exactly we'll pose or what we'll be doing for the shot. Once the camera is in proper position, she sets it so it'll take multiple shots.

“Ready? I have ten seconds to get to you before it starts taking pictures.”

“Ready.”

She slinks into the pool then hits the button on the phone. She gets to me fast, plastering her chest to mine before wrapping her legs around my waist. I grasp her ass, pulling her into me, on instinct. We lock gazes and I realize this afternoon has all been a set up for this moment. This is where Autumn gets her payback.

Her lips crash into mine in an open-mouthed touch. We still, just like that for a few breaths. Then she's kissing me, a full-bodied kiss that's nothing but real. And I sink right into it. The kiss immediately turns feral. Her hips move up and down my already hard cock and I press into her even more. She gasps and her head falls back, I kiss my way down her neck. She tastes so fucking good. I don't think I'll ever get enough. Her breathing becomes broken, her moans more pleading. She doesn't say anything. Doesn't beg, doesn't demand. It's only sounds. Sounds that tell me what words don't.

I grasp her ass tighter and move her over my cock harder, pressing myself into her as much as I can with our swimsuits on. I want to sink inside her. I want her to milk my cock, feel that sweet friction until I'm filling her with my cum.

She moans loudly, my name is a breathy whisper from her lips – and hits me like a bucket of cold water.

Shit, what am I doing?

I pull back and release her legs around my waist. She sinks in the water, but I catch her before she goes under. She looks

at me like I just unplugged the television during the finale of her favorite show - a mixture of shock, hurt, and anger.

“I think we got the shot.”

She blinks a few times before she lets out a humorless laugh, running a shaky hand over her hair. “I think we stopped short of the shot actually.”

She swims to the edge of the pool and gets out. After she’s dried her hands, she takes her phone from the tripod then disappears into the house without a backward glance. I sink under the water and let out a huge scream.

AUTUMN

I stare at my bedroom ceiling, watching the fan slowly circle. The soft clicking sound fills the room like the roar of ticking bomb. Each tick ratchets up the tension in my body. This game of push and pull we're playing is killing me. He tries to put distance between us then burns me up with his sexy words, his hot touches.

Yeah, the kiss in the pool was a bit of payback, but I had no idea we would instantly ignite. I was sure he'd give in to the promise he made if he kissed me again. Then he pushed me away. The shock of that moment robbed the breath from my lungs so suddenly he might as well let me sink.

Ugh, if the man would just let go of this 'protect me at all costs' nonsense and fully let go. God...I wouldn't ever be the same.

And I don't want to be.

I want to feel the mark of his touch. I want it rough and messy. His fingers digging into my skin. His hand pulling my hair. His cock pushing into me at a punishing pace, but only bringing me pleasure. I want to give myself over to him completely. Lay myself bare.

I look at my door. Mere feet separate us and yet it feels like oceans. I groan and shift over to the nightstand and open the drawer, pulling out my favorite toy. I turn the click at the bottom on the thick cock in my hands and it immediately starts vibrating. I sink into the covers and spread my legs and rub the head in between my slick folds. I inhale sharply at the instant

zing of pleasure. I'm so sensitive already. Damn, what that man does to me.

I close my eyes imagining it's his cock moving over me. His body covering mine. His lips on my jaw. My neck. My breasts.

I take my breast in my hand, pinching my already aching nipple as I lift my hips, sinking the vibrator into me.

I'm so wet. I don't even remember the last time it slipped inside me this easily. I pump it in and out slowly, letting the head come fully out and kiss my clit before sinking it back. Every time I push it in a little further.

My orgasm is already building, but I'm not ready for it. I want it to be him taking me nice and slow. His mouth whispering dirty things in my ears.

...and fuck you so hard that neither one of us will be able to breathe.

I moan, not caring how loud it is, as I plunge the vibrator inside me, fucking myself with long, hard strokes. My body is heating up even more, my limbs are locking up as I feel my orgasm inch closer and closer. I bring the vibrator out and move it over my clit and a hard and loud sound comes out of me, somewhere between a moan and a scream as I start to come.

I move the cock over me, to let the orgasm break loose just as the door to my room bursts open.

I scream, abandoning my vibrator to grab the covers and pull them fully over me. The silhouette of Jackson is in my doorway.

"What the fuck?!" I yell.

He eases into the room, his head moving slightly to tell me he's taking in the whole room. "You screamed. Are you okay?"

All the pleasure leaves my body as mortification takes over. Maybe I should tell him that someone was in my room and jumped out the window?

“I’m fine. You can leave now.”

“I’m not leaving until I know everything is okay. What happened?”

“Nothing! Just go!”

Silence settles between us. Except it’s not silent. There’s a faint vibrating sound. I close my eyes. Just great.

“What’s that?” He comes fully into the room.

“Nothing.”

Seriously, can this guy not get a clue that I want him to leave?

His stiff posture relaxes as he comes closer to the bed.

“Jackson –”

That’s all I get before he’s right next to me and there’s no mistake where the sound is coming from. I should insist he leaves, but I don’t. I can’t seem to make myself do anything except be still and wait. My body warming back up.

He doesn’t move for a long time and when he does, he sits on my bed.

“What’s this?” he asks as he slips his hand under the covers.

I don’t say anything. I don’t even move.

His hand brushes my leg in a light caress before reaching over to the vibrating cock. It’s dark, but there’s enough moonlight coming in through the windows that I can see his brows raise before a naughty smirk forms on his lips.

“Is this what made you scream, Autumn?” His voice is all sex and silk.

“You know it is.”

“It’s nice and big. Just like you like it, isn’t that right?”

Oh fuck. His words scorch right through me. “That’s right.”

He shifts and suddenly I feel the tip of the vibrator at my entrance. “Did you come, wildcat?”

Oh God. I don’t look away, but I clear my throat. “I was rudely interrupted.”

He makes tsking sound. “Can’t have that, can we?”

I adjust myself, lifting my leg and letting it fall until I’m open wider. “No, we can’t.”

I hold my breath, waiting for him to push the vibrator inside me, but nothing happens. He doesn’t move at all. There’s only that barely there touch vibrating against me. He wants my words. And for the first time in a long time, I them let loose as I move my hips forward.

“Fuck me, Jackson.”

He growls right before he thrusts the vibrator inside me. I arch up, a broken moan passing my lips. “Yes, just like that. Give me that cock.”

I hear his breath falter and I wait for him to say something, to continue the dirty talk he started, but he remains silent.

I can’t. Not anymore.

“This is what I was imagining when I was all alone. Except it was your cock fucking my pussy, claiming it. It was your thick head rubbing over my clit. It was your cum all over me. Inside me. You filling me. Only you.”

His breath is now coming in spurts as each thrust goes deeper. Each one harder.

I pull down the sheets, revealing my breasts.

“Fuck, Autumn.”

I take my breasts in my hands, massaging and caressing them. “I imagined it was your hands on my tits. Your mouth. Your tongue flicking over my nipple. Your teeth nipping them. God, I want your tongue on me. Do you want to suck my tits, Jackson?”

He makes a deep moan but doesn’t answer me.

“I know you do. I know you want to touch yourself. You want to take that throbbing cock out and stroke it. Over and over and over until you come all over your hand.”

His thrusts increase and I move my hips with the movement.

“That’s right, baby. I want to take all of it. I want all of your cock.”

He gives me everything I ask for and we become lost in moans and grunts. My release is rushing through me, ready to burst.

“Yes, Jackson. More...don’t stop. I need you...I need... don’t ever stop.”

He doesn’t.

He’s relentless and just as my climax builds, he pulls it out completely and presses it into my clit and the burst of pleasure breaks free. I yell out as the orgasm bursts through me, and he thrusts the vibrator back inside me, building my pleasure higher and higher. I’m moaning and screaming so loud I should be embarrassed, but I’m not. I want him to hear how good it feels. How much I love it.

His own loud groan fills the room and I see him shudder in his own pleasure even though he never touched himself.

He eases the thrusts until he pulls it out of me completely. In the next second, the noise of the vibration is gone. And it’s only us and our labored breaths. That has to be the single most erotic moment of my life. Surely, he felt it too. I start to move my hand toward him, but the movement breaks the spell between us. He immediately stands and walks out the door, shutting it behind him in an almost quiet finality.

A laugh bubbles out of me. Maybe I’m a little delirious after he completely wrecked me, but I know one thing for certain. That’s the last time Noah Jackson walks away from me.

JACKSON

What the fuck is wrong with me?

The question is on repeat as I push myself into a punishing pace, my lungs burning with every stride. I'm running like I can catch up to the professional line I sprinted past like I was on fire.

But I'll never catch up. I don't even want to anymore.

I shake my head at myself. This isn't me. I never cross the line with clients. I've never been tempted to.

But none of them have been Autumn Atwood.

Last night when I saw she was using another cock to get her off when it should have been mine, I felt crazy. I wanted all her moans, all her shudders, all her climaxes...all to myself.

So, I took it. For a few blissful minutes, I owned her body, and she owned mine - without even touching me.

I've never experienced anything like that. Fucking her with that giant vibrator as she egged me on with that beautiful filthy mouth of hers – the simple intensity of her words causing me to come. It was hot as hell. But the next time she makes me come with that mouth, it's damn well going to be wrapped around my cock.

Shit. No. I shouldn't be thinking that way.

I increase my pace and glance at my smart watch. I've gone two miles in less than twelve minutes. At this rate I'll

give myself a heart attack. While that would certainly solve my problems, I ease up and force my breathing to steady. I've always prided myself on keeping my cool then one little wildcat actress tears it to shreds.

After a few more miles, I jog back up to the house and see the gate is open. Panic slams into me as I race toward it. I skid to a stop when I see our car backing out of the garage.

I rush toward the car to see Autumn is in the driver's seat. I knock on the window with my fist. "What are you doing?"

She gives me a huge smile – a huge fake smile – then wiggles her fingers at me in a wave before she puts the car in drive. She hits the gas, causing the tires to squeal.

"Autumn!"

I start to run after her but realize there's no use. I rip off my phone strapped to my arm and pull it out of the case, swiping at her name. Surprisingly, she answers.

"Hello!" Her voice is too cheerful.

"What are you doing? Come back here."

"No."

"Autumn, you can't leave without me."

"I just did, didn't I?"

"Where are you going?"

"To visit Cara. You know that."

Yes, we had plans to visit the author of *Enemy Mine* today, but not for another few hours.

"At noon."

"I called her and changed the time."

I grip my phone tighter. "Autumn, please come back. I'll take you."

"No, I'm good. I don't think Cara is going to try to kidnap me or anything. I'm perfectly safe."

"No one is perfectly safe."

There's silence on her end for several seconds. "You really want me to turn back?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll do it on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You fuck me like you wanted to last night."

"Autumn."

"Fuck me and don't push me away afterward. Admit that you want me like you've never wanted anyone else. Admit that last night was one of the hottest nights of your life."

I want to give her all those words. Instead, I swallow them all down. I can't even find words of denial.

After I never answer her, I hear her make some sort of noise. "I'm not turning back. If you're so worried, call a fucking Uber."

With that she disconnects. I call her again, this time she doesn't answer. Damn it!

I go into the house and grab my keys and wallet. I don't want an Uber coming to this house in case someone recognizes me, so I jog to the convenience store that's about a mile down the road. I take an Uber to my apartment where I get my own car. Thankfully, I have Cara's address in my phone and her place isn't too far from mine. Autumn's car is still there when I arrive. I take my phone out and text her.

Me: I'm here. Text me that you're all good or I'm knocking on the door.

Autumn: Cara has a knife. It's scary at how terrible she is at cutting brie. And the cracker keeps breaking when she tries to spread it. She's making a huge ass mess. It's horrific.

Me: You're funny.

Autumn: Thank you.

Me: Wasn't a compliment.

Autumn: I'm choosing to take it as one. Now go fuck yourself. I'm enjoying my visit and you're ruining it.

I can't help but to laugh as I lean back into my seat and breathe easy for the first time since she took off. This woman is driving me crazy.

And I kind of love it.

My phone buzzes with a call from Gage. I answer, disconnecting from the car's Bluetooth so I can talk to him on my phone. "Hey, man."

"Hey. How's it going? Your single word texts all week are starting to piss me off."

"There's nothing to report. We've been laying low while Autumn heals."

"Is rubbing yourselves all over each other poolside how you two lay low?"

"Her publicist demanded photos with her hot as sin boyfriend. Had to deliver."

Gage laughs. "Incredibly humble too."

I bark out a laugh. "Hey, when it's true, humble has nothing to do with it. By the way, those were her words."

"Seriously, how is she doing? How is she handling losing the H&H contract?"

"Her wrist looks good, and she said it isn't really giving her much pain anymore. She's looking into auditioning for this new series. It's very anti-Home & Heart so she's worried about doing something new. Especially with this scandal surrounding her."

"That Home & Heart bullshit isn't her anyway. The girl I grew up was always more spicy than sweet."

I grunt at that. It's true, but I kinda hate that Gage knows it too. Though he doesn't know her like I do. That her spicy side is scorching, and it doesn't matter how badly it burns, you want more.

“I think Autumn lost sight of her spicy side for a while there.”

“Has she found it again?”

I don't say anything.

“She's giving you hell, isn't she?” I hear the smile in his voice.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I saw the sparks flying between you that first day. And I saw the pics of you fucking her in the pool.”

“I didn't fuck her.”

That came later. Just not with my cock.

“I'm supposed to be her boyfriend, that's what we shot.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You don't believe me? You think I'm not doing my job?” Irritation laces my voice.

Gage laughs. “Jackson, come on, you're ever the professional. And I'm guessing after the concert fiasco, you're determined more than ever to protect her, which is probably driving her crazy. Has she tried to ditch you yet?”

I blow out a breath as I look at the house. Gage laughs. “Oh my God, she did!”

“This morning.”

Gage laughs harder. “What did you do?”

“I trusted her to stay put while I went for a jog.”

“Yeah, not buying that it's that simple. You pissed her off.”

I don't say anything, and Gage starts to laugh more. I really wish I could reach through the phone and give him a giant shove.

“How's Leigh-Leigh? She come to her senses and dump your ass yet?”

“You and your nicknames. That one is ridiculous.”

“I know, but I like it.”

He sighs. “I think she does too. And don’t think I didn’t notice that you’re trying to change the subject away from Autumn.”

“I’ve tracked her down. I’ve got everything under control.”

“Hmm, famous last words.”

“Are we done now? I’m about to hang up on your ass.”

Gage laughs softly. “Alright, alright. One more thing. I know the spotlight is on her, but if this new show is good for her and helps her discover that spicy side again then maybe give her enough room to explore it. Of all people, you can do that and keep her safe.”

A certain private club comes to mind. It’s definitely a place where she could let her inhibitions go. And as much as I want to be the man to take her there, it would be too dangerous. And the biggest risk has nothing to do with her safety.

AUTUMN

“What’s going on?”

Cara glances from me to my purse where I violently tossed my phone. I was imagining it was Jackson’s head being thrown into a woodchipper. I’m done playing by his stupid rules. If he can’t man up and admit that he wants me, then I’m going to make his life a living hell.

“It’s nothing.”

She laughs. “Yeah, right. I know we’re meeting in person for the first time, but I think three years of knowing each other is enough for me to know that something is seriously bothering you. You’ve been on edge ever since you got here. Did something else about you get in the news?”

“No. At least not that I’m aware of.” I hope not, that’s the last thing I need right now.

“Then what’s going on?”

I sigh. “My boyfriend and I had a fight. Sort of.”

“And is that who is sitting in front of my house?”

“How did you know?”

“I have a driveway cam.” She lifts her own phone. “It notified me before your phone started going off.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, that’s him.”

“Should I be worried that he stalked you here? Do we need to call the police?”

“No, I promise he’s not being a stalker. The thing is,” I pause. I know I’m not supposed to tell, but I really do consider Cara a good friend and I need a friend right now, “he’s not really my boyfriend. It’s just pretend. He’s my bodyguard and I went AWOL on him today.”

Cara blinks a few times. “Okay, there’s a lot to unpack there. And the romance author inside me is literally jumping up and down. The fake boyfriend is one of my favorite tropes. Please tell me more.”

She scoots to the edge of her sofa and leans toward me, a delighted smile on her lips. I tell her about hiring Jackson and how the boyfriend thing is supposed to salvage my reputation.

“Okay, so why did y’all fight?”

“Technically, we didn’t. But we almost slept together last night.”

Her eyes light up like a kid in a candy store. “Go on.”

“After what happened at the concert, he’s afraid of being distracted. So, he keeps walking away before anything more can happen.”

Cara throws her head back and laughs. “Of course, he is. So, what are you going to do about it?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve only gotten as far as pissing him off any chance I get. Like leaving him behind today.”

“That’s a plan I can get behind. But what I really want to know is what do you want? Do you want a one-night stand to get him out of your system? Do you want more? Like a relationship?”

I want more than one night. Or even more than a friends with benefits situation. When I think about being with Jackson, I don’t think about an end. So, guess that leaves me wanting a relationship. Something real and solid and unlike anything I’ve had before. And I think Jackson can give me that.

“I think want everything with him.”

Cara melts at that answer. I swear hearts almost appear in her eyes.

“Alright then. You just need to convince him to stop walking away from what he clearly wants.”

“Okay, queen of romance, how do I do that? I tried today and he dug in his heels.”

She smiles and rubs her hands together in an evil-planning kind of way. “Let’s see. I would for sure walk around the house as scantily clad as possible.”

“I can do that. He already lost it when he saw me in my bikini yesterday.”

“He kisses and touches you for show, right?”

I nod.

“What about making everything about role-playing? Break down his defenses, you know?”

It certainly worked with our Sunday Funday photo session yesterday. Just didn’t work as far as I wanted it to.

“Oooh, do you know what he likes? Like fantasy stuff? A kink? You could add that into the role-playing thing.”

“I don’t know...oh, actually, I think I might know something.”

Oh yes. This wildcat is about to bring out all her acting chops. Noah Jackson won’t know what hit him.

“What the fuck, Autumn?”

I jerk upright, my hand flying to my heart. I might have been making a ruckus in the kitchen hoping Jackson would walk in on me, but the sound of his voice still startles me. Since I got back from Cara’s, he’s avoided me. He didn’t even join me for our nightly routine of watching TV together. So, I decided to play a little dirty.

“You scared me to death!”

His gaze is on the hem of my T-shirt that is hitting my upper thigh.

“You aren’t wearing any underwear.”

I give him an innocent look even though the growly sound of his voice is lighting my body up. “I just showered. I didn’t see the point in putting any on.”

“Where are those tiny pajama shorts you’re always wearing? And that’s my shirt.”

“Yeah, found it in the laundry room. My shorts are dirty. If I wanted to get dirty after my shower, I could think of a much more pleasurable activity.” I toss him a saucy grin. “Would that be something that interests you?”

He swallows as his gaze dips down to my breasts then the hem of my – his – shirt again. “No.”

My gaze falls to his crotch and the very obvious erection forming before going back to meet his gaze. “Liar.”

He puffs out a breath. “Go put some clothes on, Autumn.”

I close the distance between us. “No. Besides, you really don’t want me to. Why are you resisting this? I can practically feel you stopping yourself from touching me.”

“You know why.”

“Because you’re my bodyguard?”

“Yes. My job is to protect you. To help you get your reputation back. That’s it. I can’t be distracted from that anymore. I work for you. I don’t fuck clients.”

Maybe Cara is right. Maybe he needs a role to play to get out of his own head.

“Fine. You’re fired.”

He flinches. “What?”

“You’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me.”

“I just did, didn’t I?” I grab the hem of the shirt and pull it over my head and throw it on the ground. “Now that you’re the disgruntled former employee, what are you going to do about it?”

As Jackson stares at me, not moving, I wonder if my bold move is going to backfire on me. Because if he walks away from me now, I’ll either die of humiliation or kill him for being a stubborn jackass.

He wants me.

I can see it as those blazing green eyes grow darker while his gaze rakes over my whole body. Will he give in to what he wants?

His gaze comes back to my face. I put my hands on my hips and tilt my chin up at him, refusing to back down.

His jaw clenches as a flash of anger comes over his expression then it’s gone, and I see a look of pure desire before he closes the distance between us and grabs me from behind my neck and crushes his lips down to mine.

His kiss is rough and angry, our teeth mashing as his tongue pushes into my mouth. But that sweep of his tongue is pure fire and melts me on the spot. I relax into his hold and let him devour me. If he thinks he’s going to punish me for going after what I want, then he’s in for a rude awakening. I want it. Let him use me any way he likes. I’ll take it. I’ll relish every fucking minute of it.

I tangle my tongue with his, meeting his hard strokes with my own soft ones. A moan escapes my throat as I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my body to his. He suddenly stops kissing me, though his mouth is still on mine. He inches back enough to look into my eyes.

“You going to lose your fight now, wildcat?”

“I don’t want to fight you. I want to fuck you.”

He lets out a low growl before his mouth is on mine again. The kiss isn’t soft by any means, but it’s no longer punishing. It’s fire meeting fire. His hand leaves my neck and both hands trail down my back until he’s gripping my ass. He pulls me up

so my pussy is rubbing against his erection. I wrap my legs around his waist and tip my hips against him.

We both moan and shudder into each other.

He starts walking and suddenly I'm pressed up against the refrigerator doors. I hiss at the cold stainless steel on my bare back, my head snapping back while Jackson starts trailing kisses down my throat.

"Cold, wildcat?"

"I'm burning up."

"Hmmm," He hums before he nips at my neck. "Can't have you getting overheated. Sounds like we better cool you down."

He releases one hand from my ass and uses his hips to keep me in place. His free hand goes over to the ice dispenser lever and presses it until he has a cube in his hand.

My gaze flies to his face and he's wearing a wicked grin. He fists the ice in his hand until I see water seep through his fingers. Then he brings the ice to my collarbone. I gasp as stinging cold hits my skin and drips down my body. His gaze jumps to mine and there seems to be a question in his eyes. As if he's wanting permission to continue. I arch into him and that's all the answer he needs. He trails the ice down my chest, the water slowly trickling over my nipples.

I stop breathing when he stops just above my nipple. It feels like hours pass, not seconds before he touches the ice over my nipple. I let out a shaky moan as white-hot sensations rush through me. "Fuck yes, Jackson."

He holds the ice there then moves it over to the other nipple while taking the one he left into his mouth. The sensation of warm and cold has me writhing against the refrigerator. He switches again, pulling my other cold nipple into his mouth. Sucking hard, lightly biting.

I grip his hair, arching into him.

"You like that, wildcat?"

"Yes, God yes."

His hand trails down my body, his cold fingertips parting my folds. The feel of his cold finger sinking into me has my body jackknifing.

“You’re still too hot, wildcat.”

“Yes.”

He removes his finger from me and takes the ice into his hand, pressing it into my clit. “Holy shit!”

It burns, but in a good way.

Then he takes the ice down and I feel it press inside me.

“Jesus, Jackson!”

He fucks me with the ice before removing it from me and pressing it into my clit again as he pushes his fingers back inside me. The sensations are intense – the burning cold, the sweet friction of his fingers inside me. I love every second of it.

I grip his shoulders tightly, not sure how much longer I can take it. He slowly removes his fingers from my body and takes the sliver of ice in his hand. He brings it up to my mouth.

“Open up.”

I do and he slips it into my mouth, the taste of me melting on my tongue.

“I think you’ve cooled down enough.”

He slowly releases me until my feet are back on the ground, but I’m still pressed against the refrigerator. He sinks down taking my thighs in his hands and spreading me wider.

“Let’s warm this pussy back up.”

He presses his mouth to me, his tongue slowly licking my clit. I’m a little numb, but the feel of his warm tongue still has me jerking at the contact. He moves his tongue over me in delicious strokes until the numbness suddenly disappears and fiery sensations flood my body. The intensity of it has me screaming out. He flicks his tongue against me harder and my orgasm hits like a burst of fireworks.

And he doesn't relent.

He stays with me, taking every ounce of my orgasm from me.

As my body relaxes, I almost melt completely into the floor, but he catches me and holds me up as he stands. He grabs my hand and starts to pull me through the kitchen.

“Wait, why are we stopping?”

“I don't think there are condoms stored in the cookie jar.”

Oh right. I've never been with anyone without a condom so the fact that it completely slipped my mind shows how much Jackson has befuddled my brain. And the fact that I would like to not have anything between us has made me certifiably crazy.

We enter his room, and he leaves me at the foot of his bed as he goes over to the dresser where his wallet is sitting. I take the moment to look around his room and the monitor he has set up with all the camera feeds on it. My gaze immediately zeros in on the camera on the pool. Did he sit there and watch me?

Jackson's arms encircle my waist from behind as his lips kiss the curve of my neck.

“You said you deleted the pool footage. Is it completely gone?”

“Yeah. All traces.”

A warmth fills me that he did that for me, that he protected me from myself. Yet there's a tiny part that's disappointed. I want to see it. I want to see what he saw.

“Did you watch me?”

He stiffens behind me and takes a moment before he answers. “Yes.”

“I wanted you to.”

“I know.”

I turn in his arms, wrapping my arms around his neck. “What did you do?”

His hands come down and grab my ass, pulling me into him. “Are you asking me if I touched myself?”

“Yes.”

“Did you want me to?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He picks me up and drops me on the end of his bed. He grabs the back of his shirt and pulls it over his head in the sexiest move ever. He hooks his thumbs into his shorts and pushes them down.

He’s got a gorgeously thick cock. The thought of him pressing into me sends a flood of wetness to my core.

He grips it and gives it a slow tug. “You want to know if I watched your hands moving over your gorgeous body. If I saw that dare in your eyes.”

“Yes.”

“You want to know if I fucked my hand? If I was wishing it was your hand on me. Your mouth. Your sweet pussy.”

“Yes.”

He releases himself and grabs the condom next to me and has it on in record time. He leans into me, pressing me back until I’m lying on the bed. He grips himself and rubs that giant head over me.

“Yes,” he says just before me sucks my nipple in his mouth. “I did it all.”

I moan and lift my hips against him. “Jackson, please.”

He lifts enough and presses my legs wide. “You ready to take all of me, wildcat.”

“Yes...now.”

He pushes into me slowly. Only an inch or two before pulling out. Then pushes back in, a little more this time. He does this over and over, driving me crazy. The fact that I can’t move my hips or legs because of the way he has me pinned is making everything much more intense.

“Jackson!”

He slams into me then. I scream out. Nothing has ever felt so good. So right.

“That’s it, wildcat. Take all of my cock.”

“Yes...you feel so good.”

He fucks me, hard and fast. It’s everything I want.

“You’re going to come again, Autumn.”

I shake my head. I don’t usually come from penetration. “No, I can’t. Just don’t stop. I want you to come.”

“After you, wildcat.” He shifts his body and every time he thrusts his pubic bone is grinding against me. Oh damn, that feels amazing. “I want to feel you cream all over my cock. I’ve been dreaming about it, wildcat.”

His words send a spike of hot sensations through me.

“That’s right, you’re not the only one with a filthy mouth. Now come for me, wildcat. Fall apart on my cock.”

He grinds into me and suddenly I’m coming hard, and he doesn’t let up, taking my orgasm to another level. “Yes, Jackson...it’s perfect. Come...come with me. I want it so bad. I need it.”

He groans and shudders, his cock stiffening inside me just before he falls apart.

“Wildcat...”

He fucks me relentlessly before sinking on top of me in exhaustion. As much as I knew it was going to be good between us, this blew away any expectation I had.

I pull him close, not ready for him to leave me. Not wanting him to pull away again and pretend this wasn’t life changing. Because it was. Noah Jackson has ruined me, and I don’t care. I want him to ruin me over and over again.

He lifts up on his elbow and looks at me, there’s a soft satisfaction in his expression. There’s even a tender smile on his lips. Then I see reality set in. A panic comes into his eyes,

and I have to take control before it turns to regret, because I don't think I can handle him saying this was a mistake. Not while he's still inside me.

I shift and it prompts him to move. The instant his body leaves mine, I miss it. Everything inside me wants to stay, but if I have a chance of winning him over, I need to play the game.

“That was definitely worth the wait,” I say as I stand up. I lean in and give his cheek a kiss. “Good night.”

When I get back to the doorway, I turn to look at him over my shoulder. “Oh, and you're rehired.”

JACKSON

I knew sex with Autumn would be good.

I just didn't know it would be so good that I would go days thinking of nothing else. That the taste of her would linger on my tongue. That the feel of sinking into her wet heat would keep me in such a state of arousal that I'm seriously worried about my dick. It's like it decided that if I'm not going to give it what it wants then it's going make sure I'm as miserable as possible in protest.

And I am miserable. Because I want her again.

And it doesn't help that it's been two days and Autumn's acting like nothing happened. She's been busy trying to get everything ready for her audition. She's on the phone constantly, working on lines and rehearsing several different scenes. This is probably the worst week to dive into... whatever we're doing.

Not to mention, she's still pushing my bodyguard buttons. She left me this morning while I was on my run again. I really should have learned my lesson on that one. At least I kept my personal car at our rented house. She texted that she was at a spa appointment and would meet me for shopping when she was done. The spa was one of those exclusive ones only the rich can afford, so I decided it wasn't worth it to follow her and waited until it was time to meet her. Thankfully, media gossip on her has died down since a prominent Hollywood couple announced their separation.

When I pull up to the address Autumn gave me, it isn't what I was expecting at all. It's a vintage clothes store plus costume shop, not some high-end boutique. Autumn's car is already here and when I walk into the place, it's filled with racks of clothes from wall to wall, all vintage and eclectic.

I look around for Autumn, but all I see are two brunette women in the far corner of the store. Then one of them turns and looks at me. My stomach clenches as my brain processes who I'm looking at. She waves at me, and I swear my heart stops before kicking back in gear at a double-time pace.

Christ, she's gorgeous.

I close the distance between us and her eyes light up with desire and excitement. When I reach her, I take a strand of the rich, deep brown hair with golden highlights in between my fingers as I take her all in. The new hair color brings out a glow in her skin and makes those whiskey eyes deepen to a bourbon color.

"Like it?" She asks with a bit of hesitancy to her voice.

"You're beautiful, wildcat. No hair color is going to change that, but this...this feels like you.

Her eyes turn shiny before she nods.

"I love it. But as long as you love it, that's all that matters to me."

She gives me a stunning smile before she pulls me into her side and introduces me to the shop's owner, Felicity. Felicity assures us all cameras are off, but also lets us see for ourselves. She also produces a signed NDA before she gives us some privacy to walk around.

I look at Autumn, impressed she went to all the lengths I would have.

She winks at me. "I've learned a thing or two from you."

"I like it. So, are you going to tell me why you've emptied out a costume shop?"

"Because shopping without people taking my picture all the time is much more enjoyable."

“Not that part. The costume shop part.”

“I need the perfect Camilla outfit for my audition.” She leans into me. “You ready for a dressing room montage scene today?”

I groan and she laughs. She has no idea that this will be torture, not because it’s shopping, but because I’m going to see Autumn in all sorts of sexy outfits. My cock is already twitching in excitement.

“Is that why you dyed your hair?” Camilla is dark-haired.

She shrugs. “It’s part of it. But mostly I wanted to get back to my natural color. Or at least close to it.” She takes a few strands in her hands and gives it a look before letting them fall away. “I’m going to get some new headshots while I’m with the videographer. He’s a photographer as well. I want something that isn’t all girl next door. Maybe even something a little in character with Camilla, we just need to find the perfect Camilla outfit.”

She turns to a rack and starts sorting through clothes.

“You never sent me the info on him, you know?”

She pulls off a hanger and examines a shirt. “The videographer? I told you Ed vouched for him. Besides, I like him. He’s got some really good ideas I’m excited to try out.”

I sigh. “You’re making it really hard to do my job, Autumn.”

She replaces the shirt and closes the distance between us, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her body fully against mine. She goes up on her tiptoes and trails small kisses along my jaw until her lips are close to my ear.

“Right now your job is to look like a smitten boyfriend. Now kiss me like you mean it.” She leans back just enough for our mouths to align and waits.

I want to tell her that every time I kiss her I mean it. Instead, I show her.

Our tongues tangle in a sensual dance - unhurried and sultry. I let the kiss tell her everything I can’t. That no role-

playing scenario we put ourselves in will ever take away the fact that this is real between us.

Though I have no desire to, I slowly end the kiss. Her brown eyes are almost as dark as her pupils, and her lips shiny from my kiss. It takes every single piece of my willpower not to crush her lips to mine again, this time in a hard, consuming kiss that claims her as mine.

The corner of her mouth lifts before she darts her tongue out and wets her lips, tasting my kiss all over again. I stifle a groan.

“Now I’m going to go try on clothes and you’re going to keep that, *I’m ready to throw you on the floor and fuck you*, expression on your face the whole time.” She throws me a smirk before turning away and heading toward the dressing rooms.

She and Felicity work together to get several outfits assembled. She tries on several leather skirt combinations that are so incredibly sexy on her I actually moan when I see her. She tries on a nude sequined dress that’s sheer enough that I can see the outline of her nipples. I have to ball my hands into fists to not get up and tear every piece of clothing she tries on off her. They’re all perfect.

“Okay, I have one more.” She gives me a saucy grin before she walks back into her dressing room.

I’m going to lose it. Felicity’s presence in and out of the dressing room is the only thing that’s kept me from grabbing Autumn and fucking her brains out. Though the woman seems to have disappeared, and I really need her to come back. I’m pretty sure I know Autumn well enough by now that she’s saved the best for last, which will probably mean the skimpiest and sexiest.

Unable to sit still anymore, I stand and start pacing the small area in front of the dressing rooms. I swipe at my forehead and find a light sheen of sweat. The woman has me sweating.

I hear the swish of the dressing room curtain and turn to see Autumn wearing a skin-tight black leather cat suit with a belt looped at an angle where a weapon could be held over her hips. She's the embodiment of the femme-fatale superhero.

Fuck. Me.

She walks toward me, those gorgeous hips swaying seductively. She stops in front of me and runs a finger down my chest, stopping right above the button of my jeans.

"Hello, big guy," she says with a Russian accent and just like that I'm hard.

Her hand continues down until it's cupping my cock. "What are you doing?"

"Conducting a body search. I can't have you concealing any weapons." She leans in and squeezes my dick. "Though this feels awfully dangerous. I might have to take it out for inspection."

I groan and thrust into her hand before I can think twice. I'm so damn turned on I might black out.

"Autumn..."

"I'm not Autumn. I'm a Russian spy and I'm ready to play." A wicked gleam fills her eyes. "Play with me?"

A growl leaves my throat as my hand goes to the base of her head and I fist her hair in my hand. "Felicity is right around the corner."

"No, she's not. I disposed of her," she says with a dismissal wave of her hand, perfectly in character. I fucking love it.

She flicks the button loose on my jeans and unzips me before slipping her hand into the band of my boxer briefs and touching my cock with her bare hands.

"Autumn." I give a little tug of her hair.

She grips my cock tightly and with her other hand she suddenly has a knife at my neck. By the feel of it I can tell it's real, though she has the blunt edge against my skin. Before I

can fully comprehend how it got there, she presses the knife more strongly against my throat. "I'm not Autumn."

She releases some of the pressure on the knife and slowly moves it up and down, almost in a caress. And damn if it doesn't turn me on.

"No. You're my little spy."

A pleased smile graces her lips. "That's a good boy."

I growl at that. "I'm no boy. And good is the last thing I feel right now."

Her intoxicating eyes flare with desire as she moves her hand over my cock again. "Prove it."

She removes the knife from my throat and spins it in her hand before returning it to the belt sheath, the blade still extended. It's about the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Later, I'm going to find out how she knows to work a switchblade with such skill.

My hand is still fisted in her hair, and I bring her lips to mine giving her the consuming kiss I wanted to earlier. There's nothing nice about it. It's demanding, it's possessive - and she completely submits to it.

I push her backward until we're in the dressing room she was in. I rip my mouth from hers and yank the curtain closed. I don't care that we're alone, I want her all to myself.

I take the zipper that's nestled between her breasts and slowly pull it down, revealing a black lacy bra. I pull it down until I can see her gorgeous tits fully.

I grab a sash hanging up that was used as a belt in one of her previous outfits. I turn her around and wrap the sash around her wrists, tying them together behind her back.

She looks at me in the mirror. "You think that is going to hold me down?"

"Yes. Because I say it is. You want to be a good little spy, don't you?" I give the knot an extra tug, but I don't make it so tight that it would hurt her.

“Get on your knees.”

She gives me a defiant look but does what I say. I pull out my cock fully. “Open your mouth.”

She gives her lips a lick. “You’d enjoy this more if I had my hands.”

“I only want your mouth. Now suck me into that pretty mouth, wildcat.”

As much as I love role playing, I don’t want the spy’s touch. I want my wildcat’s.

She opens her mouth and leans in, her tongue slowly swirling around my head before flicking it across the seam and sucking it into her mouth. Sweet Jesus, she feels good. I have to stop myself from not thrusting and fucking her mouth.

She sucks me in further and I see her arms twisting as if she wants them free to touch me. As much as I’d love her hands on me too, I love seeing that sweet mouth working me over.

“That’s right, wildcat. Take my cock.”

She hums, taking me deeper into her throat. And fuck, it feels so good that I can already feel my orgasm about to break free. As much as I want to see her swallow me down, I want in her pussy more. I pull out. Her lips are red, her cheeks are flush, and her whiskey eyes are drunk with desire.

“Did you like that, wildcat?”

“Anytime your cock is in me, I like it,” she says, her Russian accent husky. Then she shocks the hell out of me by standing up and bringing her arms – her no longer bound arms

–

around to press on my shoulders.

“What the...?”

“That knot was child’s play.”

And just when I thought I couldn’t get any harder, this woman proves me wrong.

“It wasn’t and you know it. Later, you’re going to tell me how you got out of that.”

“I’ll never reveal my secrets.”

“We’ll see about that.”

She pushes me until I’m maneuvered into the chair in the dressing room. “You’re at my mercy now.”

I’ve never wanted to be anywhere else. “I wish I could fuck you with this outfit on.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

She reaches for the knife at her hip and spins it around again, so the handle is facing me. “Cut it.”

My heart starts beating double-time. The thought of placing a knife right at the center of her makes me equally nervous and turned on. Who knew knife play would be a kink of mine?

I look up at her and I can tell from her face she’s feeling the same way. “Are you sure about this?”

She unzips the suit as far down as she can then sticks her hand inside so she can push the material away from her center creating room to cut it without touching her skin. “Cut it, Jackson.”

I move the knife to where the material is the furthest from touching her and gently pierce the suit. The soft pop of the material separating has a moan escaping her. A look of pure lust is on her face. I hold her gaze as I slowly tear a long slit that splits the material widely. She removes her hand from inside the catsuit and I reach through the slit and hook a finger over her panties, brushing the sensitive skin of her pussy. She shudders, her knees giving away just a little, and a hand comes to my shoulder for support.

“Be still, my little spy.”

I pull her panties through the slit and easily cut the lacy material away until she’s fully exposed. I drop the knife and

run a finger along her folds. Her other hand comes to my shoulder and grips me tightly. I move my finger until it's grazing her clit and her fingernails dig into me. She's close. I bet if I give her a few more strokes, she'll be coming on my hand.

As if realizing this too, she knocks my hand away and straddles me, taking my dick in her hand and rubbing it over her slick center. "See what sucking your cock does to me?" She says then she settles down onto me until my head sinks into her pussy. "Fuck, Jackson..."

Her accent isn't completely gone, but it isn't fully there. I love that she's so turned on she drops character.

"I'm not wearing a condom."

She blinks, looking a little shocked she forgot. She reaches into the holder where the knife was and pulls out a condom. I don't even care that she clearly planned this seduction, I'm only grateful she's prepared.

She lifts off enough to roll the condom on my cock. I grip her thighs tightly, praying I don't come from the feel of her touch. Once the condom is on, she rubs my cock against her again before taking me into her then letting me slip out. She does this over and over, making my head spin.

"Sink that sweet pussy down on me, wildcat. I need you. Now."

She shudders as she sinks all the way on me. I groan at how perfect she feels around me. I pull down the cups of her bra to free her tits. I lean in and suck one in my mouth. She grips my head as she moans loudly, riding me faster.

"That's right, wildcat. Ride my cock. Take every fucking inch."

"Yes...I want it all. I want all of you."

I grip her hips and help her fuck me. It's rough and erratic and the best damn thing I've ever felt. I feel her contract around me as her breath pitches and her moans grow louder.

"That's it. I'm going to come. Make me come."

I don't relent until I feel her apart around me. Her moans and screams are so loud they could probably be heard from the street and that turns me on even more. I keep fucking her hard and fast until my release rushes through me the same way.

She falls into me as we both come down from the intensity of our climaxes, nuzzling her face into my neck. Our breaths are loud and labored. I hold her close, and I know I should say something, but I don't want to take the chance of ruining this moment. It's too perfect.

She finally moves when my cock softens inside her and stands, turning her back to me. I take that opportunity to remove the condom and tuck myself into my underwear.

"I saw a bathroom around the corner," she says and turns slightly, holding something out to me. I realize it's her torn panties. "Throw this away too."

I look at her as I take them from her, trying to gauge her state of mind. The Russian spy is gone. And I can't tell if Autumn is sated or sad, or maybe a little of both.

I leave her and go to the restroom and clean up. When I return, Autumn is dressed in her own clothes, with a few items in her arms, the torn catsuit among them. She gives me an amused smile. "Good thing I was planning on buying this anyway, huh?"

I laugh softly. "Um, yeah, though I don't think it's reusable anymore."

"They have the costume of a certain master archer." She gives me a saucy look.

"You know those two are strictly friends, right?" I say, touching the catsuit.

She tilts her head at me. "It's role-playing, Jackson. The rules don't count." She closes the distance between us and runs a finger down my chest, leaving behind a trail of fire. "Remember that and let me know next time you want to play."

I'm so fucked when it comes to this woman. I don't stand a chance against her, and I don't even care anymore. Never in

my life have I loved breaking rules more than I have with
Autumn Atwood.

AUTUMN

Tonight 9pm. Let's play.

That's all the card on top of the single red ribbon wrapped box said. Inside there was a gorgeous long slinky black dress. It's been two days since the costume shop without a single touch from Jackson. Is there any question that I want to play?

At nine sharp, I stepped out of my room wearing the dress that clings to my every curve with a plunging neckline and slits up both legs that show an obscene amount of skin to find Jackson waiting for me looking devastatingly gorgeous in a black suit and tie. His gaze blazed so hot that I thought he was going to devour me right then. Instead, he offered his arm and we got in the car.

We've been driving for a while, getting farther away from the city. Where is he taking me? And why tonight when he knows tomorrow is so important?

Tomorrow, I film what might be my only shot at an audition for Camilla.

My scandal might have died down some, but there's still a big black cloud over my name. I have this one chance to convince the powers that be I'm worth a chance.

Since Jackson and I visited the costume shop the other day, I've been in a constant state of doubt. I've second-guessed every idea I've had to film and have been generally horrible to live with. Jackson's been great though. He's listened to me rant, he's brainstormed ideas with me, and held my hand when I couldn't seem to calm down. I've been so preoccupied with

my plans and freak-outs that I haven't had time to freak-out about us.

What we did in the costume shop was so incredibly sexy and kinky and every night I've crawled into bed, I wanted him with me. But I put the ball in his court, so I was going to wait.

Thankfully, tonight the wait is over.

Now we're driving down a darkened two-lane road seemingly in the middle of nowhere. This is all starting to feel very much like a dark erotic thriller. Especially when he pulls off to the side of the road.

"Open the glovebox."

His voice almost startles me, it's been so long since we've spoken. I do what he asked, and inside there's a black masquerade mask. I take it out, the material is light and delicate though the mask is larger than most, one that will cover most of my face.

Suddenly, it hits me where we're going. I look at him, shocked, and he gives me a knowing grin.

"Put it on."

He produces his own black mask. Watching him tie it on is sexy as hell. I take a shaky breath and do the same.

He gets back on the road then takes another turn and we're in front of an ornate gate and gatehouse. A man steps out, not wearing a security guard uniform, but a suit and tie and a simple black mask around his eyes. He doesn't say anything, only takes what looks like an invitation from Jackson. After he looks at it, he gives a nod and hits a button that opens the gate.

We continue down a tree lined drive and at the end, I can see the large mansion lit in a golden glow. It's even more beautiful and charming than in the pictures. As we drive, I take in what looks like sculpted gardens on one side and even though it's dark, I can see small cottages in the background. Right before we get to the circle drive surrounding a large water fountain, there's a sign that says, Fantasy Gardens.

He pulls up to the valet and has me stay as he comes around to open the door for me. Butterflies take flight in my stomach.

He opens the door and holds out his hand. “Camilla, your night awaits.”

I inhale sharply as it all makes sense now. He wants to me to play Camilla tonight, but this isn’t about the sexy game we’re playing. No, he’s giving me a night to embrace her before my audition.

A flood of emotions rush through me and it takes all I am not to throw my arms around him in a huge hug. After all, that’s not what Camilla would do.

I take his hand instead and tuck my arm into his as he leads me up to the door where a masked man in all black stands. He looks more secret service than doorman. He’s as tall as Jackson though he has more of what I would describe as a boxer’s build. I can’t see his face fully, but he reminds me of a young Russell Crowe. It’s not necessarily in looks, but in the stoic way he’s holding himself.

“Mr. and Mrs. Madden, welcome to Fantasy Gardens.”

I do my best to school my surprise at the name. Jackson went all out, naming us after the characters in *Enemy Mine*. Nick Madden is Camilla’s love interest and the undercover agent trying to catch her, though they aren’t married in the books.

The door opens and we’re led into a large entry with a grand staircase that curves up to a second floor, an opulent chandelier giving the space a golden sparkle. I can hear club music pumping from somewhere. It seems very out of place in the middle of a house that looks like it could be in *Steel Magnolias*. There are a few people mingling around. To my left there’s what I would call a sitting room, but it’s filled high-top tables as well as plush sofas and chairs. The women are dressed in sexy cocktail attire and the men in button-downs and slacks. Some have suits on, but most are slightly more casual. Everyone has a mask on.

The man in black leads us to the room to my right where a bar is set up. It looks like a modern version of what a bar would look like in the 1800's. It's made of dark wood with delicate carvings, but the glass shelving is all modern and backlit in neon colors.

"Please order a drink if you want, then I'll escort you to where you'll meet with Ms. Scarlett."

Before I can even question who Ms. Scarlett is, he retreats to the foyer.

"May I get you a drink?"

I turn back to the bar where an orange-masked bartender is waiting. He's wearing a deep cut black vest with a white button down and orange tie. He very much looks like a modern version of an old barkeep, except for the orange touches. It seems to be the theme here, to add a little bit of the 1800's to the present day.

"I'll take a Southside," I say, Camilla's drink of choice. I've never had it, but from the descriptions I've read it's like a gin mojito served in a martini glass.

The corner of Jackson's mouth curves up right before he orders an Old Fashioned – Nick's preferred drink. The bartender nods his head and before he turns around, I catch the name on his nametag – Bartender Orange.

I turn to Jackson. "Ms. Scarlett, Bartender Orange, are we in the game Clue?"

He chuckles softly. "Everyone who works here has a color surname."

I glance at the man waiting for us. "Let me guess, Mr. Black?"

Jackson smiles and taps his nose to let me know I guessed correctly.

I take another sweep of the room. "This is place is beautiful, very fascinating."

"It is." He closes in and places his hand at the small of my back and pulls me into him. His head leans down and his lips

caressing my jaw. “But not nearly as much as you are.”

He kisses me right at my pulse point. “Wildcat, everyone in this room can’t take their eyes off you you’re so fucking stunning.” He kisses his way up to the lobe of my ear, giving it a light nip. “They can look all they want, but you’re all mine.”

I melt into him. I love that every time we play, he still calls me wildcat – that I’m not only a fantasy to him.

Bartender Orange returns with our drinks, and we reluctantly pull apart. I take a sip and find that I like it very much.

“Good?”

“Yes.” It might become my go-to cocktail.

“Ready?” Mr. Black returns.

At our nods, he leads us back into the entry then through another door that opens to a hallway. He takes us past several doors until we reach the end and motions us into a room that looks like an old sitting room, one might call it a parlor. The thumping of the music is louder and sounds like it’s coming from the other side of the wall.

“Ms. Scarlett will be with you shortly,” Mr. Black says before he shuts the door, leaving us alone.

This place is freaking weird – I love it. Jackson takes my hand and leads us further into the room to a settee, where we settle on.

“Let me guess. Mr. Black works for you and he’s the one who got us this last-minute invitation without all the hurdles.”

Jackson smiles. “He exclusively works at Fantasy Gardens, but yes, he’s a member of our team. And I might have made a call.”

“Have you already been vetted?”

“If you’re asking if I’ve been here before, the answer is no. Not for pleasure.”

The sound of that word on his lips makes my temperature rise. I take a sip of my drink. “You mentioned this place has

themes that correlate to your fantasy. What's tonight's theme?"

His gaze is intense and dark as he takes a sip of his drink. "Exhibition and Voyeurism."

My breath catches. My heart starts beating faster.

"Camilla likes to watch. She likes to be watched."

Suddenly, my body is tingling all over. That's true. The sex club scene in the book is a prime example of just how much Camilla likes to be watched. And the thought...it doesn't turn me off. I love the idea of playing out a version of that scene as Camilla. But the reality is, I'm not her. And if someone recognizes me...

Jackson must realize where my thoughts are going, because he leans in and runs a finger down my cheek then under my chin. He lifts my chin until I meet his gaze again. "Wildcat, trust me."

That's the problem. I do. I trust him like I've never trusted any man. And it scares the hell out of me.

I nod and take a big drink of my cocktail. "Why did you go through all this trouble?"

He sets his drink down then puts mine next to his. He takes me by the hips and pulls me into his lap until I'm straddling him, my dress bunching at my waist. He reaches up and runs a finger over my lips then trails it down my neck and further to my shoulders where the thin strap of my dress sits.

"Because my little assassin was doubting herself."

He slips his finger beneath the strap and lets it fall down my arm until it reveals my bare breast. He cups it, rubbing his thumb over the tight nub. I sigh and settle myself further into him, moving my hips to rub myself over his quickly growing cock.

"We're here because you need to know that you're not sweet romance." He leans in and sucks my nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue before giving it a light bite. My head falls back and I press my fingers into his scalp, encouraging him to keep going as I move my hips over him.

There was no underwear in the box, and I took that as a hint not to wear any. Feeling my already sensitive skin against the rigid material of his pants is amazing.

“You’re erotic romance,” he says as he kisses his way to my mouth and gives me a thoroughly erotic kiss. “You’re edgy and sarcastic and daring. You’re sexy with the most deliciously filthy mouth that would bring any man to his knees. You’re Camilla, wildcat.”

He gives my bottom lip a quick nip. “And tonight, you’re going to encompass everything she is.”

Tears prick my eyes. I don’t remember the last time someone has believed in me so thoroughly, has seen me for me. And Jackson has, right from the start. I take his face in my hands and bring his lips to mine and we sink into a kiss that’s the perfect combination of soft, sensual, and sweet.

A knock at the door breaks us apart then a female voice asks to come in. Jackson adjusts my dress and I slip off his lap before he gives permission.

A gorgeous woman in a red body-hugging dress and matching mask enters. She’s exactly how I’d cast the infamous character, Ms. Scarlett. Dark hair slicked back, dark intriguing eyes, full ruby lips – she’s a total Angelina Jolie.

“Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Madden, I’m Ms. Scarlett,” she says as she settles into the chair across from us, a few tablets in her hands. “Welcome to Fantasy Gardens. We need to take care of a few housekeeping items before I take you to your room.”

She makes a few swipes on a screen. “I would like verbal confirmation from both of you that you’re here of your own free will and tonight is consensual between you both.”

She looks to me. “I am. It is.” Then she looks to Jackson, and he repeats my answer.

“And have you two been intimate before?”

I blink at that as she looks up at us both. “Um, we have. Why?”

She looks to Jackson for confirmation and when she gets it, she looks back to the tablet. “Sometimes strangers meet here. We like to know going in to make sure everyone feels comfortable and safe.”

“Oh. Well, that’s reassuring.”

Ms. Scarlett forms a Mona Lisa smile. “We pride ourselves on a thorough application process, but we like to take extra precautions.”

She asks us a few more questions and has us verify all our answers then she hands us each our own tablet.

“I encourage all couples to establish a safe word between each other. If you haven’t done so, please do once you’re in the room. For Fantasy Gardens, we establish a safety word. This will be a word that is known only to you and must not be anything you’d say in the heat of the moment or regular conversation. Once you submit your word, it’s immediately implemented into your room’s security system. It works sort of like an Alexa. If at any moment you’re uncomfortable or don’t feel safe, say that word and it’ll trigger security to your room.”

“Wow. Impressive.”

Scarlett smiles a little more widely this time, pleased at my praise. “Thank you. You’ll also be prompted to enter a two-digit number and I’ll explain what that’s for once we’re in your room. Make sure it’s something you’ll remember easily and don’t tell it to each other. Please go through all screens until it tells you you’re done.”

I look down at the tablet and it says pretty much exactly what Scarlett just told us. I enter the word rattlesnake as my safe word. Once I press submit, another screen immediately pops up to enter my two-digit number. The next screen says, For Your Eyes Only, and proceeds to tell me where a hidden panic button is that is unknown to my partner. I have to say, this place really works hard to keep women safe. I click the box that says I understand where it is then hand over the tablet.

Scarlett meets my gaze and gives me a nod as she takes it. Then she gives us a seductive version of her Mona Lisa smile.

“I’ll take you to your room.”

She leads us through a different door and into a room that is made of glass except for the wall the door is on. There’s a large opulent four poster bed sitting in the middle of the room and little else. Only a side table on the one wall with some standing lamps and a mirror. The main attraction is clearly the bed – and the wall of glass.

Through the glass is a large open room, dark with neon lights flashing over a dance floor, but there’s also sofas and booths with tables interspersed throughout. It looks like a high-end club. And the room is full of people. It’s not overcrowded, but more people than I expected to be here. Some are dancing. Some are making out. Some appear to be having sex.

They don’t seem to be paying us any attention.

“They can’t see us,” I say.

“No. It’s a one-way mirror. You choose how you want to play out your fantasy.” She hands us a remote with four different colors on it, a keypad, and a circular dial with a button in the middle. She points to the green button. “This one will turn on a light in the ballroom to tell the exhibitionists that someone is in the room.” She points to the yellow one. “This one will turn on a speaker so they can hear you.” Then she points to the red button. “This will allow the exhibitionists to see you.”

“It makes it see through?” I indicate the one-way mirror.

Scarlett nods. “Only these three panels here move.” She indicates the three that are central to the room. “They open from the center, and it takes about fifteen seconds for them to fully move. For them to open, you must press the red button then you enter your two-digit number followed by Mr. Madden’s number. You’ll have ten seconds to press the red button again. Only then will the mirrors move to reveal clear glass. We want it to be a decision you both are comfortable with and not made lightly or accidentally.”

I look at Jackson and there's a look of pride on his face. Did *Personally Yours* do this? I assumed the security he did was only personnel. Did they create the system?

"Impressive."

Scarlett nods. "The black button moves it back to one-way. Remember it'll take fifteen seconds before you're fully private again. You'll hear two beeps when they're fully closed."

"And the dial?"

"The button in the center will rotate through different colored lights and the dial is a dimmer. Press the dimmer and the lights will strobe." She takes the remote from me and presses the button and the room turns red then purple, and she keeps pressing through several colors until we're back to normal lighting. Then she moves the dial, dimming the room to give a candlelit feel before handing the remote back to me.

"Enjoy your night."

Scarlett leaves and I look at Jackson. "Did your company create all this?"

Instead of answering, he crooks his finger for me to come to him. I do and he turns me toward the mirror until we're both looking out at the ballroom, him behind me.

"Want to see what happens when we turn on the light, my little assassin?"

Ah yes, we're not Autumn and Jackson right now. I lift the remote and press the green button. We can't see any changes, but suddenly gazes turn our way. There are even some cheers as the beat of the music seems to increase. People start making their way to our mirror, dancing seductively and touching the mirror. Couples are kissing and touching each other. The couple in front of us are standing much like me and Jackson as they dance. The man's hand comes around and takes the hem of the woman's skirt and pulls it up, revealing that she's completely naked underneath.

My breath hitches as I watch his fingers move over her. Jackson's lips kiss my shoulder as he hooks his thumb under my dress strap and reveals my breast again. The instinct to

cover up is overwhelming until I remember they can't see me. And it's clear they can't. Their gazes don't leave the same spot they're focused on. The woman is watching the man's hand move over her, inside her.

So am I.

Jackson's hand cups me, pinching my nipple and I moan, letting my head fall back on his chest. "Does it turn you on? Watching them?"

"Yes."

He moves from my breast and pulls up my dress until it's around my waist. His hand moves over my pussy. "Fuck, you're wet. Do you want to watch them come? Do you want to come with her?"

His words are going to make me come right now.

"Let's watch. I'm not ready to come yet."

He teases me, taking me almost to the brink then pulling back. The man is now rubbing his hand on her clit faster and faster. I can see her breathing increase as she gets closer to the edge. Her hips move with him, and I know she's close.

"More," I say, and Jackson moves his own hand faster.

I want to match her. As much as I thought I didn't want to come, I need it. I need to come with her. "More. Make me come with her."

Jackson lets out a low groan as he pushes hard cock into my ass.

"Watch her. Watch that hand on her pussy. Watch how it gets her off. Feel me. Feel how good I fuck you."

I'm suddenly on the edge, ready to fall. I watch the woman and I see it. Her release building then breaks, and I shatter right along with her.

"God, yes! Don't stop!"

"I have you, baby. Going to make you come so hard."

And I do. I come in intense waves that seem to build higher and higher instead of crashing. Then finally it does, yet still I crave more. Jackson stays with me, keeping it going until I slump against him.

I take a moment to catch my breath before I turn around and sink to my knees. I tackle his pants until his cock juts out and I take him fully into my mouth. Jackson grabs a fistful of hair as he lets out a loud moan. I don't take my time teasing him. I fuck him. I use my mouth and hand to work him over, sucking him in as far as I can. I want him to come hard and fast.

He wants it too. He fucks my mouth with little restraint. I love having him like this, out of control and desperate.

“Wildcat...”

Intense heat throbs between my legs at the nickname. I suck him harder and the sound he makes is completely carnal.

“I'm going to come...wildcat...fuck.”

He releases on a loud groan as I take him all in, swallowing everything he has until he pulls me away. He lifts me up, kissing me. “That was so damn sexy.”

“And we've only been here ten minutes.”

He chuckles. “Don't worry, my little assassin. We have all night.”

We spend the next half hour being voyeurs to the orgy in the ballroom. We've watched people take each other against our mirror, people switch partners and almost anything else imaginable. Then we see the panels from the room next to ours open. It slowly reveals three people, two women and one man. People flock to their room and we watch as the threesome starts. One woman goes down on the other as the guy fucks her from behind. They put on their speakers too so we can hear every dirty thing they say and do. It's intense. And incredibly arousing. Once they all find their satisfaction, the panels close.

“I want to open the panels.”

Jackson jerks his gaze to me. He doesn't say anything, but there's hesitation in his gaze.

“They need to see us.”

I can tell he's seriously considering my words. “Do they need to see us, or do you want them to?”

I look out. “I *need* to do this. For Camilla.”

His mouth flattens and he stands and moves away from me. His hand moving through his hair as he stares out at the exhibitionists. Then he takes his mask off and looks at me. “No.”

His answer surprises me. I'm not sure why though, he told me he would always be the bodyguard first. If he was going to only treat me as a job, why bring me here?

The word hangs between us as he moves back to me and takes my mask off. He squats until we're eye to eye. “I can't do this with you unless it's about more than Camilla. It has to be something *you* want. Something you're comfortable with. Not to prove yourself for this role. Not to prove to all the haters and trolls out there that you're what they're saying about you. This has to be about you. About *your* desires and wants.”

This man. Maybe protecting me is a priority for him, but I don't think he realizes how much freedom he's given me.

I take his face in my hands and lean in and give his lips a light kiss. “I want this. I want it because the thought of it turns me on. Because I've spent too many years being afraid to be myself. But more than that, I want this because it's with you. Because I trust you to keep me safe. I trust you to fulfill this fantasy with me, to make it wonderful and good. I trust you because I know you understand why I want, no, why I *need* to do this. That you don't judge me or think less of me.”

“Never.”

“But I only want it if you feel the same. If you'll trust me to keep you safe too. If you trust me enough to share this

fantasy with me, to want it too. I'm not going to ask you to do something you don't want to."

He sits back on the bed and pulls me into his lap. "I do. I want this with you." He kisses me then his arresting green eyes meet mine. "Only you."

The fervent note in his voice breaks the last thread of hesitation I have of going all in with him. I want this man in my life and never want to let him go.

"Only you," I repeat and those beautiful eyes darken. His fingers dig into my hips possessively and I love it.

Yes, I'm yours.

"Tell me your fantasy." His voice is deep, dark, and promising.

"I want them to watch you go down on me."

He inhales sharply, but his nostrils flare in interest. His tight grip runs up from my hips up my back to my neck. He nips at my bottom lip. "Yes, wildcat."

We lock gazes, our agreement sealed. I take the remote and set the lights to red and dim it down until the room is in more shadows than light then press the dimmer so the lights strobe.

"I want to press my hands on the glass while you're under my dress."

He stiffens. "Your face. It'll be too close to them."

"I'm masked. Shadowed. I'm only a few inches from you now and I can't make out your features clearly."

His mouth flattens.

"Trust me to take care of my identity. You wouldn't have brought me here if you thought it was unsafe. So, let's fulfill our fantasy without fear."

Finally, he nods. Then his grip on my neck tightens again and he pulls me close, his lips against mine. "As soon as you start coming, press the black button. Because I plan to fuck the hell out of you when we're alone."

My body lights up like the strike of a match. He reveals my breasts, kissing, licking and sucking them. I move my hips over him, loving the feel of his hardness. He bites down on my nipple, just hard enough to make me cry out. Then he pulls away, bringing my dress back over my shoulders. "This dress stays in place. No one sees you but me."

I nod.

He takes my mask and puts it back on my face then puts his back on. He slips his hand between our bodies, his finger moving over my core. "So wet, my little assassin."

I moan and move my hips further into his hand.

"Are you ready to feel my mouth here?"

"God, yes."

"Me too. I'm dying to taste you again. I dream about it. About how good it feels to sink my tongue into you. How sweet it'll be when you come around me."

"Please..."

He moves so we're both standing. He walks me to the center of the three panels. He presses my hands to the glass then trails his hands down my arms, over my breasts, down my hips. He pulls them out until I'm almost half bent over. His hands roam over my hips and ass. He raises my dress as his hands make me crazy, the way they softly caress me yet singeing me to the core.

He leaves and comes back with the remote in his hand.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

He lifts one of my hands and moves so he's between me and the glass. He kisses me then places the remote in my hand. I press the red button then enter my number and turn the remote toward him. He presses his in, gives my lips a quick peck then sinks down. He bunches my dress up, putting one of my legs over his shoulder. Then he gives my pussy a long slow lick.

I moan and press the red button again.

The glass vibrates beneath my hands and my stomach surges with nerves. Then Jackson flicks my clit with his tongue, and I'm lost in only him.

I close my eyes. I can hear commotion from the ballroom as we start to come in view. I move my hips against his mouth, and he grips my hips tighter.

“So fucking sweet, wildcat.” He licks me again. “Better than any dream.”

I moan and open my eyes. Pleasure and excitement face me. They're touching themselves, each other. Touching the glass.

I dip my head so they can't see my face.

“They're watching us.”

“Do you like it, wildcat?”

“Yes. I like that they can see me but can't touch. Only you.”

He sinks his tongue inside me, and I move my hips against his mouth.

I feel him groan against me. “That's right, baby. Take what you want from me.”

I look up and the crowd is getting bolder. A woman is now pressed against the glass as her partner goes down on her. I move my head around, making sure it dances in the shadows as I rock against Jackson's mouth. I'm not going to last much longer. It's too good.

“Yes...don't stop. I want to come so hard.”

Jackson moans again and I feel him move, his hand moving up and down. I realize he's taken his cock in his hand. Though no one can see him, the fact that he's done this with the panels open turns me on so much my orgasm storms through me.

I scream out and press the black button, riding out my orgasm as the panels close. I can hear them, some cheers, and

some groans of disappointment that the show is over.

As soon as the two beeps sound indicating the panels are closed, Jackson stands, taking my dress off then tosses me on the bed. He takes a condom out of his pocket then sheds his clothes. He's a work of art. Seeing him stroke his beautiful cock as he looks at me with such intense lust in his eyes is incredibly sexy, makes me *feel* sexy.

He puts on the condom and spreads my legs, sinking a finger inside me. "You're so gorgeous, wildcat."

He fucks me with his finger as he pulls my nipple into his mouth. "And you're all mine. Like this, you're only mine."

"Yes..."

"Say it, wildcat. Let me hear you say it."

"I'm yours. Only yours."

He presses down on my legs, spreading me wider as he moves his cock against my folds.

"I need you inside me." I know we're supposed to be role-playing, but I can't. Not in this moment. "Jackson...please."

He groans and thrusts inside me, claiming me as his. "So good...Autumn..."

At the sound of my name, I feel my release start to build higher. I can't come yet. I want more. More of him.

He kisses my neck, sucking on my skin hard enough to leave a mark. "Did you like them watching you, wildcat? Did you like coming for them?"

"Yes...I like this better. Just you and me. Your cock inside me."

He takes my mouth in a feral kiss and that's all it takes to push me over the edge. "Yes! Jackson...please."

"Come, wildcat. Now."

I do. And he follows me with his own release. "Autumn..." He presses his forehead to mine as we move with each other. "Autumn."

JACKSON

The ride home from Fantasy Gardens is silent. Maybe it's because we're sated and overwhelmed from our night. Maybe it's because we can't seem to keep our role-playing to the actual roles. I knew getting in this role-playing thing with her would backfire on me. That it was only an excuse to be with her.

And after tonight, I don't want to let her go.

I don't know what to do with that. The reality of being with Autumn is complicated. She lives in California. I live in Texas. She's an actor. I'm a business-owner, a bodyguard at heart. How do we make a relationship work? I've never been in a proper relationship in my life, much less a long-distance one.

And does she even want a relationship or am I just a distraction while she works through this scandal?

I glance over and her eyes are closed, a content smile on her lips. I've hated seeing her so stressed the past couple of days. But it wasn't until I overheard her say, this is a mistake, as she was practicing lines, that I knew I couldn't sit by quietly anymore. I needed her to know she's more than Home & Heart. And it turns out, she needed much more than that. I might not know the details, but it's clear that Ben and her other asshole exes made her feel less than the amazing woman she is. I wish I could have a few moments alone with each and every one of them, but the fact that she seems to have more peace of mind now makes my chest swell with happiness.

I nudge Autumn when we arrive back at home, and she blinks her eyes open and gives me a sleepy smile that makes the sweet ache in my chest swell even more.

“We’re home.”

She nods and we get out of the car and make our way into the house and the hallway leading to our bedrooms. I don’t want to leave her, but I also don’t know how to break past this role-playing thing we have going on. I don’t know how to ask her to be mine. Not at one in the morning when she has a big day tomorrow.

When we get to my door, I pause. She does too.

Before I can utter a good night, she puts a hand on my arm.

“If you go into your room, I will go full Camilla on you. And not in the way I did an hour ago.”

I press my lips together not to smile. “Still playing assassin, huh?”

Her expression turns contemplative as she steps closer, her face tips up to mine.

“With you, I’ve never truly played. Jackson, I’ve been role-playing for years, and I don’t want to do it anymore. I want to be real. With you. Only you.”

Her words steal the breath from my lungs. I hate that she’s spent so many years not feeling like she could be herself. And that she trusts me enough to take that step with me, it fucking slays me. Makes me feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

“And honestly, Jackson, you’re shit at role-playing. If you were serious about this, then you wouldn’t call me wildcat. You wouldn’t have said my name. So, how about we forget all these excuses and games and just be together?”

“Okay.”

She blinks at me. “Okay? Just like that?”

I pull her into me and press my forehead to hers. My heart is beating so hard, I’m surprised she can’t hear it.

“Just like that. Autumn, I don’t want to fight this anymore. I’ve wanted you from the moment I saw you on that escalator in the airport. It scared me how quickly and intensely you got under my skin. It still does if I’m being honest. But tonight...it was beyond words. Not just the sex, but with how right it felt. There’s no one else I would have trusted to experience that with. With you...it was perfect.”

I brush my lips against hers.

“I don’t know much about being a boyfriend. But I know I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. I want you. I want to be with you. I’m all in.”

Her eyes turn glossy. “Really?”

“Really.”

“So, we’re taking the fake off the boyfriend label?”

I give her a half smile. “Consider it gone.”

She takes my face in her hands. “Good. Now I’d like to take a shower with my boyfriend. And maybe let him get me a little dirty first.”

I didn’t think I could get anymore turned on after the night we shared, but Autumn just proved that when it comes to her, I’ll always want more.

“Is that possible? Our night’s been pretty dirty already.”

She gives me a cheeky smile and takes me by the hand leading me to her bedroom. “A little more filth won’t hurt.”

We pull up to the videographer’s studio and I glance at Autumn. She’s wringing her hands together as her leg bounces. I reach over and weave my fingers through hers, giving her hand a squeeze.

“You’ve got this.”

She nods, but I know my words went in one ear and out the other.

“Hey, look at me.”

She does then and I can see the panic in her eyes. “Is this your normal pre-audition worries or is this more?”

She sighs. “More. I feel like I could throw up. I don’t even think I was this nervous when I got called back for Sunset Beach. What if...what if I can’t pull it off? What if they can’t see past the Christmas movies and the wholesome girl thing? Or the scandal?”

“Okay...what if? If all your fears come true, what then?”

She opens her mouth then closes it. “I don’t know. I guess my career is over.”

“That’s it? You won’t audition again? You’ll just hang up your acting hat?”

“Jackson...”

“What? You’re saying if you don’t get one role then that’s the end of your career. Autumn, that’s not an industry ending it. That’s you giving it up.”

She blows out a breath. “I didn’t say that. But this black cloud isn’t going anywhere. I could go on hundreds of auditions, and the outcome could be the same. Then I’ll be the sad sack who refuses to accept that I’m a washed-up actor.”

“Or you’re like one of the many actors that have found success after a lull or scandal. Or maybe your career shifts to behind the camera. Or some other aspect. What if all this going on right now leads to an opportunity you never thought of? Or what if you get a second audition? What if you get the role of Camilla? Or another role? Your what ifs don’t have to be negative. Your what ifs could be everything you want.”

She gives me a small smile, but the worry is still in her eyes. “That’s the thing...it’s all too much. I feel it all and it’s weighing down on me. At least if I fail, I can blame it on the scandal and not on the fact that I’m not good enough to make it. But if I make it then fail, it just proves I’m not good enough. I went from teen star to Christmas queen and never got past that. Maybe it’ll be better if I stop now. Disappear. Become one of those ‘where are they now’ actors.”

I release her hand and gently pull her into me until our foreheads are touching.

“Wildcat, your doubts are killing me. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes. See how strong you are. How capable. I might not know how Hollywood works, but I believe in you. I believe that no matter what life throws at you, you’re going to succeed. Giving up isn’t in your nature. I’ve seen it through this scandal. The way you handled that douche in the airport and anyone else who’s come at you. You’ve held your head up high. Hollywood might try to kick your ass, and maybe they’ll knock you down, but you’re Rocky in this story. You’re going to get back up. You’ll fight back. You’ll win. I know it with everything inside me.”

Tears pool in her eyes. “Kiss me. I need to taste those words. I need them to fill me.”

I kiss her. Softly, slowly. Letting her savor every word. And when she pulls back, her whiskey eyes are mostly clear of doubts.

I softly move my thumb over her cheek. “There’s my wildcat.”

“Let’s do this,” she says and we get out of the car. The door to the studio is open so we let ourselves in. The room is open and large with professional photos hanging on exposed brick walls. There are also several televisions on the walls with various videos silently playing.

A man emerges from the back of the studio, a large smile on his face as he approaches us. “Autumn, it’s nice to meet you. Tom Flynn.”

He holds out his hand for her to shake. They exchange pleasantries then his gaze moves to me and his expression freezes.

“Holy shit. Noah?”

My stomach clenches at the sound of my first name and what that means. The man is younger than me, probably a kid when he knew me. His name and face aren’t familiar, but I

stopped learning them all. Only the bad cases stick in my mind.

“I’m Noah Jackson.”

The man puts his hands on top of his head, his expression full of shock and awe. “I can’t believe it.”

Autumn looks between us. “You two know each other?”

“He saved my life,” Tom says and my stomach twists even more, my suspicions confirmed.

“You serve together?” Autumn asks.

“No,” I say. “What city?” My gaze never leaving Tom’s.

“Houston.”

I was in Houston a couple different times, including when I aged out. Considering his age, that’s probably when I met him. Tom now has his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “I can’t believe it. I always wanted to run into you again. To thank you. Jesus, I’m doing my best not to hug the shit out of you.”

I must have made some sort of face because he laughs. “Now I’ve made it awkward. Don’t worry. We’ll work up to the hug.”

Autumn is looking between us, clearly confused and curious. “How did he save your life?”

I love how she asks him and not me. She can probably tell I’m not doing well with words right this second.

“I was in a foster home, and they were more in it for the money instead of taking care of the kids. We weren’t exactly treated well. Noah came in, he took one look at me, and he knew. Two days later I was out of there and those assholes never fostered again.”

She looks at me, an astonished expression on her face. “Oh my gosh.”

Tom continues, “I was put with a different family, and they adopted me. And they’re great. Really great.”

I nod, it suddenly feels like a vice has clamped around my heart. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“You know you’re a legend, right? Before I was put with my parents, I was in a group home and there were at least ten of us that were saved by you. I’ve got to at least shake your hand.” He comes toward me and holds his out. “Man, you have no idea the difference you’ve made in my life.”

Emotion clogs my throat. It was always my hope that those I helped found themselves in a better situation, but I never knew. I take his hand then decide, *fuck it*. I tug his hand and bring him in for hug. He tightens his arm around me and when we disengage his eyes are shiny. There’s a burn in mine as well.

“Damnit man, you can’t cry,” I say. “Then I’ll start. Then she’ll start and her make-up will go to shit. Next thing you know, we’re to blame for ruining her audition.”

Thankfully, that breaks the tension and Tom and Autumn start laughing. Though she’s already gently wiping at her eyes.

“Yeah, I need to change and probably freshen up,” Autumn says.

Tom nods and points toward a corner. “The bathroom is down the hall to the right.”

She takes my hand and pulls me with her. Once we’re in the hallway, she pulls me into a fierce hug. “There’s a lot to unpack and I hope you’ll share it with me one day.” She looks up, her eyes still shiny. “You’re a special man, Noah Jackson. I’m pretty sure I’m halfway in love with you.”

My heart slams into my chest at her words. “Autumn –”

She presses her fingers to my lips. “It’s no secret after last night that we have feelings for each other. They don’t have to be defined yet, but I’m not going to hide away from them either.”

She goes on her tip-toes and gives my lips a soft kiss. “Now go out there and continue to make that man’s day.” She pats my chest before disappearing into the bathroom.

I'm halfway in love with you.

It's not like I haven't experienced love. I was loved by my parents and loved them in return. I love Gage like a brother. And the moment I saw how happy Everleigh made Gage, I considered her family. But I've never been in love. I've never wanted to say those words or even wanted to hear them from any woman I've been involved with. But the thought of Autumn saying those words...it fills every part of me with euphoria. I've never understood the saying, floating on a cloud, more than I do in this moment.

And if I'm honest with myself, I'm halfway in love with her too.

But I can't give her those words without telling her about my past. Including the part I haven't told anyone, not even Gage. Maybe it's time I stop running from it too.

For the first time, the thought doesn't strike fear through me. I have Autumn to thank for that.

I return to the studio where Tom is setting up. He glances up and he gives me a shy smile. "You don't remember me, do you?"

I shrug. "Houston was the last place I was before I aged out. The faces started to blur by then. Your story is familiar though. I was always afraid to find out what happened to the kids I helped, in case they ended somewhere worse. It's really good to hear things worked out for you."

"If you want to know about others, I can help. I've kept in touch with some, others I've found over the years. There's actually someone I think you should talk to. His name is Kyle Brooks, sound familiar?"

"The name Kyle is familiar, but I can't place him."

"He lives in California now and he's writing a screenplay about his experiences as a foster kid. You got him out of a bad situation."

"Are you saying I'm in his screenplay?"

Tom nods. “He’ll want to talk to you, and you might want to do the same. The project sounds solid, but if I had a character in a movie based on me, I’d want to check it out. You know?”

This can’t be real. Tom walks over to his computer. “He contacted me about it, so I have his email and phone number.”

After a few clicks, Tom copies down the information on a piece of paper and hands it over. “I won’t say I met you and let you decide if you want to talk to him, but I think it’ll be worth your while to contact him.”

I nod and take the piece of paper. “Thanks.”

We fall into easy conversation from there and the tension that came over me when he first recognized me has dissipated. Meeting Tom again might have given me a contentment about my past I’ve never felt.

Autumn returns looking lethal in the low-cut red jumpsuit that she purchased from the costume shop. I curl my fingers into my palm so I don’t grab her and kiss her until that jumpsuit is on the floor. If these casting directors don’t see how right she is for this show, then they’re idiots.

Autumn and Tom talk about how they’re going to shoot the audition piece which is a monologue from the first book. They film it a few times, trying out different things. Then they watch it on his computer and finally decide they’re happy with it. As Tom sets up to take some photographs of her as Camilla, Autumn wanders his studio. He has an area where he has random pieces of clothes and accessories. She puts on this pair of oversized, black-rimmed glasses and looks over at me. As huge as they are, they look good on her.

“You remind me of Sydney in those glasses,” I say.

Sydney is a side character in *Enemy Mine*, always described wearing huge glasses. I wouldn’t say she’s Camilla’s best friend, more the Q to James Bond. Where Camilla is dark, intense, and seductive, Sydney is quirky and geeky, but still a complete badass with her own brand of sexy. She doesn’t take Camilla’s shit – no one’s really. She has a confidence and

sassiness about her that I always found alluring. What Autumn did to that guy in the airport, it's a total Sydney move. Though Sydney would also have found a way to hack into all his accounts and made his life hell.

Autumn's mouth quirks up. "I love Sydney. I keep waiting for Cara to do a spin-off with her and Mason. I might love their will they/won't they romance even more than Camilla and Nick's. That scene where Mason kidnaps her... I love that scene. I have it memorized."

The way her eyes light up, I swear that's the first spark of true excitement I've seen in her eyes regarding this audition in days.

"Audition for Sydney."

"What?"

"Do the kidnap scene as an audition for Sydney."

She blinks a few times then takes off the glasses. "You want me to do that instead?"

"No, I'm saying audition for both. If this is your chance to be seen, then show them all you've got."

She tilts her head as if to consider it, but Tom calls her over, now ready. They spend about twenty minutes taking pictures and they're all great as far as I'm concerned. She looks sexy as fuck, totally encompassing the dark seductiveness of Camilla.

After they're done, she asks Tom about filming another audition and he immediately agrees. Autumn looks through his clothing and accessory options before disappearing into the bathroom. When she emerges, she's wearing a tangle of necklaces over a T-shirt that says, Sarcasm Loading, on top of a loading bar.

Her hair is fixed in quirky half up buns on each side of her head, a modern Princess Leia look. She simplified her make-up and is wearing the big glasses from earlier. She looks like the perfect Sydney. "Will you read the Mason part for me off camera?" she asks me.

I nod, there's no way I'm denying her anything. We find the chapter in the book where the scene is. She looks over it then hands it to me. For the scene, she's in a chair, her arms behind her back as if they're bound together.

As soon as Tom says action, Autumn immediately transforms. She looks around as if taking her surroundings then at me, a contemplative look on her face before she says her line.

"You're wasting your time. Camilla doesn't care about me."

"Then I guess I'll waste my time and find out. At least the view is nice," I read, doing my best to inject the right tone.

She rolls her eyes as she gives off a small scoff. "Wow. Wasn't expecting flattery. You think I'm such a pathetic shut-in that I'll melt at your pretty words? Give away all my secrets?"

"Maybe. But it's still true."

My words make her expression sober from her earlier sarcasm. She seems to contemplate me again. "I have to say, this charming side of you is a surprise. Your approach comes off a little cut and dry, I was expecting more of a stilted personality."

"My approach is cut and dry?"

"Yeah, you calculate and execute. I'm not saying it isn't impressive, but you certainly don't win any style points."

"Style points get you caught."

She shrugs, almost seeming bored with the conversation. "Maybe. Maybe not. But it also makes you merely a trigger boy."

"You think I don't research my marks?"

She raises a brow. "Do you?" She pauses as she lets this jab sink in for Mason's character. "Why is Camilla a threat for you? Are you only wanting to get the competition out of the way? Are her style points winning over clients? Or is it

something else? She's in the same profession as you and you've been hired to kill a colleague. Think about that."

"She's not my colleague. We're not fucking co-workers. We're hired killers. This is what we do. You think she would hesitate to take me out for the right price?"

"She already has."

This is where she catches Mason off-guard, and she knows it. Autumn leans in, as far as her restrained arms will let her, a knowing smirk on her lips. And I believe it. "You think you're so good that I haven't already found you? Before here, you were in Lisbon then London. Cairo. New York. She could have killed you ten times over by now."

She's encompassed the character so well that I almost forget to read my line. "You think I don't know you track me?"

"I believe that of all the cities I listed, you only knew of two."

"Maybe I should just kill you and leave your body for Camilla to find."

She leans back, seemingly unconcerned. "Go ahead. You'll regret it though and I have a feeling you're not a man who likes to live with regrets. It's why you don't question your mark. It's why you don't get personal."

"My job isn't to get personal."

I get the line out, but the significance of it sits heavy between us. This is us. Or it was before last night.

"And yet here you are."

The way Autumn looks at me, I know this is more than acting. She's channeling us. Of all the turbulent feelings that have been between us.

She leans in again, holding my gaze. "I'm not your job, Mason." Her voice is full of quiet authority. "You didn't have to kidnap me to get to Camilla. You wanted to. I think I intrigue you. It fascinates you that I can find you so easily."

“It infuriates me.”

I deliver the line with all the fury and frustration Mason is feeling, what I’ve felt. It did infuriate me how easily she got underneath my skin. How easy it was for me to forget that professional line. As much as I don’t regret crossing that line, not knowing how we’ll handle going forward still scares me.

She throws her head back and laughs before returning her gaze to mine. “The line between the two is very thin and you know it.” She looks at me then with a raw honesty in her gaze, in her voice. “I know it too because I feel the same way. I hate that you caught me, but also thrilled you did.” Then her devil-may-care expression returns. “It’s nice to get out of the office and come face to face with my favorite project.”

“You’ve been looking forward to your death?”

She gives her lips a quick lick as she watches me. “I bet you a hundred grand you won’t kill me.”

“That’s a stupid bet.”

“I know.” And smiles fully for the first time and the moment is stunning. It’s full of victory. “I’ll still win.”

A few beats pass then Tom says cut and we all sit there in a charged silence. Then Autumn releases a deep breath. “Okay, that felt really good. Think we should try it again?”

“No,” Tom and I say at the same time.

Autumn’s eyes round in shock.

“That was perfect,” Tom says.

Autumn looks at me.

“Wildcat, you just knocked that out of the park.”

JACKSON

A loud scream pierces the air and I push away from my desk so hard, my chair falls behind me.

Autumn.

I burst into her room to find her standing in the middle of the room, all in one piece, with her phone pressed to her chest. Relief that she's not in some sort of bloody state fills me, but there are tears running down her cheeks that has panic filling me all over again.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She wiggles her hand with her phone in it. “I got it. I got a real audition. For Camilla and Sydney.”

Then I see it, the pure joy in her tears. I close the distance between us and pick her up in a big hug, swinging her around. She laughs and squeals as she holds me tightly.

“Congratulations, wildcat,” I say before kissing her. “They would’ve been fools not to consider you.”

“You’re not biased or anything.”

“Maybe a little. Your audition was good, Autumn. I don’t know how they could’ve ignored you. You were magnetic in both roles.”

Her expression softens as she melts into me even more and I love that my words made her feel good. She leans in and places a soft, but fervent kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

I nuzzle my nose against hers and as much as it pains me, I set her down. I have a feeling that things are about to move fast. “What’s the plan?”

She takes a big breath. “I leave for L.A. today. The audition is tomorrow.”

“*We* have to leave today.”

“You’re going with me?”

“Of course, I’m going with you.”

The joy in her face dissipates and what looks like disappointment fills her eyes. An uneasiness settles in my stomach. “Do you not want me to?”

“No, it’s not that.” She looks away and it seems she like she wants to say more but can’t find the words. Then it hits me. She thinks this is about being her bodyguard.

I tilt her chin up until she’s looking into my eyes. “I want to go with you, Autumn. Not because I feel I have to. I’m not going to say the bodyguard side isn’t a factor at all, but I want to be there as your boyfriend first.”

Her whole expression softens. “Really?”

“Really.”

She jumps back into my arms, peppering my face with kisses. “Good. Because I want you there as my boyfriend.”

I take her mouth in a kiss that immediately ignites. My cock hardens and as a hot need fills my body. Fuck, I want inside her. Now.

Right as I get my hands on the hem of her shirt, she pushes me away. “No, we can’t get started on that as much as I want to. I gotta get on the phone with my assistant and get us a flight out of here as soon as possible. Go pack.”

Very reluctantly, I release her.

She’s right. We have a lot to do in very little time. I retreat to my room and grab my duffle bag out of the closet. I’m tossing clothes on my bed when it sinks in that this is my chance to meet with Kyle. We’ve exchanged a few texts and

he's anxious to meet with me, but I wasn't going to leave Autumn. But now I really don't have an excuse. I pick up my phone and shoot off a text before I think about it too much.

Within five hours, we're lifting off. Autumn's team worked hard to get this done and I'm relieved we're taking a private plane since it ensures us anonymity and limits the people around her. We have reservations at The Starlet, an upscale hotel that Autumn says is discreet. She has a former acting school friend living at her place while she's been gone.

Autumn weaves her fingers through mine. "Do you not like flying?"

I roll my head against the headrest and look at her. She directs her gaze to my bouncing knee. I might not be a fan of taking-off, but that's not what is bothering me. Kyle can only meet during Autumn's audition, and I don't like the idea of leaving her alone for that long.

"I'm fine."

She gives me a look that says she doesn't believe me. "If it's not flying then what's going on? You've seemed distracted for a few days. Ever since meeting Tom."

I know she's been waiting for me to bring it up. I had planned to, but I don't know how to talk about that part of my life. I know she'll see me as Tom did and I don't feel like some hero. There's so much about those years that I haven't let myself process.

She's giving me an encouraging smile, so I take a deep breath. "When you were changing at Tom's studio that day, he told me about another foster kid I knew, and I've been texting with him. He lives about an hour out of L.A."

I stop myself from telling her about the script. I'm not ready to talk about it. Hell, I don't even want to think about it. I told her my story doesn't deserve a Hollywood ending and now it's getting one without my permission. I need to find out more before I can come to grips with it.

"Are you going to meet him?"

I shrug. “He can meet tomorrow, but I have to go to him. Your audition...”

She squeezes my hand. “Jackson, I can get myself to my audition. You should go.”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. We’ll order a car for me, it’ll be fine, I promise. This feels important. You should go.”

I nod. She’s right, but I’m a little disappointed I don’t have an excuse to bail.

“Jackson, will you tell me about it? It’s okay if you don’t want to, but...I’d like to know. To understand.”

I swallow, not sure I can even push the words out. But Autumn deserves to know.

“I was raised in a good home before my parents died. You know, they taught me right from wrong. To speak up when you see someone is doing something wrong. To defend myself. To help those you see being treated poorly. That kind of stuff.”

“Right.”

“Well, I get in my first foster home situation and things are just wrong. I’m supposed to trust these adults to take care of me and instead, they’re doing bad things. The other kids in the home were scared. Then the foster dad grabbed this girl and the fear in her eyes, I’ll never forget it. I went to stop him from hurting her and I got backhanded across the face.”

She gasps, her fingers cover her mouth.

“I’d never been hit in life.” My cheek stings just at the thought while that same feeling of horror tightens my stomach. “There was no way in hell I was going to stay there. I was able to sneak my way to a phone that night and called the cops. They showed up and I listened to these foster parents spin a tale, making us kids sound like troublemakers. I refused to stay hidden and showed the cops the bruise on my cheek. The dad told them I got in a fight with another kid. The cops could have dismissed me, but they didn’t. Child services came and took us out of the house that night. I encouraged the other kids

to speak up and some did. Some were too afraid. But it was enough for us to not go back. Then the next place I got stuck, I saw the foster parents' son trying to touch one of the girls in their care."

"Jesus, Jackson."

"I stopped it. I was the one kid that wouldn't stay quiet. I wasn't afraid to stand up for what was right. My social worker gave me a phone and said to text her anytime I saw anything suspicious. I loved that. It made me feel safe, you know? Eventually, I realized I was the inside man. I didn't get put in good homes and if I was, I was taken out after a while. Every situation was miserable and horrible."

"Oh my God. Are you telling me they used you as some sort of spy?"

"Pretty much."

She blinks in disbelief. "How is that any better? To put you, a child, in dangerous situations. To deprive you of a chance of being adopted."

How many times have I had the same thought?

"It wasn't, for the reasons you just named. In the beginning, I didn't really care though. I missed my parents and didn't want another set. To have the kind of responsibility they gave me, it felt good. It gave me purpose. But it also created this person who didn't trust anyone. The foster mom who would smile and make me feel welcome one day, would call me a worthless piece of shit another day. I didn't believe anyone. At some point, I hated that about myself. I hated that they put me in that situation. I just wanted to be somewhere good, to feel safe again. But then I'd stop a toddler from getting abused. Or a teen from being sexually assaulted. They deserved to be safe too. So, I sucked it up."

Autumn leans over and cups my face with her hands. "You're an amazing man. You were a hero to so many."

I shake my head. "I'm no hero. It was a job to me. I stopped learning their names. I don't even know how much I cared. It was only about justice."

This sudden tight feeling fills my chest, my lungs burn. I've never admitted that out loud. Never even admitted it fully to myself. What kind of man does that make me?

Autumn shifts and moves until she's straddling my lap, but I'm only vaguely aware, trapped in my memories.

"It's okay, Jackson."

I meet her gaze. "What?"

"It's okay to feel that way. You did what you had to in order to survive the situation you were in. It's okay not to feel like a hero."

And just like that, it's like she took a sledgehammer to my chest, her words releasing all the tension and guilt. I let out a shuddering breath and pull her close as the pain starts to evaporate.

"It's okay not to feel like a hero and still be a hero to the person you helped, Jackson. That you took on such responsibility at such a young age, it's remarkable and brave. I imagine...I imagine that your parents would have wanted to see you loved and taken care of above anything, but if they knew that what they instilled in you brought good to so many, I know they'd be incredibly proud of you."

I close my eyes, a completely different pain filling my chest. "I miss them so much."

Autumn hugs me tightly to her and I hold on to her just as fiercely.

"I know you do."

A shuddering breath leaves me as my eyes sting with the tears I'm holding back. I try not to think about them. About how differently my life would have been if they hadn't died.

"I just wanted them back. Every day I wished it was all a bad dream and I only needed to wake up."

I feel her thumbs wipe away the tears that slipped out and I open my eyes to see her looking at me, her face full of compassion.

“They were with you. In your heart. Giving you the courage you needed to survive all you did.” She presses her hand to my chest where my heart lies, and I swear I hear a crack in the armor that’s inked over it. “They’re still with you. That never goes away.”

I place my hand over hers. “I’ve never told anyone that. Not even Gage.”

Her eyes turn shiny. “Thank you for trusting me with your story.”

I swallow as I press my hand over hers, applying pressure against my beating heart. “You’re the chink in my armor.”

Her lips fall apart in a surprised gasp just before they take mine in a searing kiss. I sink my hands in her hair and grip her head tightly, kissing her with every ounce of passion inside me. It might be crazy and fast, but this woman is it for me. I just know it.

I yank her head back and she grunts as she grounds her hips against me. I trail kisses down her exposed throat until I get to the collar of her shirt.

I tear my mouth away from her. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

She only makes a sound of agreement as she slips off my lap and takes off her shirt. I unbuckle and work off my pants and underwear and she comes back to me, gloriously naked. She moves her hips over me, soaking my cock with her wet pussy. I lift her up, lining myself at her entrance then sink her down on me.

We both moan loudly.

“I love the way you feel, Autumn.”

She rolls her hips sending a rush of heat through me. “You, too. God, Jackson...”

She’s so damn warm and wet. The feel of her is unlike anything I’ve ever felt then it hits me that I’m not wearing a condom. We’ve had the safety talk already but haven’t stopped using protection.

“Autumn, I’m bare.”

She nods, meeting my eyes as she continues to move up and down my cock. “We know we’re safe. I don’t want to leave you.”

“I don’t either.” I grab her hips and slam her down on me. “I don’t want anything between us. Ever.”

A broken moan leaves her as I guide her hips up and down in a punishing pace.

“Jackson...it’s so much...” She shakes her head, her voice full of emotion. It almost feels like she’s pulling away.

“Look at me, Autumn.”

I don’t stop guiding her over me, but I change up the pace so she’s now taking me sinfully slow. She shudders, her breathing hitches, but she meets my gaze. She’s beautiful - the dark desire swirling in her eyes, the painful pleasure on her face. It’s fucking stunning.

“It’s not too much. It’ll never be too much. Not with us.”

A pleasurable sob escapes her lips.

“Now come for me, wildcat. Let me feel that sweet cream on my cock.”

“Jackson...”

I growl as she clenches around me and I know I’m about to lose it. I reach between us and slip my finger over her clit and her hips jerk and she’s suddenly moving faster, taking her pleasure. Greedily demanding it. Then she shatters.

“That’s it, wildcat.”

I grip her hips tighter and bounce her harder as her pleasure pours over her again and again. Then I’m lost.

“Fuck...Autumn...”

Filling her with my cum with nothing between us is the most erotic feeling I’ve ever felt. I never want her any other way. Just pure us.

She grips my shoulders as we ride out our orgasms then she slumps into me. I pull her close and burrow my face into her neck. Her hands slip onto my chest, and I press it against my heart again. Saying everything I can't push past my lips.

AUTUMN

As soon as I get in the car waiting for me after my audition, I let out a deep breath and all the adrenaline that kept me going, starts seeping out. I run shaky hands through my hair. I did it. And I did it well. I know it deep down.

I pull out my phone, though Jackson is meeting with Kyle now, he told me to call to let him know how it went. And honestly, he's the only person I want to talk to right now.

He answers after the first ring. "Hey, wildcat."

My shaking hands settle as soon as I hear his voice. "Hey."

He must sense it in my voice. "It went well," he states.

I smile. "I'm cautiously optimistic."

"Come on, wildcat. Don't tell me the politically correct response. You fucking rocked it, didn't you?"

I laugh. "Okay, yeah, I feel really good about it. They had me read an extra scene for Sydney."

"And how do you feel about that?"

I had been set on Camilla for so long, I hadn't even thought about Sydney until we taped the audition with Tom. And doing that scene with Jackson had felt so right. Sydney's her own person, but she's also overlooked. Which has a lot of her being too comfortable staying in the shadows instead of taking risks. Much like myself.

"I'm good with it. The thought of playing Sydney is actually exciting me more than Camilla. It's clicking. And I

got the sense that Sydney has a bigger role since it's a series, not a movie."

"I think you'd be a kick ass Sydney. Tell me more."

"Well, I had a good rapport with everyone. I wasn't sure what to expect with everything that's happened. All I know is I had a good audition and right now that's all that matters. I'm happy."

"And I'm happy for you, wildcat."

"How's it going there?"

"Good. We met up about thirty minutes ago. I remember him now. We haven't talked about a lot yet. He's only a few years younger than me. I found out he aged out too." There's a heaviness in his voice.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah. It's a little weird, but good."

"Okay. Have a good time. I'm almost back to the hotel. I have a massage appointment waiting for me so I'm going to be all nice and relaxed for you when you get back."

"Oh?"

"Mmm-hmm, all oiled up and wrapped in that fluffy robe and nothing else," I say in a flirty voice.

He groans. "Wildcat, you're killing me."

"I'll be in our big bed waiting for you when you get back."

"You better be. Enjoy getting pampered, wildcat."

Two hours later, I feel like a million bucks all snuggled into our luxurious king-sized bed, not even bothering with the robe. I check my phone to see if Jackson's texted about when he'll be heading back, but there's nothing from him. I toss it back on the bed then glance out the window at the glimpse of the city I've called home for ten years.

Except it's never felt like home.

Living in Los Angeles has always been part of the job, and honestly, I would happily live in Austin or move back to San

Antonio. It's a crazy thought considering Jackson and I haven't even talked about the future of our relationship.

A relationship that would have to endure lots of long-distance, even if I change my home base. Is it too soon to be thinking of uprooting my life? Even if I'm happy to leave L.A. in my rearview mirror, are we ready for that kind of commitment?

It feels like we are.

I've never felt so deeply, so utterly connected, during sex in my life like I did yesterday on the plane.

It's not too much. It'll never be too much. Not with us.

The trust he placed in me even though I haven't confided all to him, had my heart tumbling past the halfway in love mark. He gave me his ugly and twisted parts, and it's time to give him mine.

My phone pings. I immediately reach for it, but the text on my screen is from the last person I expected.

Ben: Can we meet?

I stare at my screen. After all that's gone down, now he wants to talk to me?

Me: My people have been trying to facilitate a conversation between us for over a month and you've been ignoring them. Talk to my agent.

Ben: I'm downstairs in the bar. Just a few minutes.

Me: How do you know where I'm staying?

Ben: Please come down.

I sigh. I don't want to, but I also want to know what he's up to. I want to know why he's letting the world believe I'm a crazy stalker. And maybe I can find a way to reclaim my reputation too. I don't answer him, but I get dressed. I resent him a little more for making me leave that comfy bed.

Fifteen minutes later, I enter the bar and find him sitting in a dark corner booth. I sit across from him; his eyes immediately take me in what seems to be part appreciation and

part loathing. I do my best not to shrink back into the cushion, even though I want to be as far away from him as possible.

I hate that I trusted that he'd changed when we worked together a year ago. That I let myself believe the petty asshole he'd been years ago was only a bad phase influenced by drugs and fame. And I really hate that I let my guard down enough that this attack feels out of nowhere when I should have expected nothing less from him.

"You're a brunette now." He says it with a sneer, like I should be insulted.

"Yep. What do you want?"

He tilts his head. "So suspicious."

"You know what's suspicious? The fact that you're not supporting my claims that these voicemails are from nine years ago and you're willingly letting people believe I stalked you during *Snowed In*."

"How are things with the boyfriend?"

"Seriously? You're just going to ignore me?"

"Or maybe I should call him your bodyguard." A provoking smile forms on his lips.

What the hell is he up to? I don't say anything this time. I'm not going to play into his hand. So, I wait.

He shifts, pissed I'm not taking the bait. He finally gives in. "We both know that story on how you met is bogus. You were single when we were filming."

"What I know is I never propositioned you or left you voicemails while we were filming *Snowed In*. Why did you even save those from *Sunset Beach*? Instead of being a decent boyfriend, you thought, I should keep these in case I want to humiliate Autumn one day. Who does that? Though I don't know why I'm surprised. You weren't a decent boyfriend for long."

Again, he ignores me. "He seems to be enjoying the limelight. I heard about his screenplay."

I flinch, but don't say anything. What screenplay?

Ben's eyes light up and I hate that he saw my shock.

"You're telling me you didn't know about his screenplay? He's been talking to Ed about it."

"How would you know if my boyfriend is talking to my agent?"

He shrugs. "I hear things."

I roll my eyes. "And *I'm* the one being accused of being the stalker."

He lets out a little laugh.

"Oh, you find that funny, huh?"

He shrugs. "Can't say I'm not enjoying seeing you cast as the villain. Hollywood's good girl isn't exactly pristine, is she?" He leans in. "Is your boy toy enjoying that filthy mouth of yours or is it all for show?"

I can't believe this prick.

I lean back and cross arms. "Jealous? You liked my mouth just fine until you decided it would be more fun to ridicule and slut-shame me. Why? Because I got more offers than you? Because I was featured on more magazines?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "You liked playing the whore and you know it."

"No. I liked being spicy with my boyfriend. Then you had to go and twist it and make it ugly. When you called me a whore, it wasn't some fun role-playing game. It was to hurt. To humiliate. And you know it."

He says nothing, only continues to leer at me. I'm done messing around. "If you aren't going to tell me why you're trying to sabotage my career then why did you want to meet?"

"Sabotaging your career? That's rich coming from you," he scoffs bitterly.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dropping out of the Netflix project."

It takes me a moment to even know what he's talking about. It was a rom-com, not dissimilar from my Christmas movies. I was hoping for an edgier script, not something I was already doing.

"I didn't exactly drop out of it. I wasn't officially cast yet."

"But once I was on board you dropped it."

"Is this what all this is about? The script was too much of the same. You know how it is."

He jams his finger into the table angrily. "Once you were gone, they dropped me."

"I had no idea that would happen."

"You know they wanted an Atwood-Townsend movie."

I sigh. I did and it was a factor, though not the only one, in me passing on the role. I did not want to get in a cycle of doing movies with him. One reunion was enough.

"I had no idea they would drop you if I wasn't in it. They could have found a different actress."

He rolls his eyes. "Don't play so naïve."

I throw up my arms, exasperated. "Ben, my career is not connected to yours. It was the same tired storyline, plus we'd just done a movie together. It wasn't a smart career move for me, so I bowed out. That's it. I wasn't trying to ruin things for you. I thought we'd gotten over our past during *Snowed In*. You even apologized! I thought we parted friends."

"Friends," he practically spits out. "We were never friends. We fucked."

"Well, then you truly are a better actor than I thought you were."

He scoffs. "Everyone always underestimates me."

"Clearly." I get up. I have no idea why he called me here, but I have no desire to stay any longer. I have what I need.

He gets up too and immediately crowds me. I put my hand to his chest to stop him from getting any closer. His hand

comes to my hip, and I step back as I push him away. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“You used to love my touch.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m a better actor than you thought too.”

Anger fills his gaze just before I turn around and head out of the bar. My hand is shaking as I press the button to my floor. I glance back, thankful he hasn’t followed me. But I don’t breathe normally until I’m locked in my room again.

I grab my phone and stop the app I installed earlier right before my phone rings and Jackson’s name pops up on the screen. I breathe a sigh of relief. He’ll be here soon.

“Hey,” I answer, doing my best to keep my voice steady.

“Hey wildcat.” There’s a softness to his voice. And maybe a slight slur.

“Jackson, are you drunk?”

He chuckles. “I’m ‘fraid so. Our couple of beers turned into a few more. And maybe a shot or two.”

I’ve never seen Jackson have more than two drinks. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. It was good. But I obviously can’t drive back. Kyle said I could crash on his couch.”

“Okay, yeah. That’s a good idea.”

“I’m sorry, wildcat. Really ‘rresponsible of me.”

“Jackson, it’s fine. And you’re being very responsible by staying put.”

“I’d rather be in bed with you.” Disappointment fills his voice. “Are you wearing only that robe?”

I look down at myself fully clothed. Definitely not how I wanted to spend my night – dealing with my asshole ex and going to bed alone.

I need to tell Jackson about meeting with Ben and I’m curious about the screenplay he mentioned. I can’t imagine Jackson writing a screenplay and not telling me. There has to

be more to the story, but I don't want to bring it all up while he's been drinking.

“Yeah, I am,” I say as I start to undress.

He groans. “I'm never drinking again.”

I laugh at that. “Go and pass out. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Okay. Wildcat...I missed you today. Is that weird? It's only been half a day.”

“Not weird. I missed you too. I'll see you in the morning. We have a whole other day to take advantage of this bed.”

He hums his interest. “And the desk. I thought it looked awfully sturdy.”

I glance at the desk next to the large window. “Mmm, you got yourself a deal. Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams, wildcat.”

Another saucy Autumn Atwood voicemail emerges with pictures to prove her interest in Ben Townsend is very much current.

I'm feeling very naughty. I checked into the Starlet. Meet me here. I know you can do it without being caught. Please...it's been too long, baby.

AUTUMN

As soon as I open my eyes in the morning, a sinking feeling fills my stomach. I brush it off as nervousness about telling Jackson about Ben. Not that I think he'll be mad we met, but I know he'll be upset he wasn't here for me and able to face Ben himself. But as much as I tell myself it's no big deal, I can't get past this feeling that something's wrong.

Jackson texts that he's leaving Kyle's at 8:43am. I jump into the shower and when I look at my phone again at 9:04, my bad feeling is confirmed.

And it's far worse than I ever imagined.

There are dozens of notifications, three missed calls from Jackson, two from Maren, and two from Ed. Plus a battery of missed texts. I ignore them all and frantically read about Ben's latest attempt to ruin my life.

I don't know how long I sit on the bed, wrapped in a towel, with my phone in my hand. My final voicemail to Ben bringing back that night in startling clarity. It was my last-ditch effort to save our relationship, and in the end, it was our demise.

It started as a sexy rendezvous, like I'd hoped, then his words had turned cruel. The sex became rougher and not in an enjoyable way. I'd feared he would hurt me, or not stop if I'd asked. But he did stop. Then proceeded to call me a tease and whore before degrading pretty much everything about me until he'd completely eviscerated me. Adding insult to injury, he

tossed money on the nightstand when he left, as if I was a prostitute instead of his girlfriend.

How could I have forgotten so much of that night? I must have suppressed it, because if I'd remembered it as vividly as I do now, I would have never agreed to work with him again. Screw being polite.

I'm done letting him mess with my life. Last night might have been a set-up, but the joke's on him. The recording I made came through crystal clear. Ben Townsend is going down.

My phone buzzes in my hand and Jackson's name pops up. My heart speeds up as I answer, "Hey."

"Where are you?" He barks through the phone. The harshness of it has me flinching.

"In the room. I was—"

"Stay there. And start packing. I've already talked to the hotel and Gage. We have a plan to get you out of there."

"Jackson—"

"I'll be there in thirty. Be ready." Then he hangs up.

I bring the phone away from my ear and stare at the screen. That's it? No, are you okay? Tell me what happened? Just some barked orders? The pain in my stomach intensifies.

Being your bodyguard takes top priority over everything. Over being the fake boyfriend. Over a friendship. Over... anything.

Surely, he doesn't feel this way now that he's truly my boyfriend. No. He's only worried. When he gets here, we'll talk and figure this out together. It'll be okay. I press my hand over my abdomen as it churns even more. I really wish my body would listen to my mind.

I push my worry aside and pack up all our things like he asked and wait. When Jackson enters the room, I stand. We lock gazes and all my worries come flying back. His expression is clenched and stoic. Closed. There's a brief look

of pain, but he masks it so quickly I'm not sure if it was real or if I imagined it.

He tears his gaze away from me as he looks around. Then he grabs his duffle and the handle of my suitcase and pulls it up, turning toward the door. "We need to go. Someone's waiting at the service elevator to help us get out of here."

Seriously? This is all the greeting I get? Not even a hug?

"Jackson, can you slow down? We need to talk."

He stops and looks at me again. "No, we need to leave. It's not safe. Paparazzi are already outside. Gage booked us a place where we can lay low for a while."

"Jackson, please, I need you—"

"Enough, Autumn!" His voice snaps through the air causing my heart to jump. His gaze is hard and angry. "I'm your bodyguard and you need to listen to me and do what I say. That's it. Got it?"

There's my answer. The bodyguard has taken over. The question is, does my boyfriend still exist?

Fine. He wants a biddable client. I'll give him one.

I let the actress take over and grab my purse, slowly slipping the strap on my shoulder as I face him head on. "Got it."

His eyes crinkle enough to tell me he's suspicious of my cooperation. But he doesn't question it long. He leads me into the hallway and to the service elevator where hotel security is waiting. We make our way to a back entrance where Jackson's rental is waiting.

"Get in the back seat," he orders as he stuffs our luggage in the trunk.

"At least it's not the trunk this time," I mutter and shoot him a glare.

He glares right back. "And stay on the floor so no one can see you."

It takes all my willpower not to raise my middle finger at him. Instead, I smile sweetly and do what he says. His backpack is thrown on the floor, I pick it up and put it on the seat. Underneath that is some bound paper that looks like a script.

No. Ben can't be right.

I pick it up and get as comfortable I can on the floor of the car as Jackson takes off. The beginning is a monologue, but it's the last line that steals my breath: *All I know is I wouldn't be here today, at least not as the man I am, if it weren't for Noah.*

Noah. Oh God.

I flip through and it reads exactly like some of the experiences Jackson told me about on the plane. I toss it aside, stomach churning hard again, not wanting to read anymore. Did he write this? Did he really talk to Ed about it? Is he trying to get it picked up? He said his story didn't deserve a Hollywood shine.

Okay, I need to slow down. Even if he did talk to Ed, that doesn't mean he's using me for my connections. But why didn't he mention it on the plane? Has he been lying to me?

I stay on the floor trying not to let my fears run away from me. We don't speak to each other until he tells me we've arrived. I get out of the car to see we're at a house with a gated driveway.

"Where are we?" I ask him when he's unlocking the front door.

"Santa Monica."

He pushes it open, and I enter the cute bungalow style home. He immediately leaves me to look through the house and I go to the windows in the backside of the living room. The dread in my stomach is still there. I want to hope that now we are safe, boyfriend Jackson will return, but the fear of being disappointed won't let me hold on to that hope.

"You probably shouldn't be near the windows."

I roll my eyes and look at him. “Jesus, Jackson You can’t even see the neighbors from here.” The yard is lush with plants that provide a good sense of privacy.

His mouth flattens as his gaze shifts to the window as if to confirm what I said. He glances back at me, and I hold my breath, waiting for the bodyguard to fade away. But if anything, he seems to become even more tense. A spear of pain pierces my chest.

“So, this is it.” I turn back to the window. “The moment when the bodyguard trumps everything. Even being my boyfriend.” He doesn’t say anything. I glance back at him and shake my head. “I thought we were past that. I thought being a real boyfriend changed things.”

“The boyfriend label is the least of my concerns right now.”

Label. Never in my life did I ever think that word would hurt so much. The sting of tears fills my eyes, but I turn away before he can see them form. If he wants to play stoic asshole then I can play petty bitch.

“Seems like you have a good screenplay on your hands.” I look over my shoulder. “If you wanted to use my connections, you could have just asked.”

His gaze narrows briefly before I see some sort of realization dawn.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t have left it in the open if you didn’t want me to see it.”

His brows snap together. “You think I’m using you for a screenplay?”

I shrug. “Why not? You’re supposed to be my boyfriend, yet you don’t seem to give a damn that there are pictures of me and my ex all over the internet or why they’re there. Or—and this is the big one—how I’m feeling about it all. Then I find this screenplay that’s clearly about your life after Ben told me you talked to my agent about one. Something you neglected to tell me on the plane. I might as well jump to conclusions since you seem to be doing the same.”

“Ben told you, huh?” There’s just enough of an accusatory lilt to his voice to break my heart – and infuriate me. I can’t believe that’s the one thing he focused on in everything I said.

“Yeah, and you want to know how much it sucks to hear things about your boyfriend from the one person who’s made your life miserable? A fucking lot!” I push my hands through my hair, trying not to scream.

“I can’t deal with this right now, Autumn. There are too many logistics to work out. I—”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe you. I want you to go.” He doesn’t care that he’s hurt me. It’s all about the job.

For the first time today, I see Jackson show emotion. A panicked expression fills his face as he shakes his head. “I’m not leaving you. You’re in the middle of a media shit storm right now. You need protection more than ever.”

An overwhelming rush of pain and rage fills me. “I don’t want your *fucking protection!*”

I scream so hard and loud that it feels like the words are ripped from my throat then dropped between us like an unexpected plot twist. Jackson flinches in shock as he stares at me with round eyes.

Then as quickly as the rage filled me, it drains out. I don’t want to fight. I’m too tired. Too heartbroken.

“You were supposed to be here as my boyfriend.” My voice barely above a whisper now. “That’s all I needed today. I needed my boyfriend.”

His expression crumbles and he steps toward me. “Autumn ___”

“No.” I extend my arm to stop him. If he touches me now, I’ll fall to pieces. “You need to go. I’m serious, Jackson.”

“I can’t leave you alone. Please don’t—”

“You’re fired,” I say, knowing the words will hit him hard. He stops whatever else he was going to say as they sink in. “I need you to respect my wishes. Go home, Jackson.”

He closes his eyes as his body slumps in defeat. He's going to leave. I turn away to look out the window again. As much as I appreciate him doing as I asked, I can't watch him go. Instead, I focus on the concrete bird bath sitting in the middle of the yard.

I hear him move away from me, but he pauses at the door. I hold my breath.

"Kyle wrote the screenplay. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. That's why I didn't tell you. I should have. I should have..." He releases shuddered sigh.

I close my eyes and cover my mouth to stop the sob threatening to emerge. I wait. Is he going to say more? Then the door opens and clicks shut.

I let the sob free.

JACKSON

I sit in the car, staring at the house Autumn is in, the silence so loud it's ringing in my ears as I relive this fuck-up of a day. Starting with the moment the notifications blew up my phone and had me careening off the highway.

My first reaction after seeing the news was that I wanted to kill Ben for messing with Autumn again. Then Autumn didn't answer her phone and all the doubts started creeping in. The same hotel, the outfit she was wearing, and her brunette hair color all proved the pictures were current.

Why would she meet him? Why did it look like she was happy to see him? Was everything between us all a lie?

I immediately dismissed the thought, but then my mind went down a dark path. How many times had someone I thought I could trust deceived me? How many times had I been played for a fool? And Autumn is a professional actor.

Once those thoughts took root, I couldn't trust myself to see clearly. I had to stop thinking of Autumn as my girlfriend and concentrate on the fact that she was a client that needed to get to safety — which was the absolutely wrong thing to do.

I needed my boyfriend.

Fuck. I can't stop thinking about that moment. How her devastatingly soft words exploded around me, and I could only stand there and take the blast. It left me paralyzed. Shattered.

It still does.

I run a hand over my face and take in a long breath. As much as I want to charge the door and demand we get past this, she's right. We need some space. And while I might be fired, as far as I'm concerned, *Personally Yours*, is still responsible for her security. I pick up my phone and call Gage.

"Hey, are y'all at the safe house?" he says as he answers.

"Yeah, she's inside. Look, I need you to get someone you trust to watch over the house and can provide her with a secure ride tomorrow. I can't leave her without transportation."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Austin." Eventually. First, I'm going to take care of a few things. "She fired me."

"What?! What happened?"

"Just call her. I need you to make sure she stays safe."

Silence meets me and I know he doesn't like the lack of information, but he sighs and says, "Yeah. I can do that."

"I'll wait in the driveway until someone arrives. Send me the details. Also, I need the number to the PI we hired to investigate Ben."

"Why?"

"Better not to know."

"Fuck. Please don't get us sued, okay?"

"I make no promises."

He sends me the contact info and my conversation with the PI goes far better than I expected. Gotta love it when a plan comes together. Hours later, I arrive at Ben's weekly boxing lesson. After a quick conversation with his trainer, he was more than happy to let me don some gloves and stand witness to our conversation. Further proof that Ben is bad news.

When Ben enters the ring not long later, I'm waiting for him.

He hesitates, his gaze cutting to his trainer before coming back to me. "What are you doing here?"

“I’m in town and in need of a sparring partner.”

His gaze narrows. “Yeah, not interested.”

“Ah, come on.” I nod toward the trainer. “He told me you’re pretty good and I haven’t boxed in years. What’s the harm?”

“If you think I believe that you’re out of your damn mind.”

“I just want to talk, Ben. You get your session and I get my convo plus a little exercise. Win-win.”

Ben’s expression is still skeptical. As it should be.

“Only sparring,” I say. “I promise not to throw a real hit. We even have a witness.” I point my glove at the trainer. “Now, you throw one first, all bets are off. Fair?”

If he was smart, and I do think Ben has some smarts, he’d walk away. I’m hoping he’s cocky enough to stay. I hold my breath as I wait for him to decide.

Then an arrogant smile graces his lips. “Fine. Fair enough.”

I smile for the first time today. I reach out to tap my glove against his. He bumps mine a tad bit harder than necessary. Oh yeah, this guy is going to snap. I just need to make sure I get in my shot without getting laid out. He’s wearing headgear and I’m not.

We get in stance, and he starts off with some jab-crosses then I return them. We move around each other, my heart rate starting to ramp up.

“I really don’t appreciate your little stunt yesterday with Autumn,” I say after we move to a jab catch and counter.

“Stunt?”

“Would you prefer set-up? That’s what you did, right? Set her up to get some incriminating photos. I mean, you’ve been setting her up this whole time, but I guess she was garnering too much support and sympathy, huh?”

He bounces away from me, his breathing more labored, as is mine. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Then he

comes at me with a few quick jabs, more powerful than before. I block them, but he pushes me back into ropes.

He moves away, smirking. I knew this guy wouldn't be able to stick the rules. I was planning on it.

I come back with some jabs of my own, staying at the same power I used before. I'm not going at him until the time is right.

"I've been trying for a while to figure out what exactly happened for you to suddenly turn on Autumn. Then a few hours ago I found out about this little podcast called, *Let's Talk Stream*."

Ben's jaw clenches and he throws a hook that I can't fully block. It glances off my temple, ringing my ears. I blink a few times, shaking it off.

"It's these two guys talking about what's streaming with a bit of celebrity gossip tossed in. They mentioned the project that dropped you and had a little fun talking about how you've only had success if Autumn Atwood was involved."

"That's not true." He lunges, throwing a sloppy jab that I easily block. It wasn't going to land hard enough.

His breathing is even more labored now. He's definitely more skilled than I am, so the fact that he's messing up just shows that I'm getting to him.

"Now, I don't know." I deliver a few jabs that have him backing up. "It's been straight-to-home videos until *Snowed In*. Kinda seems like you can't hack it without her."

Ben growls and charges. He gives three rapid-fire punches to my gut before delivering a full-force hook to my jaw that has me staggering back. Black dots fill my vision as pain shoots all through my face. I'm able to block the next hit coming at me hard and laterally step away.

Thankfully, he hangs back instead of attacking again. My heart is going ninety miles an hour at this point. Pain is radiating all through me. I move around, keeping my eyes on him, but direct my question at the trainer. "He hit first, right?"

“Sure did.”

Ben doesn't seem bothered by this. He wants a fight now. My face fucking hurts, but I'm going to make sure it's damn well worth it.

I move in, continuing to spar with the jab-cross. “Oh, and I have it on good authority that some of your exes aren't really buying this stalking crap. What's your career going to look like when it comes out that not only are you liar, but that you abuse your girlfriends with your misogynistic behavior?”

Ben lunges and this time I'm ready. I slip left to dodge the hit and come back with a hard right cross then a hard jab to his nose followed by an uppercut. His head snaps back and he goes down hard, his nose already gushing blood.

I stand over him, then glance at the trainer.

“I think I'm good for the day.”

I wake up to the sound of banging. Not the good kind of banging either. I blink a few times, letting the bedroom of my apartment come into focus before concentrating on the sound. It's coming from my door. Someone is knocking. No, someone is pounding on it.

I groan, my face sore as hell, as I reach for my phone and see it's after noon. I also see I have several missed calls and texts from Gage. I've ignored him ever since I told him Autumn fired me.

My phone buzzes with another call from him and I swipe to answer. Before I can even say anything, he says, “Answer your fucking door before someone calls the police on me.”

“Then stop fucking banging on it. I just woke up. Gimme a minute.”

I drag myself out of bed and pull on sweatpants and a shirt, wincing at the twinge of pain in my ribs. It feels like it's been days since I left Autumn, but it's only been over a day. I

arrived back in Austin at two this morning after catching a late flight and I'm thankful for the pure exhaustion that allowed me to sleep. Otherwise, I would have been up all night continuing to kick myself over how I handled things with Autumn. And now I'll probably have to rehash it all over again with Gage.

I answer the door to a very annoyed Gage Díaz. "What are you even doing here?"

His gaze takes in my face and the bruising that probably worsened overnight. He mutters a curse then shoves his way into my apartment. "I was worried about you, you jackass. And clearly for good reason. You look like shit."

"Thanks."

"What the hell happened? Let's start with where you were when those pictures were taken and why Autumn fired you then we'll deal with the fact that you and Ben Townsend have matching bruises."

I sigh and sink onto my couch, gently cradling my head in my hands. "I wasn't there. I should have been. She had every right to fire me."

"Except that's not why she fired you," Gage says, voice calmer now.

"No. Not at all. I fucked up."

We're both silent for a long while before Gage joins me on the couch. "I knew it."

I glance over at him questioningly.

"That your fake relationship turned real."

I lean back into the cushions. "That obvious?"

"Dude, you should have seen that kiss at the airport. That you two would be able to ignore that chemistry for long seemed doubtful. Then the way you responded when she got hurt and those pictures in the pool. I knew you had it bad."

"We weren't together then."

"But not long after."

I shrug.

“So, tell me, how big of an idiot were you?”

I scrub my hands over my face. “It’s a long story.”

“And not so long ago I had a friend listen to how I fucked up and helped me get over myself. I think I owe him the same.” He settles fully into the sofa. “Lay it on me.”

I nod and take a breath. “You know I was in the foster system, but there’s things I never told you.”

I go on and tell him about my experiences growing up, meeting Tom and Kyle, and why I wasn’t there when Autumn met Ben. I tell him about trying to deny my attraction to Autumn, skipping the intimate details, and about what happened after the last voicemail was released. When I’m done, he looks a little shell-shocked.

“That’s a lot, man. Shit. I’m sorry about what you went through. Really.”

I give him a nod of thanks.

“But man, you messed up big time with Autumn. You didn’t even talk to her about it at all.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And what happened with Ben? He was seen with a major black eye. Claiming it’s a boxing injury.”

“For once he didn’t lie.” I glance over and smile. “We might have sparred.” When I see Gage’s distress, I add, “Don’t worry, I let him hit me first. Hurt like a motherfucker, too. I have a witness.”

He rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling now. “And I’m guessing you had something to do with the clip of that podcast that Maren received. It’s got the internet lit up.”

“I almost forgot about that. I crashed as soon as I got home. Is Autumn okay? Are they ripping her apart?” I look around for my phone, but I left it in my room.

“They were. Not for long though.”

I glance at him. “What are you talking about?”

He chuckles as he picks up my television remote. “You missed a hell of a morning of celebrity news.” He points the remote at the TV and turns it on. “What station is that entertainment channel? I bet it has it on it if they aren’t rerunning some reality show.”

I have no idea, but we search until we find it. Their ‘news’ show is on air and Autumn, Hilarie Ray, and Ben are all they’re talking about. It all started with the reveal of the podcast last night then this morning Autumn released a statement along with an incriminating recording of her and Ben’s meet up at the Starlet. An hour later, Hilarie posted on her Instagram account that she broke up with Ben after discovering him trying to get rid of the phone he claimed was stolen. She also included a lengthy apology to Autumn. Now they’re reporting that a few of Ben’s former girlfriends are coming forward with claims of emotional abuse. Then they play a clip of an interview Autumn did.

“It’s been really hard. Hearing all the cruel things people have said about me and not believing that Ben and I had a relationship during Sunset Beach, no matter what I said. Shaming me for having a healthy and robust sex life with my consensual partner. Unfortunately, my relationship with Ben didn’t stay healthy. The more our fame rose, the more he chipped away at my self-esteem and self-worth. And I let his words affect me long after we broke-up. I really didn’t want to stoop to his level, but I couldn’t let him control my life anymore. It was time to take my life back.”

They cut away then and move on to a different story. Gage hands me his phone and has the recording Autumn made queued up. While I suspected this was the case, it infuriates me to hear how Ben treated her. I really wish I’d hit him harder. God, I’m such a fucking idiot for not being there for her. No wonder she was so hurt.

As much as I want to kick my ass all over again. I’m so damn proud that she faced him and got the ammunition she needed to rid herself of him for good.

“She did it.”

Gage grins. “She did.”

I wish I was with her right now, to celebrate this moment with her. Not that I deserve to.

“All that’s left is for you to grovel. What did you say to me? You need to go rom-com on her ass.”

I laugh at that, even though it hurts to. Man, if I only I remembered my advice to Gage then I wouldn’t be in this predicament.

I stand, suddenly unable to sit still. “What if she still wants space? Or what if she doesn’t want me anymore?”

“Pretty sure if you tell her that your head over heels in love with her, she’ll come around.”

I jerk my gaze to him. Hearing that out loud, it makes it real. Not that I didn’t know I was falling in love with her. “It’s so fast, Gage. Can it be real when it happens this fast?”

“Look at me and Everleigh. I’d ask her to marry me tomorrow.”

“What?! You’re going to ask her to marry you?”

“Fuck yes. Not tomorrow. We need to date properly for a while, but she’s it for me. What do you want with Autumn?”

I sigh, my chest aching. I’m afraid that if I can’t make this right, it’ll forever feel hollow. “Everything. I want everything.”

“Then tell her that.”

“She’s in L.A. That’s not exactly the kind of conversation I want to have over the phone.”

“No, she’s not.” I snap my gaze at Gage and he’s smiling. “When she dropped the statement, that interview was already recorded. She grabbed a private plane back to Austin this morning.”

“She’s here?”

Gage glances at his phone. “She just landed. She’s staying with her author friend but going back to the rental later to pack up everything she left behind.”

“I’m guessing you aren’t supposed to tell me this.”

He shrugs. “She didn’t say not to tell you.” Gage holds my gaze with a sober expression. “J, why would she come back? She could easily pay someone to take care of everything for her, but she’s not. If she wants space, then why is she closing the distance between you?”

I exhale deeply at that. Could that be true? Do I stand a chance? I don’t know, but I’m damn sure going to try.

AUTUMN

“I really appreciate this, Cara.”

I pack the last of my belongings into my suitcase and zip it close.

Cara waves her hand. “Of course. You’re giving me a great way to procrastinate on writing.”

“Hmm, maybe I should have made you stay home then. You know, I have the house for another week. You’re welcome to work here if you need a change of scenery. We can do a house swap.”

Cara looks intrigued by this. “You sure you don’t want to stay and enjoy it a little longer?”

I shake my head. The house is great, but Jackson’s ghost is all over the place. I keep expecting him to walk in at any second and the fact that he hasn’t makes my heart feel like it’s on the constant plummet part of a roller coaster ride. Maren told me he was the one that sent her the podcast link, and I have a feeling Ben’s boxing accident was no accident. Yet, I haven’t heard from him at all since I released my statement.

Is he staying away because I told him I wanted space? I needed it in that moment – we both did. But now, I just want this silence between us to end. We need to clear the air, but I suppose the rom-com character in me was hoping he would make the first step. After the way all my past boyfriends have treated me – after the way the whole world has treated me – I need to be the one someone fights for.

“No,” I say to Cara. “I don’t want to stay here alone.”

“Are you going to call him?”

“I will.”

Maybe. Part of me wants him to do the calling, even if I’m the one who asked for space.

Cara cocks her head as she looks at me like she doesn’t believe me. “Please don’t be the book where the whole conflict is based on a simple miscommunication that causes the couple to miss out years of being together. Because that book deserves to be thrown against a wall.”

I smile, I do hate those books. “Maybe I’m at the part where I’m waiting for the hero to come in and sweep me off my feet with an epic apology. Of all people, you should understand that.”

She rolls her eyes. “I write fiction. Men are generally less enlightened in real life. Call him.” She grabs the bag between us. “I’ll take this to the car.”

I laugh at that. “Fair point. I’ll do a final check to make sure I got everything.”

I walk through the house, going into Jackson’s room last. His stuff is still here. I wander through the room, touching all the items spread throughout. On the bed is his T-shirt that I flung off me before we had sex for the first time. I pick it up, tempted to put it on and never take it off.

“You can have it.”

I whirl around to see Jackson leaning against the door frame. My heart takes off on the best part of the roller coaster – the pure thrill. I can’t breathe, yet I feel like I’m breathing for the first time in over a day.

“But I get your shirt in exchange,” he says with a teasing smirk on his lips.

I smile, unable not to. “I was just thinking of switching.”

“Great minds...”

I soak him in, noticing the bruising along his cheek and jaw. My smile widens. Ben's face looked much worse. "Quite a bruiser you got there."

That smirk remains on his lips. "You should see the other guy."

"Oh, I have a feeling I did. I'm guessing Gage told you I was in town."

"He did. But don't go too hard on him, he doesn't like seeing his friends make mistakes."

My heart seems to stall. I nod slowly, scanning his features, desperate for what he's thinking. "Oh?"

"Yeah, and I want to fix it. Do you?"

My heart comes back to life, and I release a breath I didn't even realize I was holding. "I do."

He releases his own big breath as his expression relaxes.

"Cara left, by the way," he says. "She said if she has to come back to get you, she'll create a character based on me that will be more hated than Joffrey and Ramsay combined from *Game of Thrones*."

I snort a laugh at that. Gotta love Cara and her romantic heart

Jackson takes a step further into the room, his expression sobering. "I'm sorry, Autumn. You were right. I should have been your boyfriend." He pauses, taking another breath. "It was easier to be your bodyguard than face whatever happened to produce those pictures. Even though I knew deep down that Ben was messing with you again, I was too afraid to trust myself so easily. Because if the news was true, I don't know how I would have survived it."

Tears prick my eyes as he closes the distance between us and takes my hands into his.

"I hate that I let my insecurities blind me to what I knew was true. Because if I could have just let myself see, I would have seen that you never needed a bodyguard. You already had everything you needed to save yourself." He reaches up and

swipes a finger across my tear-stained cheek. “What you did was fucking awesome, wildcat. Not only did you take your life back, but I think you’re going to inspire lots of women to take theirs back too.”

“You think?”

“I know.” He leans in and presses his forehead to mine. “I’ll never not be there for you again, wildcat. I promise. Being the man that is more than halfway in love with you will always come first.”

I lean back, meeting his gorgeous green gaze. “More than, huh?”

He takes my hands in his and presses them to his chest where his heart lies. “Way more than.”

The raw honesty I see in his eyes fills my heart with such joy I think it might burst. But I can also tell he’s scared that I won’t forgive him. So, I ease his fears.

I lift onto my toes and brush my lips over his, once, twice, and that’s all it takes for him to seize my lips in a bone melting kiss. He grips me tightly around the waist, pulling me close as our kiss becomes hungrier.

He rips his mouth from mine, breathing hard. “God, Autumn.”

“I know.”

He presses his forehead to mine again and we stay like that, simply breathing in one another for several moments.

“Autumn –”

“Shh,” I press my finger to his lips. “It’s my turn to talk.”

He nods and I take a breath and lean back enough to see him fully.

“It’s hard to look back at the time in my life when I was with Ben. After all my sister went through, I never thought I’d land in an abusive relationship. But suddenly I was famous, and everything was coming at me at once. Our relationship went from fun to toxic and I didn’t even notice. When I finally

did, I'd created this huge distrust in myself, and I've been playing it safe ever since. Trying to truly be that good girl. With my career. With my relationships."

I wrap my arms around his neck. "Then I met you. When you first looked at me, it felt like you saw right to the heart of me. I knew you would tear down all the facades I created. And I wanted you to. I wanted to be set free."

He runs a finger down my cheek. "We set each other free."

I nod. "We did." I kiss him. "Jackson, I'm absolutely way more than halfway in love with you too."

His smile is so bright that it reaches all the way to his gorgeous green eyes. "Really?"

"Really. And I don't want to stop until we're all the way."

"I'll always want to go all the way with you, wildcat."

I laugh and finger the hem of his shirt and start pulling up until it's off and on the floor.

"Perfect. Let's start now."

EPILOGUE

Autumn

Two years later...

“I’m so freaking excited I’m shaking. Look!” Everleigh shows me her hand which is trembling a little. “And I’m not even the one in the show. How are you keeping it together?”

Oh, I’m definitely not keeping it together. I feel like I could throw up at any moment. There’s been lots of hype behind *Enemy Mine* and the reviews so far have been mostly favorable, but tonight we’ll get a real taste if the show succeeds. It’s all in the hands of the viewers now.

“I’m giving the performance of a lifetime. I’m acting like I’m not a hot mess inside,” I say as I pick up the bottle of wine I just opened and pour myself a generous glass.

Everleigh’s eyes fill with longing. “Oooh, can I smell it? I miss wine so much.”

I laugh and slide the glass over. She dips down and takes a huge sniff. An elated sigh escapes her as she rubs a hand over her rounded belly. “Oh, that smells wonderful. I don’t know which I miss more coffee or wine.”

“It won’t be long now. Only three more months.”

She cradles her belly as she nods. The smile on her lips is part eager, part anxious. Since Everleigh lost a baby with her ex-husband, she’s been super worried about this pregnancy.

They had a heavy spotting scare early on, but thankfully things have been status quo ever since. “I’m definitely ready to meet this little girl.”

Me too. I’ve already declared myself an aunt and have bought way too many baby outfits that I’m dying to give Everleigh. We might not be related, but we’ve become sisters at heart. Gage and Everleigh got married only a few months after their engagement then another three months later, they told us they were pregnant. Apparently, it was a very successful honeymoon. Jackson and I were shocked, but they were overjoyed. They’d already decided they wanted to start a family but hadn’t expected for it to happen so soon.

The microwave dings and Everleigh goes to grab the bag of popcorn and pours it into a bowl. Gage comes over with a fancy looking drink in a highball glass. “Here, babe. Your pomegranate smash.”

She takes a sip. “Yummy. Thanks for being my mocktail maker.”

“Always,” he says as he places a quick kiss on her lips. “How are you holding up? You’re up way past your bedtime.”

It was past my bedtime too. It’s almost midnight. We wanted to catch the premiere as soon as it released before the internet started slinging its opinion.

“I’m surprisingly good. I think all the excitement has kept me going.”

“T-minus two minutes!” Jackson calls from the living room.

We all grab the snacks and drinks and head into the living room. Jackson is standing with the remote in his hand, intently looking at the TV, as if he’s afraid something is going to go wrong.

“Jackson, it’ll show up at midnight.”

He blinks out of his stare and looks at me. “I know.” I swear a blush seeps into his cheeks.

We set up our snack bar on the coffee table. Everleigh grabs several pillows to put behind her back as she settles into the corner of the sectional. Gage sits and pulls her legs over his lap, one of his hands coming to rest on her belly.

I hand Jackson his glass of wine as we snuggle next to each other on the other side of the sofa. He takes his hand in mine and gives it a little squeeze. I look down at our intertwined hands, and though it's been a month already, the sight of the platinum band around his ring finger still makes my heart take flight. This man is all mine. And I'm all his.

From the moment I moved to Austin, we were planning our future. We talked about how we weren't in a rush to have kids and if we didn't, we'd be okay with that. And if we did decide to have kids, adopting is something we'd really like to do. Jackson really loves the idea of giving a child a home who doesn't have one. Marriage was always a given even if we never discussed when we actually wanted to do it. Then one morning we were sitting in bed, sipping coffee and scrolling on our phones while we talked about the premier of *Enemy Mine* followed shortly behind the movie Kyle wrote. It hit how much we were about to be under the spotlight again and I knew if we wanted a wedding without all the hoop-la, we needed to get married now.

"Let's get married this weekend," I blurted out, my heart jumping to my throat as soon as the words left my mouth.

"Okay," he said, not even looking up from his phone.

"Okay?"

He looked up then, an amused smile on his lips as he tossed his phone aside. He leaned in close, rubbing a thumb along my cheek. "Wildcat, I told you I would always go all the way with you. I love you and I'd be honored to be your husband. The sooner the better."

I kissed the hell out of him then we went at it like bunnies. Afterward, he pulled a ring box out of his nightstand. He'd had it for months. We invited my parents and a few close friends to our house then surprised them with a backyard wedding. We

haven't even released a statement, it'll become known soon enough.

The screen on the television blips and *Enemy Mine* is available to stream. My stomach clenches and it's suddenly hard to breathe.

"Hey," Jackson says as he brings my hand to his lips, giving it a quick kiss. "Are you okay?"

"Nervous. Really really nervous. What if everyone hates it?"

"Fuck them."

His response has me laughing out loud. "I don't think it's that easy."

"Wildcat, I don't see how this isn't going to be a success. On the slim chance it's not, we'll weather it like we have everything else that's come our way."

He leans in and gives me a slow and sultry kiss that's tempting me to drag him to the bedroom. Two years together and he still takes my breath away.

"Oh my God, stop kissing! We need to watch this before I fall asleep," Everleigh says as she fights a yawn.

We reluctantly pull away from each other and Jackson hits play. Sydney doesn't come on the screen until the eight-minute mark. As soon as I see myself, I look away. It's always been hard to watch myself on the screen. Jackson kisses my head, pulling me closer.

"The woman playing Sydney is hot as fuck," he whispers into my ear.

I laugh and Everleigh immediately shushes me. I giggle, but quieter this time. I turn my gaze to the TV and watch. Everyone involved with the show has done such a good job. It's blowing my mind how amazing everything looks. As much as I wanted the Camilla part at first, I'm so glad I got the part of Sydney. Jasmine Moore plays Camilla perfectly. And she was much more open to the nudity the role requires while I would have requested a body double. Sydney will eventually

get her sexy moments, but that will be in future seasons. This season Mitch Thomas, who plays Mason, and I only had one steamy scene, but it was all sexual tension, not even a kiss. Mitch and I have good chemistry, but he and Jackson have even better chemistry. Jackson wanted to meet the guy I would eventually be getting hot and heavy with, and they ended up bonding over their love of superheroes and fantasy football. *Men.*

What I'm most excited about is that the Sydney role was expanded from the books, giving the character her own arc and story. Cara worked with the writers on fleshing her out and I couldn't be more thrilled with how it's all going.

The first episode ends on a cliffhanger that has Everleigh awkwardly pushing up into a full seated position. "What?! We need to watch the next one."

The streaming service released two episodes then the rest are going to be released weekly.

"Everleigh, you aren't going to make it through another episode," Gage says.

"I will! That was so good. Oh my God, Autumn! I wish I could jump up and hug you. It was so fucking amazing! You were so good! It was just..." Her eyes start to fill with tears.

I look at Gage and he looks like he might bust out laughing. He did mention she's been overly emotional lately. Even knowing this, real concern takes over as a tear slips down her cheek. "Babe, are you okay?"

"Yes." Her voice is full of tears. "It was just so good. I'm so proud of you." Then she starts crying in earnest.

Her tears prompt my own. I've never had support like I've had since Jackson came into my life, along with Everleigh, Gage, and Cara. It still blows me away. Since I can move much easier, I get up and go hug Everleigh and we cry together. Then I get a hug from Gage and when I return to Jackson, even his eyes are shiny. And that touches my heart more than he'll ever know.

“Come here,” he says and pulls me into his body. “I love you,” he says against my lips before he kisses me.

“I love you, too. All the way.”

“More than all the way.” He grins then kisses me again. “This show is going to be what everyone is talking about in the morning.”

I agree, but I can’t say the words. I have to take everything moment by moment.

“Let’s start the next one,” Everleigh says, her tears now wiped away. “There’s no way I’m falling asleep.”

We start the second episode and Everleigh is snoring within fifteen minutes. We decide to stop it and finish it in the morning. Gage wakes her up and they head to our guest room while Jackson and I tuck ourselves in our room. We approached the owner of the rental I used two years ago and offered to purchase it from him, and we’ve been living here ever since. Our stretches of long-distance aren’t always easy, but Jackson tries to visit me on set every couple of weeks and I try to be home in Austin as much as possible. We’ve found a way to make it work.

Jackson immediately strips me down as soon as we’re alone. I do the same to him. As soon as we fall onto the bed, he’s pushing inside me. Our love making is slow and sensual until it’s not. Then it’s hot and frantic, but no less emotional.

“Autumn...” He kisses me, our gazes locking as he starts to fuck me with slow, long strokes. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For breathing life back into me. For being my wife. For giving me a family again.”

Tears fill my eyes all over again. I pull his head down and kiss him deeply as I wrap my legs around his waist, urging him to fill me all the way. “Ditto.”

He pulls back, a half-grin on his lips. “You did not just use a line from *Ghost* on me.”

I've made him watch a plethora of movies since we've been together, especially a ton of the classics from the 80's and 90's. "Maybe."

He laughs. "Only you would quote a movie while I'm fucking you."

As much as I love our intense and frenzied sex sessions, I love it even more when we're silly and relaxed. "Hey, it might be a simple word, but it's meaning is huge. Just like in the movie."

His expression immediately softens before he kisses me. "I know, wildcat."

"I love you, Jackson."

"Ditto."

I burst out laughing and lightly slap his arm. He's laughing too and it feels amazing to have this moment with him while he's still inside me. I move my hips and press my heels into his ass.

"Husband, it's time to make your wife come."

His amused gaze meets mine right before he thrusts forward. "As you wish."

THE END

Turn the page for a peek of Gage and Everleigh's story

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading YOURS TO PROTECT! I hope you enjoyed Jackson and Autumn's story. If you have time, please consider leaving a review. It would be much appreciated. xoxo

Yours to Protect is the second and final book in the Personally Yours series. Don't miss out on Gage and Everleigh's story, [Yours in Lust](#). Turn the page for an excerpt.

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YOURS IN LUST

EXCERPT

Everleigh

“I’m Everleigh, by the way. I don’t think we’ve officially introduced ourselves.”

He looks at me then. His dark gaze moves over my face, as if he’s committing it to memory. Then his gaze dips lower, moving all over my body. And I feel it...God...*everywhere*. My overstimulated body seems to be jumping up and down saying, yes please...touch me...take me. His gaze returns to my face. “Everleigh.”

It’s as if the memorization process is over and I’m now filed away in a manila folder with my name stamped on top. Except the way he says my name is far from clinical. No, there’s something possessive in his voice. Like my file is coveted. For his eyes only.

I exhale a shaky breath and he looks away making me wonder if I imagined it all. He takes a few more steps into the apartment. He sees the bookcase and walks to it. “So, where do you want it?”

Loaded question.

Okay, horny brain, you need to go away.

He’s looking at me expectantly. Does he not realize he never told me his name?

“And your name is?”

His brows bunch together, but he doesn't say anything.

“You do know your name, right?”

He gives a growl of frustration. “Gage. Are we going to move this or not?”

Gage. I should give him the same once-over he gave me, but I don't need my body acting up any more than it already is. What I really need is to get him out my apartment before I do something stupid, like climb his body.

“Bedroom.”

He jerks and stiffens to a straight posture. “What?”

“I want it at the foot of the bed.”

He lets out a little coughing sound, staring at me shell-shocked.

“The bookcase. At the foot of the bed.”

He blinks, his gaze jumping from me to the bookcase as a deep red blooms in his cheeks. “Oh. Right.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Life happens and it happened big time while writing this story. Jackson and Autumn's story was really important to me, and I wanted to give it the justice it deserved so when creativity took a backseat, it was a struggle to keep going. But I did and I'm so happy their story finally made it on the page.

I really couldn't have gotten through this story without tons of support and maybe a little hand holding.

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Lastly, but certainly not least, thank you to my family and friends who are always there to lend a hand or a shoulder and continue to support me in every way possible. Love you very much!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cate has been in love with love stories for as long as she can remember. It never occurred to her to be a writer until she realized she was constantly making up love stories in her head and she enjoyed that far more than anything else. So, she put fingers to keyboard and hasn't stopped.

Cate likes her romance with a dash of humor, a punch of emotion, and heaps of heat. When she's not writing, she enjoys spending time with family and friends, finding new places to visit, and curling up with a book (naturally).

Cate resides in Texas and living out her own HEA with her husband, two children, and pandemic pup.

BOOKS BY CATE ASHTON

PERSONALLY YOURS SERIES

YOURS IN LUST

YOURS TO PROTECT