



HARLOW JAMES

Guilty

AS

CHARGED

GUILTY AS CHARGED

BY HARLOW JAMES

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Dedication

To my sister, the inspiration behind Sydney and this story, and the lawyer
in our family.

I'm so proud of you and what you've accomplished, the uphill battle you
had to climb when your life didn't turn out the way you thought it would.

But then you fell in love, and everything else fell into place.

I love you.

“Until we have seen someone’s darkness, we don’t really know who they are. Until we have forgiven someone’s darkness, we don’t really know what love is.”

Marianne Williamson

Prologue

Javier

Dark wood. Sleek lines. Fluorescent lighting.

Seems all courtrooms look the same. The only comparison I have was to a time so long ago I'd nearly forgotten what to expect.

My knee bounces up and down as I perch forward in my chair, hanging my head between slumped shoulders and clenched fists resting on my thighs.

I knew this was coming. It just came faster than I thought. Between waiting for a court date and my attorney pushing for a trial before the court, only a few months had passed since that night—the night I beat the shit out of a man that more than fucking deserved it.

“You could do less time. You know that, right?” John Russell, my court-appointed attorney turns to me as we wait for the judge to make his decision. One glance up at the bench and he's back in my face.

“I already told you. It's not an option. So stop fucking bringing it up.”

He throws his hands in the air, sinking back in his chair as he exhales in defeat. “I can't believe you're willing to give up more of your life when there is evidence that could keep you out of prison—hard pressed evidence that could get you off with six months max, plus maybe some community service.”

The poisonous glare I flash him in warning is getting harder to control as the anger from within threatens to spill over. Of course it's my penchant for anger that landed me in this chair to begin with, anticipating the decision from the man who holds my future in my hands. Although if you asked my attorney, I'm actually the one that's in control of that.

With one twist of my head over my shoulder, my eyes land on the reason I'm sitting in this chair, the golden eyes identical to mine staring back at me, shedding tears while silently thanking me for protecting her when I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. And even though my sister's guilt is apparent as well and she begged me to reconsider, I assured her that her privacy and well-being was far more important to me than landing in prison.

Which is exactly where I'm headed.

“Alright, Mr. Montes,” the judge addresses the courtroom as he takes his seat again and shuffles papers across his desk, pulling the attention of both counsels to his bench. He glares at me over the rim of his black-rimmed glasses, the color almost identical to the hair on his head, except for a few grays sprinkled throughout. His tone is demanding and laced with irritation, like I’m making his day less enjoyable just by being in his presence. He furrows his brow further as he studies me from his position atop the room, much like most men of his power look at me—like I’m a parasite, an unwelcome visitor in his realm.

I know what people see when they look at me—olive skin, dark hair, tattoos trailing up and down my arms. I look like a criminal to some, a man with a chip on his shoulder to most, a man that has been working to make something of himself but made a decision one night in the blink of an eye that just shoved him three steps backwards.

And now I get to make the stereotype a reality.

“Is there anything else you’d like to say in your defense? Perhaps a reason why you beat the victim within an inch of his life, causing permanent damage to his left ear among his other injuries? Or even that you regret what you did before I lay down your sentence?”

I cast a death glare across the room at the prosecutor, wishing I were glaring at the victim of my actions, a man that I wish I had killed because that’s what he deserves for what he did. But the coward didn’t even have the balls to show up, claiming emotional distress to be in the same room with me. Rumor is Jesus skipped town after he was discharged from the hospital, but still had enough cojones to press assault charges against me, leaving a permanent mark on me and my sister.

“No, Your Honor. I did what I did. And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

With a shake of his head, his jaw tenses and then he stares down at me with a glare of acceptance that maybe I am the man everyone pegs me to be—a criminal with anger issues and a man with no remorse.

“Well, given that there is no evidence to support the reason for your assault on Jesus Gonzalez and your explanation informs me that you have no regrets for your behavior, I have no other choice but to sentence you to two years in prison for the aggravated assault of Mr. Gonzalez, which resulted in the loss of hearing in his left ear.”

My attorney lets out a heavy sigh as he looks over at me and relays with his eyes, ‘I told you so.’

“There will be no option for early release due to good behavior, and after you’ve completed your time, you will be subject to anger management classes and probation for one year. Is this clear, Mr. Montes?”

I lock my eyes onto his, wishing there were another way to protect my sister, but knowing that the law has already been laid down. There’s no going back now.

“Do you understand the provisions of your sentence, Mr. Montes?” The judge’s voice rises as I stare off into space, swallowing the knife in my throat as I make a tally of that time in my mind—two years, 730 days, 17,520 hours.

“Yes,” I grit out against the tightness of my jaw, my teeth grinding into each other from the pressure.

“Good. Let this be a lesson to you, Mr. Montes. As the old adage goes, treat others how you want to be treated, and keep your hands to yourself.”

Two and a Half Years Later

Chapter 1

Sydney

“We agreed to every other weekend, Michael.”

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind.”

“Do you see? Do you see what this man does? This is why we’re getting divorced!” My client throws her hands in the air as the energy shifts in the room.

I hate mediation—because no matter how hard you fight to keep it clean and calm, one outburst can derail the entire meeting.

“Remember rule number one,” I mumble under my breath as I lean in closer to my client.

“Yeah, yeah. Check your emotions at the door. But seriously, Sydney! The man just changed his mind once we got here! We agreed to this months ago!”

“My client has the right to change his decision. They are his kids too.” Earl Brown glares at us from across the table, the corner of his mouth rising as he celebrates the frazzled state of my client. His balding head and ring of hair around the shiny bowling ball he calls a head only services his unfortunate name.

“Really? Now he’s worried about seeing them? He couldn’t care less when he was out on business trips and sleeping with everything with a vagina in the last two years. Tell me, Michael,” she spits, leaning forward across the table. “How many other kids do you have now? Have you lost count?”

“Tabitha,” he barks, just as the mediating attorney puts an end to this nonsense.

“Counsel, I suggest you both discuss appropriate behavior with your clients, otherwise the entire purpose of this meeting will be null and void and you’ll have to wait to appear before a judge.”

Tabitha blows a huff of air up into her bangs before crossing her arms and slouching back in her chair, surveying the side of the room while she tries to get herself under control. Michael stewes in his seat and Earl and I have a stare-off.

“Earl, you and I both know that your client travels far too often to justify joint custody with half time spent with each parent. I think we can both agree that what is in the best interest of the kids is to stick with the original agreement when these proceedings began.”

Earl turns to Michael, whispering something in his ear before I visibly see him relent. “Fine. Every other weekend.”

Tabitha sits up in her chair as her eyes mist over, watching her soon-to-be ex-husband nod at her. “Thank you.”

“Whatever,” he mumbles, and then the next order of business is brought forward.

Sometimes I wonder why I dabble in family law from time to time when each case leaves me feeling like there’s a boulder resting in my stomach. I guess part of it is a subconscious decision to help children not end up in dysfunctional family relationships like my own.

The funny thing is, if you looked at my family from the outside, you’d accuse me of being a big, fat liar for lack of a better term. My family is the quintessential all-American family, complete with the powerful stepdad, philanthropic mother, the older sister (that’s me), and two twin boys that attend Texas A & M University as seniors about to graduate in communications and marketing.

On paper, we’re perfect, a notion that has haunted me my entire life to the point where other people perceived that about me too. “Perfect Sydney Matthews.”

If I had a dollar every time that cliché nickname was thrown around in my adolescence, I probably could have paid for one whole year’s worth of tuition in college. The sad thing is though, I lived up to the expectation because that is exactly what I was told to do.

I always had to consider my reputation, the disdain I would bring upon my family if I acted irrationally, even just a slip up like getting over-intoxicated in public could derail the status that my stepfather and mother have worked tirelessly to build. I wasn’t allowed to make mistakes or choices that were off the beaten path. And back in high school, it was more about getting straight As, never disrespecting my teachers or other students, and earning the title of valedictorian to bring the perfected and poised smiles to my parents’ faces.

“Thank God it’s Friday,” I mutter to myself as I slump down into the driver’s seat of my convertible Mustang, the car I raced out to buy as soon as

I landed my first big-girl job after law school. Of course, Byron Kennedy was just as eager to hire me once I was qualified since he knew my stepdad and my intent to become a lawyer well before I was finished with law school.

The sleek black leather allows me to slide in easily as I fire up the engine, drop the top down, and take off for my best friend's house in the quaint housing community where she lives with her husband and their own picture perfect family.

As the humid air whips through my dark hair that I released from my bun before taking off, I inhale the thick moisture and with each exhale, release the tension from another long week of battling custody cases and dividing assets. Lucky for me, I don't take too many custody cases on, most of my time focusing on estate planning and property settlements. But sometimes you get a week like mine that calls for a wide glass of red wine and conversation with my closest friend to unwind.

"Auntie Sydney!" The high-pitched squeal of Taryn, my pseudo niece, rings through the doorway as soon as the knob turns.

"Taryn the tornado! Did you grow again?"

"Yes! I grew! I grew up really tall!" The three-year-old lifts her hands as high as she can above her head to indicate her height.

"You grew." Ally comes up behind her with her son, Tanner, balanced on her hip. Her light brown hair is thrown up on her head, her dark purple shirt covered in stains skewed across her body as Tanner grabs at the neck, borderline exposing her breasts. She's wearing black capri leggings and looks like she needs wine as badly as I do.

"Hey, Mommas. How's it going?" I step through the threshold as soon as the three of them move aside for me to enter.

Ally lifts one brow and gestures around me with her hands, drawing attention to the state of her house as I take it in. Toys are scattered all across the hardwood, crumbs of snacks are spread along the floor like breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel style, and the television is blaring a cartoon that as we draw closer to the sound, I can actually make out to be T.O.T.S. I may not have children of my own, but I'm over here enough to *recognize* a few of their obsessions, promoting me to professional auntie status.

"Please tell me you have wine." Ally moves around me in the kitchen as I set my duffle bag on her white and gray marble counters. I reach into the bag and extract the biggest bottle of red I could find.

"You know I always come prepared."

“Thank God for friends like you. Collin should be home within the hour, finally granting me some peace.”

“Hard day?” I ask while searching for the wine opener in the drawer I know it’s in. I locate the corkscrew and get to work on the cork in seconds.

“Don’t get me started. Plus one of my favorite authors released a book today, so I had to make sure my photo and reviews were posted.”

Ally is a stay-at-home mom right now, but in a few years she plans to go back to work as a lawyer as well. She barely started practicing law when she and Collin found out she was pregnant. To pass the time and give her something that brings her joy, she took up bookstagramming in the past year when she discovered romance novels and became sucked into the world. Now she has an Instagram account with over five thousand followers that look to her for recommendations and new authors to support.

I peer into her office off the corner of the kitchen and see enough fake flowers and props scattered all over the floor to give Hobby Lobby a run for their money. “You need to tell me about this book later. I finished one last night and I think I’m in the mood for something forbidden.”

The corner of her mouth tips up as she adjusts Tanner on her hip. “Oh, girl. I got you.”

As I fill two glasses with red wine and check on Taryn parked right in front of the television, entranced by the cartoon, I turn to my best friend and hand her a drink. “And I’ve got you.”

“God bless you, Sydney Matthews,” she says before taking a large gulp and then setting the glass down on the counter.

“Let me go change and then we can sit down and chat.” I grab my bag and move down the hallway, itching to release my body from my pencil skirt and bra. Generally, I like dressing professionally for work, but by the end of the day on Friday, I’m desperate to strip out of these clothes.

Comfortable in a sport bra, loose green tank, and black capris with my hair pulled back up in a messy bun, I make my way back to the family room as the tune of Pop Goes the Weasel filters through the front door.

“Auntie Sydney! The ice cream man is here!” Taryn screams, sitting on the front entryway, frantically trying to put her shoes on.

“Are we getting ice cream now?” I look to Ally as she slides her flip-flops on and grabs a stroller from the closet by the door, setting Tanner down inside and strapping him in. When she pops back up, her mouth is spread into a mischievous grin as she nods.

“Oh, we’re getting ice cream alright, and a free show. Here,” she declares as she hands me a plastic cup with a lid and a straw. “I put your wine inside so we don’t look like alcoholics, even though it is after five on a Friday. Come on, we don’t want to miss him.” She bounces her eyebrows at me and then shoves the stroller out the door while placing sunglasses over her eyes, chasing after Taryn who’s already halfway down the driveway by now.

I reach for my own glasses from my purse by the door, then close it behind me and race to catch up.

“Apparently you three take your ice cream addiction very seriously.” I stroll in tow while sipping my red wine through a straw. It’s not the way I envisioned my drink in my hand tonight, but it does have its advantages. And now that I think about it, I wonder how many other moms walk around with these tumblers with alcohol inside? That’s actually pretty genius.

“Oh, the kids do. But that’s not why the moms show up.” Ally juts her chin in the direction of the run-down van that I feel all ice cream men have to own, one that’s a borderline kidnapping cliché, as I see moms disperse from their houses with kids hauled behind them, almost more excited at the prospect of a delicious frozen treat than the children. One mom is about to rip the arm off her daughter as she power walks to the vehicle.

“Am I missing something?”

Ally just shakes her head as she hands Taryn a ten-dollar bill and she marches away to wait in line. “I can’t believe I haven’t told you about Jared yet.”

“Jared? You’re on a first name basis with the ice cream man?”

“Hell yeah I am. And this is why.” As we get closer to the van, the tanned and bare chest of the driver peeks through the open window as he stands to retrieve a treat for the little girl in front of him, giving us a view of his navy blue board shorts hanging low on his hips. And as he sits back down, Abercrombie blows up my phone asking for their model back.

“Holy shit,” I whisper as I’m blinded by pearly white teeth peeking beneath full pink lips dusted with day old scruff. His radiant blue eyes lock onto my own aqua irises as reddish-brown hair falls over his forehead, and then he flashes me a wink.

I think my panties just melted.

“Right? God, what a fine piece of ass.”

“When did Jared start showing up?” I ask, tilting my head to the side as I study the way his muscles ripple when he moves while he flirts with every

mom that goes up to his window.

“About a month ago. He’s a college student home for the summer. His parents live a few blocks over in the housing track and he’s just trying to make some extra money.”

I eye my friend from the side. “Do you know his birthday and shoe size too?”

Ally swats my arm. “I know he’s twenty, and by how tall he is, I’m guessing at least an eleven, hopefully a thirteen.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Need I remind you that you have a husband?”

She shrugs. “I’m not saying I’d do anything with that, but come on,” she says, gesturing toward him with her hand. “How can you not appreciate that fine piece of man?”

“He is awfully pretty.” I reach up to scratch an itch on my face, but feel drool seeping out of the corner of my mouth and make sure to wipe it away discretely.

She jumps in front of me, blocking the view of my new spank bank material. “You should go talk to him!”

“What? No. He’s way too young.”

“He’s only twenty. I bet his stamina is incredible.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me again.

“I’m telling Collin you’re talking about him like this,” I say, folding my arms across my chest.

“Collin and I have married sex, Sydney. It’s great and I love him, don’t get me wrong. But it’s not the same as twenty-something, no-strings-attached, romp-in-the-sack, hair-pulling and nail-biting casual sex.”

I cover my mouth with my hand to stifle my laugh. “I think you’ve failed to remember that I’ve never done that.”

“I know. Your prude-meter is off the charts. And that’s why I think you need to before daddy-dearest marries you off to Andrew.”

The sigh that leaves my mouth resonates between us. Ally knows more than anyone that my father is hell bent on setting me up with Andrew Benton, the son of his friend whose family runs in the same circles as ours. Andrew reminds me of Elle’s boyfriend from *Legally Blonde* that she chases after in law school. He’s pompous, thinks he’s powerful because his family has money, and wears khakis and sweater vests as everyday attire. He’s looking for a wife that fits the image he’s trying to uphold, and since our families both operate that way, all the men think I’m the best fit. His perfectly

quaffed hair matches his paid-for tan, and even though I've told him numerous times that I'm not interested, he refuses to give up, much like my father. And my father is adamant that the two of us marrying each other would provide me with even more protection after the attack I survived a few months ago.

"That's not happening. I refuse. But bringing home Jared will not help me advocate for my denial."

"I'm not saying marry the guy." She rolls her eyes at me. "But wouldn't he be fun to take for a ride? I obviously can't, but there's nothing stopping you."

I look around the throngs of married women gathered near the ice cream van, practically foaming at the mouths. Either they're grossly unsatisfied in their marriages, or the allure of the forbidden is too much to contain. Of course, I wouldn't know either since I'm twenty-eight and unmarried, and I've never truly given in to the desires I feel at night—the need to be handled with control, the quest to be deprived of air from an overpowering orgasm, the longing to see marks on my body from being pleased by a man that knows what he's doing.

Not even Ally knows about my true fantasies, but if you read enough romance novels, you're bound to develop a few.

"Mommy! I got a Minion!" Taryn comes rushing over, interrupting our conversation as she shoves the treat up at Ally to open it.

"It's actually Tweety bird, baby," Ally replies.

Taryn's face scrunches up inquisitively. "What's Tweety?"

I gasp dramatically. "Oh, my heart. Your child isn't aware of who Tweety is?"

"It's not like they play the classic Looney Tunes cartoons anymore on television. Don't worry, I won't raise my kids without them knowing who the original cartoons were." Ally removes the wrapper from Taryn's ice cream and then makes her way up closer to the window.

"Hey, Jared," she says while leaning against the white metal door.

Jared leans forward and flexes his arms for good measure while blinding her with his flirtatious smile. "Hey, Mrs. Murphy. How's it going today?"

"Great. Couldn't be better." I roll my eyes, thinking about how frazzled she was when I walked into her house. "Can I get a strawberry shortcake bar and a Big Stick please? Apparently three-year-olds can't remember orders," she teases.

He winks at her and then moves around the vehicle. “Sure thing.”

I shake my head in amusement as she turns around to face me and licks her lips while Jared’s backside is on full display as he bends over to reach into the freezer. The other moms all nod in agreement as they watch her. It’s like they have their own dirty moms club in which everyone is automatically a member and their meetings are held randomly like this to ogle hot twenty-something guys.

“Here you go.” Jared hands her the treats and he hands her the change from the ten-dollar bill Taryn handed him earlier. “Who’s your friend by the way?” He throws his chin in my direction as I feel my cheeks start to flush. Am I really blushing at the man-child ice cream man?

“That’s my best friend, Sydney.” Ally waves her fingers over at me as I shoot her a glare. “She’s single if you were wondering.”

Jared’s eyes move down the length of me as I feel my body heat up. “I was. Nice to meet you, Sydney,” he calls out, waving his hand over at me now too.

“Hi.” That’s all I say, all I can muster—because although I love my best friend and appreciate what she’s doing, there’s no way I’m going to open my legs to the twenty-year-old ice cream man. I do have *some* standards and don’t like to waste my time. Although I’m sure Jared could go all night long, I can’t. I have a job and a persona to uphold, and I haven’t been ready to let a man touch me just yet.

“I literally give you an in, and all you say is hi?” Ally stomps back over to me and hands me the strawberry shortcake bar, then opens the Big Stick.

“I’m not sleeping with the ice cream man,” I grit out before taking a bite. The cold and creamy mixture melts on my tongue as we start to walk back to Ally’s house while Taryn is covered in yellow stickiness all over her face.

“You’re gonna let that go on longer?” I gesture down to my niece.

“Yup. No sense in cleaning her until she’s done. Besides, it’s bath time once Collin gets home. That’s his job.”

Once we arrive, Ally’s husband, who has now become one of my best friends as well, greets us at the door. We met him during our first year in law school and they fell hard and fast for each other.

“Did we get ice cream?”

“Yes, Daddy! I got Tweety.” Taryn reaches for him, but he avoids her sticky hands just in time.

“Looks like you got more of him on your face and hands than in your

mouth. Come on, let's get in the bath." He directs Taryn down the hall before stopping to greet Ally and give her a kiss. "Hey, babe. How'd it go today?"

She wistfully looks at her husband as their faces stay inches away from each other. "It was crazy, as usual. We'll catch up later. Sydney and I are going to go for a walk."

"Alright, sounds good. Nice to see you, Syd."

"Same to you, Collin. I heard about that case you won last week, the murder trial. Congratulations."

His smile stretches wide. Collin is also a lawyer, specializing in criminal law. "Thanks. It was a big victory for the firm. How is estate planning treating you?"

I chuckle, knowing that among lawyers, I picked the most boring specialty there is. But I actually love it. "Dull as ever, with the exception of a few custody cases that have been passed to me lately at the firm."

His face wrinkles in disdain. "Those can't be fun."

"Nope."

"Alright, well you two go visit. Don't let Ally get into too much trouble." He winks in our direction, knowing damn well how much of a troublemaker his wife is. Back in college, I literally had to put her on leash at one point during parties so I could keep her near me. Otherwise she would run off and then call me randomly in the middle of the night to pick her up two towns away. The woman has always been crazy and adventurous, the complete opposite of me. But God, do I love her, and I think that's why our friendship just works.

With our tumblers of wine in hand, we take off for a stroll around her housing track, full of homes with river rock cascading up the sides, brownstone pathways, and large wooden doors. The community is definitely reminiscent of the one I grew up in just a few miles away, just on a much smaller scale.

Newberry, Texas nights are one of the reasons I never itched to leave the town I call home nestled right outside of Dallas. One look at the sherbet-colored sky woven through light gray clouds accompanied by the slight breeze floating across your skin, and you'd see why I lived for these nights. Of course the humidity is a bitch to deal with, but the place I remained dedicated to made up for it. And Byron Kennedy, my boss, gave me an opportunity right out of law school to make a name for myself in an

established firm outside of the bustling city. Despite feeling like I always had to be ‘on’ around people in our town, there was a comfort that I found from the familiar, especially when my life was threatened after work that fateful night.

“Alright, spill. I can feel the heaviness in your chest as if it were my own. What’s going on, Syd? You shot down Jared, which I mean, I know he’s not husband material,” she jokes and I laugh at her bluntness. “But I feel like there’s something else going on. You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” Ally eyes me from the side as we cruise along the sidewalks.

I let out a heavy sigh and then look up to the sky in reflection. “I don’t know ... I’m not sleeping again.”

“The nightmares?”

“Yeah.” I sigh.

“What about the sleeping pills?”

“I stopped taking them.”

Ally clicks her tongue. “Why? They’re meant to help you.”

“I know. But I don’t want to depend on them for the rest of my life, Ally. I feel weak and I’m not used to feeling that way. It’s like I’m in this limbo state and the entire world is passing me by while I just try to survive day to day. Every day I battle fear and rage as little pieces of control slip through my fingers.”

“How so?”

“I just feel like I’m missing out on something, my life one monotonous list that repeats itself daily. And now with my dad breathing down my neck about the Andrew thing and tracking my every movement, I’m afraid that one day I’m going to wake up married to a man I don’t love and realize I regret my entire life. Do you ever feel like you’re afraid of living with regrets?”

“Psh. All the time. I think I got married and had kids too soon. Sometimes I wonder if I married the right man, even though Collin has never given me a reason to doubt him. I play the what if game daily, especially when I’m fishing toys out of the toilet.”

“Yeah, but at least you’re living. You have a husband and children. You partied and lived your life before you settled down. I haven’t. The only wild and crazy things I’ve ever done in my life were with you by my side. And even after the attack, if you wanna call it that, I feel like I resorted back to the same instead of taking it as a warning that life can end in an instant.”

“You’re welcome for those stories by the way.” She nudges my shoulder playfully with hers as we continue to turn along the pathway, dodging a few other families and kids on their bikes out tonight. “But I hear you. What happened was terrifying, Syd. And I can’t blame your dad for wanting to protect you, but you don’t want to have to depend on him for that for the rest of your life, do you?”

I shake my head. “No. And now he feels even more overbearing. That’s why I’m applying for my concealed carry license, and I think I want to take self-defense classes.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Did they ever catch the guy?”

“Nope. And that’s just it. Given how many people go through my father’s courtroom on a daily basis, it could have been anyone related to a case he presided over. That and he came up behind me, so I didn’t exactly get a good look at him.”

I think back to that night often, the one where a gun was held to my head by an arm encased in a maroon sleeve as I tried to get in my car late one night after work. I can still feel the man’s hot breath on my neck as he pressed the metal barrel into my temple, telling me to watch my back and send a message to my father to make his decision wisely. My stepfather was presiding over a criminal case at the time of a well-known gang member and the media was covering it heavily. The man in question was being sentenced to life in prison on multiple counts of murder, and the person testifying against him was a member of their rival gang. I can’t help but feel that the intention to scare me was so my father would lessen the sentence or dismiss evidence, which clearly exposed how little they understood the judicial system. And even though I ran to my father and warned him, he never let it affect his decision, even though he knew my safety was being threatened.

Since that night, he had a tracker installed on my car, an app on my phone to do the same, and a security detail that would follow me around town. The black car parked down the street from Ally’s house alerts me to the ominous presence I’ve become accustomed to. But I don’t want to live like this forever. I can’t ask my dad to *not* want to protect me, but if I felt more confident in my ability to protect myself, then I think that would help me sleep better at night.

“That’s something that’s always going to happen. Anyone who works in law enforcement or the court system knows that invasion of privacy and threats come with the territory.”

“I know. But I’m just questioning my own ability to stand up for myself.”

Ally sighs and then pops up in her steps. “You know what you need? A night out. When’s the last time we had some fun?” Her attempt to change the subject helps lighten the conversation.

“It has been a while since I’ve been out ...”

“Me too, and I think it would help loosen you up a bit before you go all Ronda Rousey on me and start carrying a pistol on your hip. Why don’t I ask Collin’s parents to watch the kids next weekend and we all go to The Jameson? I hear the place is off the chain!”

I widen my eyes with shock as I look over at Ally. “Did you just say off the chain? I’m pretty sure that was the hip thing to say when we were in high school.”

“Well, forgive me, but I’ve been too busy popping out babies to keep up with the lingo. Regardless, I think we need a night to get wasted and let loose. Collin could use it too. He’s been working like crazy. Let’s get drunk and then I can jump my husband when we get home.” She claps her hands wildly at the idea.

“Is married sex really that boring?” I ponder out loud, ruminating on her comment from earlier while also wondering if what I’ve experienced so far is as good as it gets, which isn’t saying much. It’s not that I haven’t had the opportunities, but I guess I never allowed myself to give in to the temptation of sleeping with any guy I found attractive. It was part of that ‘good girl’ persona I tried to live up to weaving its way into my sex life as well.

“Well, yes, and no. It’s like ...” She looks up to the sky in contemplation. “It’s not as new and exciting as it was when we first got together and would jump each other every second we could. Now there are kids cockblocking us and exhaustion to battle. But when we do connect, it’s a comfort that I can’t explain. He knows what I like and vice versa. I’m not worried about my stretch marks or my stomach being flat because I know he loves me for me. And when I feel him hover over me, I feel safe and loved unconditionally, which is a level of intimacy I don’t think you can get anywhere else.”

“Sounds amazing ...”

She sighs. “It is. But sometimes I miss the wild—the carefree, scream your lungs out, being fucked within an inch of your life sex.”

An older woman walks by us and shoots Ally a nasty glare.

“Apparently you’re too bold for her,” I acknowledge.

“She’s just jealous because she’s not getting any.”

“I’ve never been fucked like that, Ally,” I whisper as we come up to some empty fields with foundations poured for new houses being built.

“Never? Not even by Michael?” she asks, referencing the boyfriend I had a few years ago. We were serious and I thought he was the one, but he got a job offer in New York that he didn’t want to pass up, and I had no desire to leave Texas.

“Nope. He wouldn’t even fuck me on the kitchen counter.”

“Well, did you ask him?”

“What do you mean?”

She stops me cold and faces me head on. “Sydney, men can’t read minds. You literally have to tell them what you want most of the time.”

“Do you do that with Collin?”

She nods. “Yeah, I do. Sometimes I want it rougher, sometimes slow, and smooth. But he won’t know that unless I tell him.”

“But it’s so awkward,” I say with a crinkle of my nose, even though this conversation is making me think of all the things I’d want a man to do to me at this very moment. I’ve just never been bold enough to ask.

“Okay, that’s it. We’re going out next weekend, and your goal is to have a one-night stand with a guy and tell him everything you want him to do to you.”

I stand there motionless, my heart beating wildly in my chest. For a woman who generally considers herself confident, this task seems insurmountable right now. I’m starting to sweat just thinking about putting myself out there like that. “You can’t be serious?”

“Yes, I am. You’re going to find some man that doesn’t know who you are and bang him. Be filthy, dirty. Live in the moment. You’ll never see him again, and then you’ll have an amazing story to tell your grandkids one day.”

I laugh. “I am not telling my grandkids stories about my sex life.”

“I am. I’m gonna be that old woman sitting in the room full of her family that chuckles at the fact that they all exist because I got laid.”

My shoulders bounce from my laughter as we stop in front of a house that is being built, the wooden beams framing the walls the only things standing on the foundation.

“Looks like you’re gonna have new neighbors soon,” I say as a crew of guys comes around the back of the house, arms full of tools as they move to load them into the work trucks. A Gibson Construction logo is plastered

on the doors, a booming construction company that's grown in the area in recent years.

The eye candy in front of me is definitely a step up from the man-child I was salivating over earlier. Tan skin on bared chests, tattoos weaving over bulging biceps, narrow hips that frame deep Vs leading into worn jeans strut across the yard as the three men prepare to leave for the day, their hard hats resting solidly on their heads.

"Damn," I mutter out loud as Ally turns to me and grins.

"See something you like?"

I nod. Yeah. That's what I need. A man. Not a boy like Jared. A man with muscles and brawn. Someone who can lift me up and fuck me against the wall. I want some meat to hold on to, someone to make me forget and feel bold, yet protected as well...

"That a girl. Talk dirty like that next weekend!"

"What?" I turn to her as she starts to chuckle.

"Did you not realize you were just talking aloud right now?"

"Oh, God. No!" I bury my head in my hands as Ally grabs me and we start to walk away.

"Don't be embarrassed. I think you're just horny. Go home and use your vibrator, get off, and then get ready to let loose next Saturday. That's what you need to do. I'm sure of it."

"Dear lord, Ally. This has disaster written all over it. We have to make sure nothing bad happens that night, alright? Or I'll never hear the end of it."

"Even if something does happen, you can tell daddy-dearest to fuck off. You're a grown woman, Syd. And I'll be damned if my best friend dies with a shriveled up, dry vagina. You need to live a little and let go. Get out your Daisy Dukes, girlfriend. We're going dancing!"

Chapter 2

Javier

“So you’re just going to walk around with the floors like this? You know you could step on a nail ...”

I turn to glance at my sister, Selena, over my shoulder as she peers down at the concrete foundation exposed since I ripped up the tile last night. “That’s what shoes are for.”

“A nail can still go through a shoe,” she counters.

“Well, good thing I know how to clean up a job site then, huh?” I turn back around and take a sip from my glass of water.

The past six months I’ve been working for Gibson Construction thanks to my brother-in-law pulling in a favor. Forrest Gibson works out at his gym so Andre asked him to help me out, knowing I would need a job when I got out of prison. It’s not easy getting a job with a record.

She throws her hands up in defeat as Andre, my sister’s husband, and my best friend, joins us in the kitchen.

“I like the paint color though. It’s a little darker than I would have chosen, but I think it suits you.”

I lift a brow in his direction. “It was the closest I could get without painting it black.” My eyes scour the navy blue walls in the living room, pleased with the color choice even if it wasn’t my first choice.

“I may have given you control over the remodel while living here, but you and I both know black walls won’t sell in the future.” Andre reaches for an apple out of the bowl on my counter and takes a large bite, moving next to my sister and placing his arm around her waist. “Plus, they’re a bitch to paint over.”

“Hey, I still pay you rent while I’m here and you gave me full reign on doing what I wanted.”

“I know. But you won’t be here forever. You’ll have your own place eventually and we’ll probably buy a bigger place down the road too,” he says after he finishes chewing.

I huff sarcastically. “Yeah, we’ll see. Not too many people are looking to

loan money to an ex-con.”

Selena starts to move toward me, guilt written all over her face.

“No, Selena. Don’t start.” I push her away and move around the two of them into the living room.

“It won’t always be this way, Javi,” she says, trying to offer me some comfort for the thousandth time since I moved in. “It’s my fault you’re in this mess to begin with, so please let Andre and I help you however we can.”

I take a seat on the couch and rest my head in my hands, a position I find myself in more than once a day, a perch of contemplation that allows me to remember why I’m in this place in my life to begin with.

I hate the way my sister looks at me sometimes with that guilt resting in her eyes and shoulders for the circumstances of my life right now. It’s been six months since I was freed from prison, serving out my sentence that I willingly took to protect her. And even though I would do it again in a heartbeat, I think I failed to realize the ramifications of carrying around an aggravated assault on my record accompanied by a shoplifting charge from when I was sixteen.

If it weren’t for Andre and my sister, I wouldn’t have a place to live or a job right now, that’s for sure. The guest house on the back of their property was in need of renovations, so they asked me to do so in exchange for a place to stay, but I still insisted on paying them rent while I was here.

I have to say, two and a half years ago I never thought I’d be living in the backyard of my best friend’s house, or that he’d be married to my sister. I asked Andre to watch over her while I was in jail, knowing that he was the only other person I trusted to look after her since I couldn’t. I made him promise me that nothing else would happen to her while I served my time, but I guess he took his role a little too seriously when they ended up falling in love. By the time I was out, she had a ring on her finger and a wedding was planned. The truth is, I couldn’t have picked a better man for her and I’m happy that they continued to make something of their lives while I was counting down the days of mine in a jail cell.

“You know, when I originally asked you for help, I didn’t mean sleep with my sister,” I toss in his direction as the sound of his chewing alerts me to his presence near us now on the couch.

“Hey. I did my job. She’s the one who came on to me.” His smirk says it all as I catch my sister glare at him from across the room.

“We’ll see how soon that happens again if you keep flapping your jaws,

mister,” she reprimands.

“Hey. I don’t want to hear about you two in that capacity, alright?”

“You’re the one that brought it up, Javi,” my sister counters before resting her hand on my shoulder. “Anyway, just be patient. Time will pass and everything will get better. I just wish you hadn’t lost two years of your life.”

“We both know that wasn’t an option, Selena,” I declare knowingly, a bout of anger humming through my veins.

I turn my eyes toward her, taking in her bronze skin and golden eyes similar to mine. Her jet black hair is pulled up on top of her head in the pin-up style that is uniquely her, complete with the red scarf wrapped around her head. She even wears her eyeliner winged out to the side, reminiscent of the fifties style. My sister is the most important part of my life besides our mom. I can see a reformation in her face now, a stark contrast to the way I found her that night, the image of her lifeless body draped over the couch burned into my retinas for all eternity.

“Do you at least feel better now?” I ask, hoping that the passage of time has helped her heal, even though it put a stop to my life.

She nods and then smiles over at Andre. “I do. I can never thank you enough for what you did for me, Javi. I love you. But it’s time for you to live your life. It’s been six months. Your record will follow you around and make some things difficult, but you can’t live alone and solemn forever. You deserve to be happy, have fun, make something of yourself.”

I flash her a skeptical look. “The last time I had fun I beat the shit out of someone.”

She retreats back into the couch, hanging her head down. “That night was fucked up for so many reasons. But that doesn’t mean that you can’t ever let go again. Everyone had too much to drink, everyone made shitty choices that night. But you keep living back in that moment. We need to move forward.”

“Has your therapist been telling you this crap?” I ask jokingly, even though I know that my sister seeing a shrink has helped her heal tremendously while I was doing my time.

Andre chimes in. “You don’t know the half of it, man. There were some dark days in the beginning, but Selena has attempted to heal, and you need to too.”

I sigh heavily, leaning back into the couch cushions now. “I appreciate

you two trying to break me out of my funk, but I'm better off just keeping to myself."

Selena stands and places her hands on her hips, pursing her painted red lips at me. "No, Javi. That's not going to happen. You're going out with us this weekend."

"Excuse me?" I stand and get up in her face like the many times I have before. My sister might be younger than me but she's always thought she was the boss.

"You heard me, Javi," she spits. "You're going out and that's it."

I scoff at her and walk back into the kitchen. "You're hilarious, Selena if you think you can boss me around."

"Javi, I think Selena's right. You need to go out. You don't have to drink. Just get out of this house. You're starting to smell like sawdust and paint."

"It's a new scent I'm trying out. I hear it makes all the women drop their panties." Images of the last naked woman I saw come to the forefront, reminding me that it's been a while since I got laid.

Selena comes up to me and places her hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look down at her. "I love you, Javi, but I'm not taking no for an answer. I'll text you the details and we'll pick you up Saturday." Then she ruffles her hand through my overgrown hair. "But make sure you come see me this week for a haircut. Your hair is out of control."

"Yes, Mom."

My sister owns a full-service hair, nail, and skin salon in Newberry, just on the other side of the town. In this small Texas town, there's a road that divides the patrons, much like a caste system. One step over the line and the income level of the people drops by thousands. My sister and I grew up on the poor side of the road, but when she set up her business, she aimed to take the money from those that had it. Now she services housewives and women who have nothing better to do than drop hundreds of dollars on their appearance. I hate that she deals with those women every day, but she assures me that the money she earns makes up for it.

She smacks me upside the head and then retreats, grabbing her purse from the counter. "I'm telling Mom you're acting like a child. Pull your head out of your ass or I'm gonna put some gloves on and box with you at the gym."

"I'd love to see you try," I call after her as she walks out the front door and heads to the main house. She and Andre stopped by just as they got home from work so they could see the progress I've made on the inside of my

place. It's a work in progress for sure, but I'm happy with the results as they've come along.

"Go easy on her, man," Andre says, interrupting my thoughts. "You can't even begin to understand the guilt she feels over you doing time for her."

I let out a heavy breath. "I know. But going out for one night isn't going to miraculously turn things around for me. I'm better off just lying low and not putting myself in a position to get my ass in trouble again. I have six more months of parole. If my parole officer catches wind that I'm flirting with trouble, he's gonna be beating down my door."

"It's one night. We won't let it get out of control, okay? But Selena really wants to check this place out, and you've been working your ass off since you started at Gibson. Plus, you're putting in two nights a week at the gym for me. You can't work every day, Javi. You're going to go crazy."

"No. Going crazy is staring at the same four concrete walls for two years, man. Believe me, working and putting in time at the gym is a blessing."

The monotony of punching a bag two nights a week and taking out my aggression by hammering nails into wood has actually given me some peace. For someone with a temper, I found the two most therapeutic jobs I could. I tried using sex to let off some steam too, but that unraveled very quickly. My old fling put me in a position to get my ass thrown back in jail when she told me she had a boyfriend, so I put an end to that real quick. The last thing I need is to get thrown back into the slammer because I violated my parole fighting another piece of shit.

"Fine," I relent. "But I'm not drinking. Where are we going anyway?"

Andre's smile creeps up his face as he realizes he won the argument. He's probably itching to tell my sister right now. "The Jameson."

"Aw, fuck," I mumble. "Is that the new honky tonk in Fort Worth?"

He nods. "Yup. Get ready for some bull riding and line dancing."

"Fuck no. I won't be doing that shit."

Andre throws his head back in laughter as he makes his way to the door. "It'll be an experience for sure. But hey, I'll see you at the gym tomorrow night, right?"

"You know it. Night, man."

"Night, Javi."

I watch my friend retreat to his house as I turn back around and survey my cold, cement floors again. I'll need to wait until next week to purchase

the tile, so in the meantime I think I'll install the new bathroom fixtures tonight that I purchased a few days ago.

Reaching into my fridge, I retrieve a beer, taking solace in the fact that at least I can drink in the comfort of my own place without fear of doing something stupid. I pop the cap off and drain almost half of it before stripping off my shirt and making my way down the hallway to the bathroom. As I stand in front of the mirror, I take a moment to appreciate the only personal benefit that came from my time in prison besides protecting my sister's reputation—a ripped body that I worked tirelessly on every day since I didn't have much else to do. The new ink I got after I was released compliments my tan skin and muscles, only adding to the don't-fuck-with-me vibe I strive for. I'm not looking for trouble, but if someone looks at me, I'm hoping they sense that I'm capable of it.

As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I can't help but berate the man staring back at me—a poor boy from the wrong side of town that lived up to every stereotype thrown my way—a criminal that is paying for his sins, even though the urge to protect my own is one I will never deny. I'm a Montes, a Puerto Rican-American man that was given the opportunity by my parents to live a better life than they did. And I fucked it up, even though I'm sure my father would be proud of the sacrifice I made. He always told me to protect my mom and sister, to die before I let anything happen to them. And I failed. My sister will be forever haunted by my shortcomings, so I take my punishment willingly—a life of solitude and judgment from others, knowing that given the choice, I'd make the same decision all over again.

Chapter 3

Sydney

“Tessa? Can I get the files on the Young case, please?”

The soft pad of her heels on the carpet alerts me to her making her way toward my office. “Here ya go, boss,” she teases as she hands me a manilla folder.

“Thank you. And I need you to return the calls from Mrs. Harrison too, please. She wants her will finalized by the end of the week. Assure her that we will have it ready for her by Friday. Make an appointment for her to come in and sign.”

“On it. Um, I hate to tell you this,” she says, biting her thumbnail nervously, “but you have a visitor.”

My eyes scour the mess I call a desk, my anxiety flaring knowing that I never let it get this bad but this week has been wildly busy, and now I’m going to be interrupted in my quest to get shit marked off my to-do list. “Please tell them I’m busy,” I spit out, more irritated than I intended.

“Now, you wouldn’t turn your dad away so easily, would you?” The heavy shadow of my father rests over my desk and his voice wafts through the doorway to my office, pulling my head up to greet him.

“Daddy! What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to take my brilliant daughter to lunch. Your mother and I miss you and she formally sends an invitation for dinner Friday evening since she’s busy at the country club today. But I had a break between cases and thought I’d use it to check up on you.” He holds out his arms to the side and ushers me toward him. “Come on. I need a hug.”

The irritation I felt is quickly diminished as I move around my desk and lunge myself into his arms. I can’t blame him for wanting to surprise me, even though a phone call would have been a nice heads up. “I’m happy to see you, Dad. I am. But I am swamped with work right now. Can I take a rain check?”

“Sydney Matthews, when your father stops by to spend time with you, you’d better make the effort to oblige. Tell your assistant to move some

things around. I have reservations at The Florence House and we're going to be late."

I sigh in defeat and then move back to my desk, arranging the stacks of papers that I'm ultimately going to have to take home with me tonight. The more of a headache this week is turning out to be, the more I'm looking forward to Saturday night. Ally confirmed she and Collin have a babysitter, so we're counting the days until we can let loose and channel our inner cowgirls.

"Okay. Tessa, please make those calls for me and start on the debrief for the Young case," I call out to her after she leaves the room.

"On it!" she yells back as Byron Kennedy, my boss and owner of the firm where I work, comes down the hall.

"Judge Matthews, what brings you here today?" He reaches out to shake his hand as my father reciprocates.

"Byron. Pleasure to see you as always. Just here to take my daughter out to lunch. I hope she's been working hard and living up to the family name."

"Nonsense. Sydney is fantastic. I know I can always count on her to pick up the slack when I need her." He winks in my direction as I fake a polite smile. I love my boss, I do. But I have a complex about saying no and he knows it. And I'm fairly certain he uses it to his advantage. Most of the other lawyers don't put in extra time like I do, although I am single and don't have a family waiting for me at home like the others do.

"That's my girl. Ever the team player. Alright, darling. Let's get going. Nice to see you, Byron." I grab my purse as my dad places his hand on my back and leads me out of the office. He offers to drive us both, but I insist on taking my own car so I can leave if need be.

As the waiter fills our water glasses and my father orders a scotch, I unfold my napkin and place it on my lap, preparing myself for the lecture I'm about to receive. Even though I want to believe that this lunch invitation was one that doesn't have an agenda attached to it, history has deemed that to be unlikely.

Here's the thing. George Matthews doesn't yell and intimidate his family into behaving the way he wants us to. No. He uses a delicate manipulation tactic that makes you think your way of thinking is always wrong. I'm not saying that my stepfather doesn't love me, I know he does. He took me in as his own when he married my mother, knowing that her three-year-old daughter was part of the package deal. But after formally adopting me and

changing my name to his, he took his role as a father and protector very seriously. He's adamant about upholding the Matthews name in a certain light, and if something threatens to derail that standard, he's not afraid to let you know about it.

My father lifts his glass to his lips, but speaks before he takes a sip. "So how are things?" I watch the amber liquid swish in his glass before I answer.

"Um, fine. Good, actually."

"Have you seen any more suspicious activity around the firm? What about your condo?"

I shake my head, reaching for my glass of water, quenching my thirst as my throat grows dry. "No. But I haven't been sleeping well again."

"I'm sorry that my job has made you fearful, Sydney. I can increase your security detail if that makes you feel better?"

"No, it's fine. I think it was just that case that caused the irrational behavior from the community. But I actually was thinking about doing something to make me feel safer when I'm on my own."

His eyebrows raise as he waits for me to continue. "Is that so?"

My head bobs up and down in acknowledgment. "Yes. First, I applied for my concealed carrier's permit."

"Well, as a resident of the great state of Texas, I'm surprised you waited this long for that God-given right."

I struggle to refrain from rolling my eyes at the gospel spoken in our state. "Yes. Well, I think I'll feel better knowing I'm armed at all times. But I was also thinking about taking a self-defense class."

"All women should know how to defend themselves adequately. In fact, I'm angry I didn't think of this sooner. I'll contact Samuel and have him set something up." He reaches for his pocket and fetches his phone, most likely to text Samuel, our head of security.

My father may only be a judge, but he comes from a very wealthy family that has made a fortune in the oil industry and by managing investments. So when I say we have a head of security, I'm not joking. There's about twenty different men that tail me, my parents, and my brothers at any given time. And after the threat that was made to my life a few months ago, my personal team has grown by four.

Wanting to stand tall and advocate for myself, I clear my throat to interrupt him. "I actually already found a place."

"Oh?" he says, as more of a question, shock lacing his voice as he rests

his phone on the table. “And where is this place you deem fit?”

I sigh. “Dad. I know you want to protect me, and I love you for that. But I’m twenty-eight years old and am capable of making decisions for myself. You can’t protect me forever.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Sydney.” His refusal to acknowledge my declaration does not go unnoticed.

“The Elite Gym over on Madison.” I cringe, anticipating my father’s reaction.

His jaw clenches as he grits his teeth, displeasure seeping through his pores. “Madison? You mean on the *other* side of town?”

“Yes,” I confirm, knowing what’s going to come next. “The reviews online were stellar and it would be easy to stop by on my way home from work.”

“So, rather than let *my* elite team of professionals equip you with the skills to defend yourself, you’d rather sulk into the very community whose gangbangers threatened your life and let them teach you instead?” His skin is turning red from the fury building in his body, a telltale sign that I need to anticipate any unwelcome reaction coming my way.

“Dad,” I whisper, reaching across the table to rest my hand on his, attempting to bring his blood pressure back down. “I need to do this. I need to feel some sort of control in these circumstances. Surely, you can understand that.”

“All I know is that you are my daughter and I want what’s best for you. You may think you can take care of yourself, Sydney. But there are certain protections that money can provide. Andrew’s family can do the same for you.” There it is—the pushpin seeping its way into the conversation that I felt was the intent of this lunch.

“What does Andrew have to do with any of this?” I fire back, leaning away from him in my chair now, preparing to wage this battle for the umpteenth time.

“I’m just wondering when you’re finally going to accept the fact that you belong together?” His hand draws his glass back up to his lips.

I shake my head at him, seething with irritation. “You make it sound like we’re living back in the days where daughters’ hands were handed down in business arrangements, complete with dowries.”

“Nonsense. I just know compatibility when I see it.”

“Well, maybe you need to get your eyes checked then.”

“Sydney, Andrew and his family can offer you the same type of security that I can. And he’s voiced his interest in you countless times. He’s the type of man you should be looking for. It’s time for you to start thinking about your future.”

“Boy. What an archaic way of telling me that I’m not getting any younger.” I cringe as a boulder of unrelenting defeat rests in my stomach. This same issue has been clouding every interaction with my father lately. And while deep down I want to believe that a part of him just wants me to be taken care of, another part aches for him to see that I’m capable of doing this, or anything really, on my own.

Our waiter comes back to the table, volleying his eyes between the two of us, taking in the palpable tension. “Are we ready to order?”

I stand and remove my napkin from my lap, placing it calmly on the table even though my true desire is to throw it down. “I’m no longer hungry.”

“Sydney ...” my father warns, as we participate in a silent stare-off.

“I need to get back to work. Next time you decide to surprise me, make sure it’s worth my time. I love you, Dad ... but this manipulation tactic is getting old. I will be taking classes at Elite, and if it makes you feel better, you can have your team follow me every minute of the day. They can track my pee schedule and when I brush my teeth for all I care. But I’m standing firm on this. And most importantly, stop trying to push Andrew on me.”

I turn on my heel, lift my chin high in the air, and stride out of the restaurant as sweat drips down my back, ruminating on the fact that I stood up to my father in a public setting and I know it was the least appropriate time to do so. But I’ll be damned if I listen to his old-fashioned values and suggestive control anymore. There will surely be consequences from my actions, but I can’t think about that right now. As my ankles threaten to buckle on each step to my car, the shakiness of my hands subsides once I grip my steering wheel and crank the engine, returning to my office to do the job that I was born to do.

Chapter 4

Javier

“Jesus Christ. What the fuck did you bring me to?” My eyes scour the room as I take it all in, trying to avoid a brain aneurysm from the flashing lights and country music blaring through the speakers.

The old, open air barn has been converted into one of the biggest displays of country culture I have ever seen, and I can't decide if I fucking hate it, or it's one of the most genius ideas ever and I'm pissed I didn't come up with it. As we step through the doors after our IDs were checked and hands were stamped, we're immediately greeted by a long, wooden bar where twenty-something girls in cut-off shorts and equally small tops run around filling drink orders left and right, the sound of cash drawers slamming ring out over the music. And as far as the eye can see, other bars line walls and glossy wooden dance floors where cowboy boots scuff the ground as couples spin and two-step along to the beat.

Steel beams are exposed in the ceiling accompanied by HVAC ducts blowing stark cold air conditioning in the room to combat the Texas humidity outside. The walls are covered in ship-lap, giving that country feel to the 100,000 square-foot space. To the left of the entrance is the gate that opens up to the bull riding arena. Yes, there is a fucking bull riding arena in this bar, and right behind that is the tunnel that leads to the full restaurant, serving up authentic Texas barbeque.

“Now this is just what we needed!” Selena squeals as she threads her arm through her friend, Claudia's, and they descend the small flight of stairs to reach the main floor. The four of us remain close as we weave through the crowd and make our way to a bar on the right side of the room. Neon signs flash and hover from the ceiling, directing you to different areas of ‘the world's largest honky tonk’, or for me, my worst fucking nightmare.

“This definitely isn't what I needed,” I mutter in her ear as we take up residence along a bar, waiting for a server to acknowledge us.

Selena turns around and shoots me a sour glare. “Yes you did. Look, I know this isn't your typical scene ...” she says and I scoff sarcastically. “But

we're here to let loose and get out of the house. So relax, big brother, and at least admire the eye-candy," she teases as a short, Latina woman struts by us in shorts that barely cover her ass and long black hair that is practically kissing her butt cheeks as well, her eyes landing on mine as a shit-eating grin spreads across her lips.

I throw my chin in her direction with a smolder I reserve for the ladies before she turns back around and continues to walk away from me, but I take the moment to memorize her ass in case we run into each other again.

"See? Plenty of ass to keep you occupied." She swats my chest playfully as the bartender comes over and takes our order. As I declared earlier in the week, I will not be drinking tonight. The risk of getting out of control is not worth it to me, so I settle on a Coke while Andre, my sister, and Claudia all order their poison of choice.

"I know you don't exactly want to be here," Andre speaks into my ear so I can hear him, "but I'm glad you didn't leave me alone with these two." He gestures over to my sister and her friend, the same one that has been trying to get in my pants for years. Claudia is a sweet girl and works at my sister's salon, but she's never been more to me than a pseudo sister I felt the need to look after. Unfortunately, that line was one I never felt the desire to cross, and I hate that I can see the disappointment in her eyes when I shoot her down repeatedly.

"What? You didn't want to be the token Black guy in the country bar?" I nudge his shoulder with my own as we both take a sip of our drinks, watching the hordes of cowboys strut by us.

"I will always be that guy," he chides. "But now you can be the token Hispanic guy with me. And you know I do this shit for your sister."

I rest my palm on his shoulder. "I know. You're good to her. You better always be too, or I might just have to kick your ass and go back to jail."

"Shut the fuck up, man. You know she's my life."

"Yeah. I do."

"Boys!" Selena shouts, running over to us with Claudia at her side. She's already at the bottom of her drink and we've only been standing here for a few minutes, so I know the alcohol is already hitting her. "Claudia and I want to dance. Let's start heading toward the dance floor."

I groan and roll my eyes as Selena grabs Andre's hand, Claudia reaches for mine, and I let her drag me along, mentally preparing to have to let her down easy later when she comes on to me for the thousandth time, and then

we follow my sister and her husband through the crowds toward the largest dance floor in the building.

A white-washed, two-rung wooden fence frames the floor with breaks in the slats to allow people to float in and out. Couples hold hands and slide along, rocking their hips and kicking their heels and toes of their boots along the polished wooden floor.

“Hurry! Snag that table!” Selena shouts as she practically dives for a table with four stools around it just as a couple leaves their seats.

“What if they’re coming back?” Claudia asks.

“You snooze, you lose,” Selena sing-songs as we place our glasses on the surface. “Come on, babe. Dance with me.” She pouts her lips at my best friend as I watch for his reaction, enjoying the fuck out of watching him squirm. She’s pleading and holding his hands while bending over to provide a view of her cleavage for him. She may be my sister, but I’m impressed with her persuasion skills.

“Fuck, babe. Fine.” Andre rolls his eyes as he rights his jeans when he stands. Glowering at me over his shoulder, he tells me with his eyes not to say a word. And I laugh, because I may not give him shit tonight, but I’m definitely going to get my jabs in about this later. “Watch the table. You know as well as I do if it gets snagged, Selena is going to have your balls.”

I chuckle while I sip my Coke. “Noted. Go. Dance with your wife.” I watch the smile on my sister’s face light up the entire bar, the gesture so normal that no one would think anything of it. But I do. Because I know that smile wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t what I did for her.

“Do you wanna dance, Javi?” Claudia purrs next to me, turning my attention over to her.

“Sorry, girl. I’m on table watching duty, didn’t you hear?”

She licks her lips and then starts to walk away from me backwards. “Too bad.” Turning around to give me a view of her ass, she marches on to the dance floor, but not before giving me a predatory wink over her shoulder. Fuck, when is this girl gonna realize I’m not interested?

I don’t have time for females and their issues right now anyway. Relationships never have been and probably never will be my thing, unless I find some woman who can handle the fact that I come with a chip on my shoulder and flare for violence.

Of course, that was the old me, not this new version I’m trying to be. But that inkling to always be looking over my shoulder, assessing the room and

any possible threats to the people closest to me, the need to stand up to people who think they know who I am or what I'm capable of because of where I live or how I grew up—I don't know if those intuitions and memories will ever leave my mind. I think people are capable of change, but there are certain inherent behaviors that are born within us that you can't possibly overcome.

As I watch the couples dance on the floor, the song changing from a slow one to something more upbeat, a wave of anxiety radiates from my chest. I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here. This isn't my scene, at all. Hell, I'm in a country bar wearing black jeans, Nikes, a gray t-shirt, and my black ball-cap on backwards. I stick out like a sore thumb, clearly indicated by the confused looks I'm getting from every white cowboy in his Levi's walking past. The urge to pick a fight builds in my veins, a strong need to be on the defense in case someone chooses to run their mouth to me. And then I'll be in a situation where I'll have to decide if shutting the fucker up is worth me having to appear before a judge and defend my behavior once again.

Just as I glance over to check on Andre, Selena, and Claudia, a body barrels into me from behind, forcing my glass of Coke to crash onto the table, the dark brown liquid running off the surface and straight into my lap.

"Fuck!" I jump up, rage coursing through me as I turn around, ready to fucking punch someone. But the hunched over woman giggling stops me in my tracks when I take in her drunken state.

"Can you not watch where you're going?" I bellow over the music.

But then her head pops up and her smile falls as soon as she sees the wet spot over the crotch of my jeans. As her eyes dance up my torso and land on my face, a spark of recognition ignites and then my brain searches through the filing cabinets of my memory, locating where I know this face from, how those aqua eyes are eerily familiar.

And then it hits me as soon as her friend comes rushing up to her, reaching for her torso and standing her up straight as they both sway on their feet.

"Sydney! Jesus Christ, woman. That's it, you're cut off," the friend chastises as Sydney blinks, releasing her focus on me.

Sydney. Fucking. Matthews.

Miss Perfect, the valedictorian of our graduating class, homecoming and prom queen and all-around good girl is drunk off her ass. And I just got my drink spilled in my lap because of it.

Chapter 5

Sydney

“What?” I blink momentarily, mostly because my eyes are drying out from my contacts, but also to break the staring contest with the bronze-skinned hunk standing in front of me. I swear my mouth started to water at the sight of him, or maybe that’s the indication that I’m about to puke.

“You’re done. You clearly can’t handle your liquor anymore,” Ally speaks in my ear as my head twists to face her.

“No shit, Sherlock. When’s the last time I’ve had alcohol like this? Probably our last semester in law school.” I slur my words and then hiccup as my feet get twisted up in each other, my toe getting caught on my other boot. I lose my balance, causing me to fall face first into the rock hard chest of the man with Coke on his pants—which is all my fault.

“Sydney Matthews,” he mumbles in a deep rasp that strikes a match at the apex of my thighs as his hands move on instinct to prevent me from falling. *Holy hell. There are men out there that have voices like that?*

But then it dawns on me. He knows my name? How the hell does this guy know *me*? We’re almost two hours away from Newberry and an hour and half south of Dallas. If we were slightly closer to home it would make sense for someone to recognize me, but part of the allure of coming here was that it was miles from the invisible lines that mark the boundaries of where I have to uphold the Matthews name. I came here to let loose and not fear being judged or photographed in a drunken state, but it seems the world is much smaller than I thought.

“I’m sorry,” I cough, brushing my hair from my face as I stand up and try to right myself, my hand snaking to the front of my shirt to make sure my boob isn’t popping out, my skin turning cold the instant his hands leave it. “Do I know you?”

He chuckles, a laugh that is taunting and degrading. “Of course you don’t recognize me. Why would ‘Perfect Sydney Matthews’ remember anyone who didn’t run in her same circle?”

“Excuse me?”

He scoffs and reaches for some napkins on the table, dabbing at the wetness of his pants. Luckily, they're dark, so the spot isn't too noticeable. But the flex of his forearm covered in ink with patches of bare skin peeking through as he moves his hands around is *definitely* noticeable, hypnotizing me as I forget where I am momentarily. I take the next few seconds to watch him as I vaguely hear Ally trying to garner my attention, but I'm too enraptured to care.

Dark stubble lines his jaw, piercing gold eyes waft back and forth between me and his crotch, the next area my eyes choose to focus on as I try to gauge the outline of his penis. His biceps bulge with each swipe, and the fabric of his shirt that is clinging to every ridge in his abdomen looks so soft that I want to rub my face against it. Not to mention that the backwards ball cap does it for me. It so fucking does.

Christ, Sydney. What the hell is the matter with you?

I'm thinking I'd really like to see this guy strip for me, Magic Mike style ... is that too much to ask?

"Getting a good look, Princess?" His words snap me out of my perusal as I shake off the rapture I was under and take in his words.

"Princess?"

"Yeah. Or are you a queen now of your high and mighty world?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You don't even know me!"

"Ah, but I do," he says, bopping me on the nose and then looking to Ally. "You'd better get Miss Perfect out of here before she does more damage."

Ally huffs in disgust. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

He laughs again, shakes his head, and then gathers his empty glass from the table. "No one of importance to you, apparently. Who knew that the valedictorian still wouldn't know how to handle her liquor ten years later? Watch where you're going for the rest of the night, Sydney," he tosses at me before sauntering off, giving me a spectacular view of his ass as he walks away from us, leaving me dumbfounded as my eyes cross and suddenly there's two of him.

"What an ass," Ally says and then turns to me. "Do you know him?"

"Am I supposed to? He sure as hell knew who I was."

"Maybe he just knows who you are because of your dad, or he's a former client of your firm, or something."

"Yeah, maybe. But he knew I was valedictorian," I slur, trying to recall

his face from somewhere I would know him from, but he didn't exactly look like we would have the same acquaintances. I hate to judge a man by his appearance, but the hard and belittling man I just encountered was the epitome of rough around the edges. "Ally," I say as I turn to her and grip both of her shoulders, holding myself up. "I don't feel good. I'm reeeeeeeally drunk."

"I can see that, Princess," she teases.

"Don't fucking call me that," I spit as she grabs me around the waist and walks me to the nearest restroom, our feet dragging underneath us. Collin is somewhere with his buddies in this honky tonk, but I can't even begin to worry about that right now. We were headed in the direction of the restrooms anyway before I collided with the next star of the latest Magic Mike movie.

"Oh! I love when you cuss. That's how I know you're three sheets to the wind."

"How am I supposed to have a one-night stand and ask a guy to do dirty things to me when I can't even see straight?" I ask as we collide with another group of girls, waiting in line to pee. Good thing my bladder is numb from all of the alcohol so the urge to relieve myself doesn't sting as bad.

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to happen tonight," Ally says, soothing her fingers down my face and wiping under my eyes. I'm sure I'm just the definition of the hot-mess-express right now, but I'm too drunk to care. This was the goal of the evening—throw caution to the wind and have fun—and I think we accomplished that until I killed my buzz slightly by running into Mr. Coke Pants, a nickname only I can give him since it was my fault his pants got wet in the first place.

"But how am I gonna practice talking dirty? How am I gonna tell a guy what I want him to do to me?" I whine as a bonified cowboy comes walking past us, looking back as he overhears me. His steps falter as his lips curl up while his eyes move up and down my body.

"You can practice on me, sugar," he says in that southern drawl that should come with a warning label. But right now, all it's doing for me is putting me to sleep.

"Get outta here!" Ally swats him away as she holds me up. "You'll get another chance, Sydney. Your time isn't running out."

"But yes it is, Al. My dad is trying to force Andrew on me and the more romance novels I read, the more I feel I'm destined to end up alone. Why can't fictional men be real?" I think I'm crying, but my cheeks are so numb,

it's hard to tell if tears are sliding down them.

"Shit. You're breaking down on me, Sydney. It's gonna be okay, babe," Ally soothes as she pulls me in for a hug, and the next thing I know, everything goes black.

The sound of a leaf blower outside wakes me up, my eyes peeling apart from the mascara that clumped together when my face plopped into the pillow. As I blink a few times and take in my surroundings, I realize I'm on a bed that is not my own. Lavender walls and white bedding throw me off balance, my mind reeling as I wonder how the hell I got where I am until a tiny voice alerts me to my surroundings.

"Auntie Sydney!" Taryn shouts as she busts through the door of the room I'm in, a room I should be familiar with since it's the guestroom at my best friend's house. I guess that recollection just solidifies how long it's been since I've had to sleep in said room.

"Taryn, sweetie ... please don't yell." I cringe as Ally follows her inside holding two steaming cups of coffee. The heat swirls over the lips of the cups and my nose wakes up to the smell. But then my stomach quickly churns and threatens to revolt.

"Ugh." I groan, throwing my head back on the pillow and curling up into a ball, holding my gut as the threat to puke becomes real.

"How are you feeling, Princess?" she mocks, as she sets my cup of coffee on the nightstand and sits down on the bed next to me. "Taryn, go tell your daddy to start the French toast."

"Oh! Can I have lots of whipped cream on mine, Mommy?" she squeals, making me squeeze my eyes shut and throw my pillow over my ears to drown out the sound.

"Yes. But stop screaming, please." I hear the patter of Taryn's footsteps down the hardwood of the hallway before Ally adjusts her seat on the mattress. "Do you want to claw your eyes out?" she teases on a slight chuckle.

"Why on earth did you let me drink that much? And why aren't you as hungover as I am right now?"

"Because it's almost eleven and I made sure to drink water in between each drink last night. You act like I don't know how to handle my alcohol," she scoffs.

"Why didn't you make me do that?" I ask as I remove the pillow from my

face and shoot her a death glare.

“I did. But you told me you were on a mission to get fucked up and there was no stopping you.”

“Well, mission accomplished.” I groan. “How did we get home? The last thing I remember was standing in line for the bathroom.”

Ally smacks her lips together. “Ah, yes. Well, you passed out on me in line. I had to call Collin to help me carry you to the Uber that took us all home. You snored the entire way here, which Brandon found very sexy, by the way,” she jokes, referencing Collin’s friend. “But then as soon as we pulled in the driveway, you launched up out of your seat and scrambled to open the door before puking all over my driveway. Thank God you didn’t do it in the car, otherwise the drive would have been even more expensive.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry, Ally.”

She waves her hand nonchalantly. “No biggie. Collin hosed off the sidewalk before he came inside, otherwise someone from the H.O.A. would have had a field day this morning banging on our door.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say I had a good time. I just wish I weren’t suffering from the aftermath right now.” I roll over and attempt to sit up before reaching for the cup of coffee, blowing on the liquid before taking a sip, still scorching the tip of my tongue.

“Do you remember everything that happened though?” She eyes me over the rim of her cup, studying my face as I try to decide why she’s being so cryptic.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, on the drive home I couldn’t help but stew on that guy you bumped into and spilled his Coke in his lap.” She laughs, but her brow is furrowed. “And the more I kept thinking about it and his comment about you being valedictorian of our class, the more I got to thinking ...”

Visions of the man in question pop into my brain like a highlight reel, complete with a montage of all the attributes I admired about him last night. The guy was the essence of dark and mysterious with an edge of bad boy, the complete opposite of the type of guy I’m normally drawn to, or rather should I say, the type of man that is chosen for me.

Ally reaches on the other side of her, picking up our high school yearbook from senior year. “I wonder if we went to school with him?”

“Seriously?” I mock, pulling the book from her hands as my head pounds. My fingers find my temple as she stands and reaches for something

on the nightstand. I look to see her holding a glass of water and two aspirin. “Thank you,” I say, throwing the pills in my mouth and then washing them down quickly, returning the glass to the table and picking my coffee cup back up.

“I got you. Now, humor me. Let’s see if we can find him.” We adjust our seats in the bed, both of us leaning against the headboard as we flip through the pages, scrolling back through memories of a time that seems like another lifetime ago.

Prom, football games, pep rallies—photos that captured awkward teenage years and social circles that unfortunately followed many of us into adulthood. Many of the faces of people I knew back then have long since moved on from Newberry, Texas, only a few choosing to remain in the town we call home. Most of those people who I thought were the most important people in my life back then don’t even function as a blip on my radar anymore, except when my family is involved in something around town and I have to smile and play nice.

“Cheer Captain, Sydney Matthews, leads the Varsity Squad to a first place trophy at nationals,” Ally says in a high-pitched whine, poking fun at the caption of a picture of the group of girls that I lead, but ultimately hated. The bickering, the gossip, the pressure to be the best, the waste of time caring about what they thought of me is all I see in that photo.

“Prom Queen, Sydney Matthews, and Prom King, Blake Marks.” Ally points to the next page, focusing on the moment I was crowned prom queen. But all I remember that night was wondering what would happen if I came home without that crown, how my mother would look at me with disappointment for not earning the ‘honor’ her and my father deemed I deserved. Now that crown sits in a box, collecting dust, serving no purpose except as a reminder of the persona I was expected to uphold.

“Oh my God, look at us!” Ally shifts the pages ahead where the headshots are lined up for the senior class, her picture just a few down from mine. Ally’s maiden name was Nelson, so we were always next to each other for anything alphabetically.

“Dear lord. Why didn’t you tell me that I wore too much black eyeliner?” I wince, studying my picture and how different I looked then, even though I still feel like I’m eighteen some days—living up the same standards, pressured by the same morals, afraid to truly go after what I want.

“Um, hello? Mine’s not that much better,” she says through a laugh. “But

hey, let's see if we can find that guy? He had to have gone to school with us."

I nod and then flip back to the beginning of the alphabet as Ally and me both hunch over the book and study each guy's picture, dragging my finger along each row as we narrow down the search. Finally we arrive back on the page with both Ally and myself, pausing between our photos as a scrawny face in the middle of ours looks eerily familiar.

"Is that him?" I squint and pull the book closer to my face, tilting my head to the side as I try to picture the man from last night, my drunken memory playing tricks on me as I decide if it's the same guy.

"I think so. Javier ... Montes," she reads the name to the left of the row, making sure it correlates with the picture in order.

"Javier Montes," I whisper, letting the sound of his name roll off my tongue and hit my ears, wondering why the exotic slur of the letters heats up my body.

"The boy *definitely* grew up if that was him," Ally drawls. "Do you remember him?"

My head shifts back and forth in admission. "No. I don't."

"But he definitely knew who you were."

"Well, a lot of people did," I counter.

"Yeah, you were quite the popular bitch."

"Hey! You were friends with me." I shove into her body, causing her to fall over and almost out of the bed.

"Keep that up and you're going to have one less friend," she fires back.

"You can't live without me," I joke as I wrap my arm around her pulling her in for a hug. "But promise me that you'll never let me drink like that again," I grumble as my stomach rolls, desperately in need of some greasy food to soak up the bile rising in my throat.

"Ha. Okay, famous last words." She stands from the bed, reaches for her cup, and then walks toward the door. "Come on. Breakfast will be ready soon and it's only a matter of time before Taryn comes barreling back in here."

"I'll be out there in a second," I say, realizing I haven't peed yet and I have no idea what my appearance looks like. Slowly as not to upset my equilibrium anymore, I throw my legs over the side of the bed and stand at a snail's pace, gaining my footing before grabbing my coffee cup as well. As I turn back to face the bed, my eyes land on Javier's photo, the sour taste of his reaction to me eating me up inside along with the acid in my stomach.

Obviously, the guy had a problem with me, for what reason I'm not sure.
But I guess it doesn't matter. I'll probably never see him again.

Chapter 6

Javier

“So tell me why I had to hear from my husband that you ran into Sydney Matthews at The Jameson on Saturday?” If it weren’t for the smack of her gum, I wouldn’t have been prepared for acquisition. I turn around in the chair at the front desk of Elite Gym and glare up at my sister from my seat.

Folding my arms over my chest, I arch my brow at her. “Technically, she ran into me.”

Images of seeing Sydney drunk and disorderly flash in my mind for a second until I push them away. I’ll never admit to what seeing her all grown up did to me because that would mean that I actually give a shit that I saw her.

Which I don’t.

“Semantics. So, what did the most popular girl in school say when she wet your pants?” My sister’s grin is a mile wide as she eats up the fact that my run in with the prom queen wasn’t smooth sailing.

“She attempted to apologize I believe, but she was pretty wasted. Of course, I don’t know that she truly meant it anyway.”

“Sydney Matthews? Drunk? I’d have to see it to believe it.” The tap of her fingernails on the top of the counter starts to grate on my nerves.

“Can you stop that, please?”

“Jeez, grump. Wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?”

“Just a long day,” I reply, not wanting to reveal that I actually woke up with a raging hard-on as Sydney visited me in my sleep. The girl was everything I hated about people from the other side of our town growing up—privileged, pristine, perfect—so I don’t understand why seeing her the other night is stirring up past feelings of inadequacy, or why I can’t shake the image of her shapely body from my subconscious. The girl never knew I existed in high school, and to be quite honest, I didn’t care.

But her long dark hair and smooth white skin that had been gently kissed by the sun made my fingers itch with the desire to touch her, and the

confusion in her aqua eyes when I called her by name gave me a playful high I haven't felt in years. She was curvier than I remember her being ten years ago too—a girl that clearly developed into a woman during that period of time.

Ten years—could it really have been that long since I last seethed at the image of her and her friends across campus as she conversed with her crew of varsity athletes and ASB leaders? The disdain I felt for those people comes back full force as I remember how they always looked down on kids like me—the ones from the other side of town that would never compare to them monetarily or otherwise. Honestly though, I don't remember much of the last few months of senior year due to inebriation and being stoned out of my mind most days. I wasn't the most academically devoted student if you catch my drift, but I did enough work to get by and graduate.

Shifting back to our run-in Saturday night, it was rewarding to catch someone like her off her game, throw a wrench into her world where people probably worship the ground she walks on and bow at her feet still. The woman probably doesn't even know what it means to struggle, to have to choose between freedom and living up to a vow your family engrained in you from birth. Last I heard she went off to college at her parent's alma mater, but I have no idea what she's up to now. I did lose two years of my life in prison, so I wasn't exactly keeping up with town gossip. My sister could probably fill in those details for me if I asked though, given how many clients from that world come through her salon.

“Javi. There's a new client coming in twenty minutes for the self-defense class. Here's the paperwork I need her to fill out before she begins.” Andre comes down the hallway where the storage closets and his office are located, handing me a packet of forms all new members must complete before using the facilities.

“Sure.” I grab the papers and set them in front of me as I log into the computer and make note of how many people signed up for the three evening sessions we offer. Since I work construction during the day, I come in here from six to nine two nights a week, leading a few HIIT classes and the self-defense class we offer for women. After my sister's incident, she begged Andre to add a class specifically for women to the roster. It helped her gain some confidence back as well as she healed from her ordeal, and now she recommends it to every woman she can. We not only teach women how to protect themselves when faced with an attacker, but we use it as an exercise

course as well to help them work on their strength. It's a four-week-long course and almost every woman who's taken it all the way through leaves with a renewed sense of confidence.

"Hey, baby." My sister stalks up to Andre, planting a kiss on his mouth and then taking it to a level that is more appropriate in private.

"Why the fuck must you two do that shit in front of me?" I shoot them a glare of disgust and then rise, reaching for my gloves and water bottle.

"Newsflash, stupid. We're married. Kissing is mild compared to what else we do behind closed doors," she chides and I feel my blood pressure rise as well as my stomach churn.

"Fuck, Selena. Don't say shit like that. I've learned to accept the two of you, but that doesn't mean I want to hear about it."

"Babe. Don't give your brother a reason to brawl with me, okay? It's not gonna end well for him." Andre flashes a cocky smile my way as I stand and stride up to him, our chests mere inches apart, our eyes locking in a stand down. The guy is practically my brother, but that doesn't mean I won't knock him out if I need to.

"You wanna put your money where your mouth is, Andre? Wanna go toe-to-toe with me? Don't make me show you up in front of your woman." I challenge him with my words, even though I know this is just part of who we are. Andre and I used to wrestle and beat the shit out of each other when we were younger, but it never was out of spite. The one time we did almost go to blows was when he left my sister alone at that party, the night my entire life changed. The guilt he carried around from that night though was enough of a punishment for him, I felt, so I never pounded his face in like I felt he deserved. He left to fuck some girl that was making her way around our group of friends, but in doing so, left Selena exposed to Jesus.

"Ay, *Dios Mio!* Would you two knock it off? You're acting like a bunch of *niños* up in here."

Andre and I continue our stare down before he finally cracks, barreling over in laughter. "Aw, man. You know we'd probably both knock each other out in the same punch if it ever went to blows. But seriously, what's got your panties in a wad?"

"Speak for yourself," I say with a smirk and ignore his last observation that I'm on edge, grateful that I can mess around with my best friend like that and go back to normal in the next breath. Although, I think that's just a man thing in general.

A throat clearing behind us snaps us out of our interaction as we turn to take in the person who interrupted our conversation. And then my stomach drops as a wave of confusion barrels through me.

“What the fuck?” I ask in a high-pitched voice I don’t even recognize. I can hear Andre snicker behind me before Selena elbows him in the ribs and he coughs from the impact.

Sydney Matthews is standing in front of me like a ghost I can’t shake. *What the fuck is she doing here?*

Andre steps forward, breaking the awkwardness that just built between the four of us. I can see my sister sizing Sydney up, taking in the woman that sticks out like a sore thumb in this gym.

“Hi. I’m Andre. The owner. It’s nice to meet you, Sydney.” He reaches out his hand to shake hers, but her eyes are still locked on me, growing wider in each passing second.

Finally she shakes off her reaction and then gives her full attention to him.

“Likewise. I, uh ...” she stammers, looking off to the side of the room before continuing. My eyes follow her line of sight as the row of leather bags hang from the ceiling, swaying slightly from the flow of air conditioning in the room. One bag is being wailed on by a guy training for his first amateur fight, while the rest of the room is occupied by the group that came in for the free-style session at five. “I’m sorry. I’m here for the self-defense class. I signed up online, but it said to arrive fifteen minutes early to fill out the paperwork.”

“Yes. Javi here has your papers.” Andre turns to me, but my eyes are still laser focused on the woman standing in front of me. I honestly thought that running into her at The Jameson was just a fluke, but now that she’s standing here, decked out in bright pink spandex and her long hair pulled up off her neck, the satisfaction I got from our serendipitous run-in is short-lived when I realize she’s going to be training here at the gym, in *my* fucking class.

Before I got out of prison, Andre taught the self-defense class. But since I came on a few months ago, he’s passed the reins to me. Part of the reason why I work here now is so he can leave early a few nights a week to spend time with my sister. Most of his classes and clients come in the morning, and besides, I feel obligated to help him for his generosity in letting me stay at their house and for looking after my sister while I was doing my time.

“What?” I finally snap out of my mental breakdown, ruminating over the fact that I’m letting this woman’s presence derail me.

Selena chuckles under her breath as Andre narrows his eyes at me in confusion. “The paperwork? The forms Miss Matthews needs to fill out before she starts the class?”

“Oh. Yes. Um, here they are.” I twist around and lean over the counter to snatch up the papers and end up shoving them at her as I face her.

“Thanks,” she says as she takes a step back, eyeing me suspiciously.

“You sure you’re up for this, Princess? You might have to get a little dirty.” I pull out a smirk to cover up the fact that seeing her has clearly rattled me. But why is still the question I’m having trouble answering.

Suddenly the nerves I felt from her before disappear as her spine straightens and she glares at me. “Stop calling me Princess. I have a name.”

“As do I.”

“I’m aware, *Javier*.” My name rolls off her tongue like butter that’s been laced with a jalapeno—smooth, yet fiery, packing a punch that you don’t ever anticipate. Her acknowledgment that she in fact does know me threatens to throw me off balance again, but then I realize that Andre actually said my name earlier.

A bought of silence builds again as Andre and Selena study the interaction between Sydney and me. I can feel my sister’s eyes tracking my movements as I twist the lid off of my water bottle and bring it to my lips for a sip, never breaking eye contact with Sydney.

“Well, as much as I would love to sit here and watch you two glower at each other for an hour, this little lady is tired,” Selena interjects, cutting through the tension long enough for Sydney to turn around finally and take a seat at one of the chairs by the door to fill out her paperwork. Her eyes flip up to me for a second before she dives in and her hand flies across the paper.

“Fucking Christ.” I turn and start heading back to the break room, removing my hat, and running my fingers through my hair in frustration.

“You gonna be able to handle this?” Andre comes in behind me a moment later as I turn to face him.

“Of course.”

“Really? Because you sure as fuck don’t look like it right now?”

“Why do you say that?”

He scoffs. “Javi, I’ve known you for basically our entire lives. Say what you want, but that girl being here seemed to knock you off balance and I’m

not sure why. Why does it matter if she's training here? Did seeing her last weekend stir up some unrequited feelings you had for her back in high school or some shit?" He eyes me as I pace back in forth in front of the small futon stationed up against the wall.

I blow out an exaggerated breath. "Get fucking real, Andre. Sydney Matthews is the last woman I'd want, alright? She's from an entirely different world than ours ..."

"Meaning ..."

"Meaning she doesn't belong here."

Andre continues to track my movements as he lifts his brow. "Seems to me like you have some very one-sided opinions about who deserves to be able to defend themselves or not."

And with those words, my anger and shoulders drop drastically. "Shit ..."

"Yeah, shit. There's a reason she's here, Javi. And whether you like it or not, our job is to give her skills to build her confidence. Who knows who she is now compared to when we knew her. I hired you to do a job and I expect you to do it."

I shake my head at him before righting my hat back on my head and inhaling deeply to bring my blood pressure back to normal. I shouldn't be this fired up at the thought of a prospective client, but I guess people like Sydney Matthews get under my skin and I don't know how to fight that. "Fine. But I'm not going to go easy on her."

He throws his hands up in the air. "I didn't say that you should. But you owe her what she's paying for *and* what she came here for." He eyes the clock. "Class starts in two minutes and I'm taking off because I owe your sister a nice meal."

"Fucker," I mutter under my breath as I walk past him and the echo of his laugh follows me back out to the front. By now, five other women have shown up, three returning and two new ones besides Sydney. This should make for a fun class.

"Here," Sydney says as she comes over to me and hands me the clipboard with her completed forms.

I place them on the counter and then turn back around to face the group, ignoring her completely. "Good evening, ladies. You all ready to kick some ass?"

That comment sparks some laughter from the group, but Sydney remains stoic, a side of her I don't recall seeing in the past. You can tell she's

nervous, but I can't be bothered to coddle her right now. I have five other women who need my attention more than the prissy princess that thinks she owns half the town.

“Alright. Let's move into the room.” I wave my hand and guide them to the other side of the gym to a room full of mats made for throwing people down on, all the while wondering what the hell I just got myself into.

Chapter 7

Sydney

What an ass, I think as I catch myself staring across my office, lost in thought for the hundredth time today. If I keep this up, I'll definitely have to bring more work home with me tonight.

Visions of Javier's biceps bulging as his hands ricocheted off the punching bags at the gym seep behind my eyelids once again, blinding me from the crass attitude he showed me the rest of my first self-defense class. But the memory of his perma-scowl is etched there too, reminding me that he clearly wasn't letting the drink spilling incident go.

Never did I think I would run into the man again, especially after I realized who he was the next morning with Ally. But seeing him in the flesh, his sculpted and powerful body moving around while teaching us techniques to strengthen our bodies and our confidence threw me for a loop more than I care to admit. A war is raging in my mind whether to return to the gym again tomorrow night or give in to my father's request to let one of his men train me since I'm not sure if being around Javi is a good idea given his reaction to me.

"Hey, boss," Tessa sings as she knocks on my door once she enters my office, pulling me back to reality.

"Hey. What's up?" I sit up taller in my chair and begin moving forms back into the folder in front of me. This file is ready for signatures, which means I can move onto the next.

"There's a delivery for you."

"Really?" I perk up in my chair, wondering why someone would be sending me something on a Wednesday. It's not my birthday and I'm as single as a woman can be, so I'm not sure what to expect.

Tessa leaves and then returns with a crystal vase full of pink roses and twigs of baby's breath. "They are so gorgeous," she croons as I stand from my chair and intercept them.

"They are beautiful," I agree, setting them down on my desk but then mentally chastising this person because if they truly knew me, they'd know

that my favorite roses are red. I search the arrangement for a card and find one easily. Pulling the cardstock from the envelope, my eyes search the note for my admirer's identity, but my entire body deflates as I find the missing piece of information.

Sydney,

Please accept these roses as a token of my interest in you. Your father had expressed that you'd be willing to have dinner with me sometime to discuss our future. I look forward to it.

Andrew

"Ugh," I spit as I toss the card in the trash and then return to my chair.

"I'm guessing that these aren't from someone you wanted them to be from?" Tessa bites her thumbnail, a nervous tick of hers that I've become accustomed to.

"Not at all. They're from Andrew Benton."

Her nose scrunches up instantly at that information. "Ew. Gross."

"Exactly."

"I've only met him once, but the stench of his cologne lingered in the hallways for days after he left. Why is he sending you flowers?"

I stare out the window, my blood boiling beneath the surface. "My father seems to think we'd be the perfect match made in heaven. We come from the same circle and he's hell bent on setting us up."

"And you're not interested?"

I shake my head quickly. "Not at all! I can barely stand the guy, do *not* find him attractive whatsoever, and because my father wants us to be together, it makes me want to retaliate even more. I know it sounds so 'papa don't preach', but it's the truth."

Tessa nods as if she understands my rant completely. "Okay, note to self. No deliveries from Andrew will be accepted any longer." She mock salutes me and then turns to leave, but stops short to drop a few more words. "For what it's worth, I admire you standing up to your dad. I wish I had that type of confidence." She flashes me a polite smile and then returns to her office two doors down.

I sigh, leaning back in my chair again, stewing on her words. If Tessa only knew the conflict I go through trying to live up to his expectations so I don't seem ungrateful for everything he's given me while also trying to loosen the leash I feel he's tied around my neck.

If my mother had never met my father, who knows what my

childhood would have looked like, a detail that she likes to remind me of in private on numerous occasions. Even at dinner last week after the lunch I stormed out of with my father, my mother pulled me aside and reminded me that we've experienced privilege because of him and the least I could do is respect his need to protect me and want what's best for me.

But that's just the thing—it's what *he* thinks is best, with no opportunity to express what *I* want.

My mom was barely surviving working two waitressing jobs when she met my father as a customer at the small diner she worked at during the day. He was caught off guard by her beauty, but the sadness in her eyes is what pulled him in. When he offered to take her out for a decent meal, she thought he couldn't possibly want a woman like her, but he was relentless. Before she knew it, she was attending social events decked out in designer gowns and he put a blinding diamond ring on her finger. I have never doubted that my father loves my mother, and don't consider him the type of man that would ever use his fists to control a woman, given his job and the scum he sees in and out of his courtroom on a daily basis. But he does like people to do what he says, which can be downright irritating at times.

So while bending to his wishes and running to him for help is exactly what he'd want and what I was leaning toward earlier, Tessa's words struck a chord with me. If I want him to respect me and my wishes for my own life, I have to stand my ground firmly this time, which means going back to Elite tomorrow night and facing the intensity of Javier Montes, even if that means having to stand up to him too.

I shuffle papers around on my desk and get back to work, throwing myself into the estate planning of Mr. Nickson before my stomach growls and alerts me that I haven't eaten since I downed my protein shake earlier.

"Tessa, I need to get out of my office for a bit. I'm going to grab lunch from Russo's. Do you want anything?"

"Ugh. I would love a sub right now, but I'm trying to cut back on the carbs. My sister's wedding is in a few months and I don't want to be the fluffy bridesmaid." She reaches into her lunch pail beside her desk and pulls out a clear Tupperware full of salad.

I narrow my eyes at her and then put her in her place. "First of all, you are anything but fluffy. You are gorgeous and curvy and you should love your body. Second, I'm at least going to bring you back a cookie because life is too short to not give in to a little sugar fix once in a while." I wink at her,

grab my purse, and then head for my car, cruising to the Italian deli in Newberry that is always packed around lunch time.

I find a parking spot in the back and make my way inside, the smell of fresh baked bread hitting me the moment I open the doors. Waiting in line makes my stomach lurch at the prospect of food, so as soon as I pay for my order, I run to my car and open the sandwich wrapping on my lap, diving in for that first bite like my sub might grow legs and walk away from me.

“Oh my gawd,” I mumble around a mouthful of my lunch. I am by no means a vegetarian, but their no meat sub is full of my favorite things—fresh tomatoes, avocado, pepperoncini’s, olives, lettuce, bell peppers, and onion, and topped with a homemade vinaigrette that takes the sandwich to another level.

As I sit in my seat and stuff my face, my eye catches on the gleam of sun hitting metal when a truck door closes abruptly to my right. My head follows the noise as I take in the Gibson Construction logo on the door—but that’s not the only thing that catches my eye.

Striding toward the building I just came from with his crew members in tow is Javier Montes, decked out in worn blue jeans, an orange construction shirt that clings to his well-defined torso I’m quickly becoming a fan of, and a black bandana tied around his head, keeping the sweat from pouring into his eyes during this humid and hot Texas summer day. The skin exposed on his arms seems even darker than I remember, his tattoos flashing a pinch of danger in his presence. But his smile is carefree and given easily as the men joke with each other while making their way inside, showing me that the hard lines of his face and down turn of his lips I’ve grown accustomed to must be an expression he only saves for me.

And then it hits me. Javier works for Gibson Construction? I thought he worked for Elite Gym? Maybe he does both? Holding down two physically exhausting jobs can’t be easy, and for a moment, I admire his work ethic until the rasp of his voice calling me *Princess* whispers in my ears and suddenly I’m irritated with him again.

Wanting to see if I can catch him off guard, give him a little aggravation to ruin the lightheartedness he’s carrying around with him today especially after his less than welcome attitude last night, I decide to go inside Russo’s again and purchase a few more cookies. The office staff has been working hard and I think everyone deserves a treat.

I check my teeth in the rearview mirror, fluff my hair for good measure,

and then walk back toward the door, opening it and seeking him out without being too obvious. My legs are shaky and I momentarily consider leaving, but Javi and his two buddies found a table right near the register, giving them a perfect view of me as I walk straight to the cashier.

“Sydney? Did you forget something?” Hattie, the teen girl behind the second register asks me, worry evident in her eyes.

Out of my peripheral vision I see Javi’s head pop up but I don’t dare turn in that direction. I don’t want him to know that I see him, for him to read me in any way which would allude to the fact that the man has been in and out of my mind for the past eighteen hours and I’m here just to spite him.

“Well, yes. I need to get a few more cookies, please. The office staff needs an extra pick-me-up today.” I wink at her as Javi shakes his head, momentarily pulling mine in his direction.

“Oh, sure. All chocolate chip?” Hattie asks, drawing my attention back to her.

“Yes, please. Just make it a dozen so there’s more than enough.” I flash her my poised smile and then hand her the money for my purchase.

“Looks like you don’t know how to wait in lines, do you, Princess?” Javi’s words pull me back to him as I see his co-workers are now watching our interaction too, grins plastered on their faces.

“Excuse me?”

His arm flies out to the side, gesturing to the line of people still waiting for their sandwiches. “There’s people that are waiting for their turn, you know? What the rest of us are taught to do?”

“The rest of you?”

He nods. “Yeah. Those of us that haven’t been handed everything in our lives.”

“Here are your cookies, Sydney,” Hattie says, breaking my stare down with Javi, which is probably best seeing as how my blood was boiling just looking at him. However, the space between my legs was heating up too, which makes no sense as he was acting like a complete jackass to me just now.

“Thanks, hun.” I grab the bag and then turn back to Javi, taking the few steps over to the table where he’s seated. His eyes falter for a moment from mine, taking the opportunity to study me from head to toe. And in that moment, I’m so glad I wore my maroon pencil skirt that makes my ass look great and the sleeveless black blouse that pairs perfectly with it. My black

heels give me a few extra inches and lengthen my legs too. I know I look good today, and I'm so glad I feel that way because it's giving me an extra boost of confidence as I prepare to put this guy in his place.

"Not that it's any of your business, but that second register is exactly for purchases like this one." I hold up the bag. "If you're not waiting for a sandwich to be made, you can go right over there."

"You think you need all of those cookies?" he says now, changing the subject, and then takes a large bite of his sandwich, chewing as he continues to watch me.

"Why do you care? It's not like that little class of yours is going to help me burn any of these off. I barely broke a sweat last night."

The two guys sitting next to him choke on their lunch, laughing through their mouths full of food.

"Is that so?" he fires back.

I keep the act going, loving how I can see him grow increasingly frustrated. "Yup. I was not impressed with your stamina at all."

"Fucking, A," one of the guys spits out, wiping his mouth that is stretched into a pleased smile as he boils over in laughter.

Javi's jaw becomes tense, the only indication that I'm rattling him. "I was going easy on you, Princess. You have no idea what my true stamina is like."

I shrug and then turn to leave. "I'll believe it when I see it. Have a good day, boys." I wave, but then stop and do a Princess-style wave for good measure, loving how Javi's eyes narrow but the grin on his face stretches wider before I turn around completely and exit the deli, pleased with showing him that I'm not some girl he thinks he can treat like dirt even though being that bold made me feel like I was about to throw up the little of bit of my lunch I was able to gobble down so far.

But I'm a woman on a mission to be taken seriously in all aspects of my life, and somehow I feel like standing up to Javi a bit put me on the right path.

Chapter 8

Javier

I'm having trouble pinpointing why I'm so anxious as I sit in the chair at the desk of the gym, waiting for my next class to start.

At least that's what I'm trying to convince myself. But deep down I think I know exactly what has my hackles raised and my chest tight.

It's knowing that any moment now Sydney Matthews is going to walk through those doors and make me want to punch something.

After our little run-in at Russo's yesterday, Cory and Trilch both gave me shit for the way the woman tried to put me in my place. And I'm not gonna lie—the confidence she portrayed and the words she spit back took me by surprise. Apparently Sydney has grown a bit of a backbone since I last saw her, and I can't deny that watching her eyes light up with disdain for me didn't give me a half-chub in my jeans.

When we returned to the site of the new houses being built in the Ashwood community, I fought to keep images of her out of my head—her long, dark hair, those pools of aqua in her eyes that reminded me of the ocean in the tropics, her long legs stuffed into closed toe heels that I would love nothing more than to see draped over my shoulders as I plowed into her...

Obviously, my conscience sent me into a downward spiral as I realized I was fantasizing about the woman that I had engrained in my mind years ago to hate. I don't know who she is now though, but if her little display at the deli was any indication, I'd say the woman still has an entitlement bone in her body and I can't wait to see if I can bend it in place.

The bell above the door rings and a few of the girls in the self-defense class walk in, giggling and waving to me before talking to themselves as they make their way over to the lockers to deposit their things. As I watch them walk away, a familiar voice catches me off guard as I jump up in the chair.

"It's not very professional to check out your clients, don't you think?" Sydney's vision is planted directly on me, along with a hand on her hip.

"Are you jealous?" I ask, moving to stand and the difference in our height makes me tower over her. I'm just shy of six-feet, but without heels

on Sydney has to be five-five.

She scoffs. “Please. I’m just wondering if you’re going to be too busy drooling over those girls to actually give us a decent workout tonight.” There’s a fire in her eyes as they momentarily dip down to my mouth, my jaw ticking as I watch her.

“Don’t worry, Princess. I made sure to incorporate plenty of moves to get you sweating tonight. I’m going to show you just how good my stamina can be.” I grin knowingly in her face and then walk off, taking a deep breath to bring my pulse down to normal as I open up the room and the girls start to file in.

Even though the class is designed to teach the women how to deal with a person attacking them, it’s also a grueling workout. In order to possess the strength to fight your opponent, you must build those muscles, which in turn, builds confidence.

So at Sydney’s request, I put the girls to work—lunges, push-ups, crunches, burpees, and laps around the mat. I focus on cardio while building in some strength training that will guarantee to leave them sore for a few days. And I do the workout right alongside them so Sydney has no choice but to eat her fucking words.

As she rests on her knees and finishes her last round of push-ups, I kneel down in front of her, putting my face in line with hers.

“Why, Miss Matthews? Is that sweat I see gracing your face?” I take great pleasure in knowing right now that she’s probably regretting her little dig she took at me yesterday.

“About time,” she fires back and all I can do is chuckle as I stand and wait for the girls to finish.

When they’re all winded and resting on the mat with their water bottles in their hands, I move to start the lesson. These women came here for a reason—to be able to feel confident enough to defend themselves physically in a situation that warrants that response. And even though some instances leave you vulnerable and unable to do so, like my sister’s, at least having the knowledge of how to react in those situations can offer women peace of mind. Defending yourself isn’t just about using physical means either, which is something we will explore bit by bit during each class.

“Okay. So today, I’m going to show you a few moves that you can use if your attacker is coming at you from the front ...” I stagger to my feet and get in position in front of Clay, one of the other coaches that helps me out with

demonstrations.

Sydney's hand shoots up the air, and with how she's sitting cross-legged on the mat, I feel like I'm transported back in time, staring at an elementary version of the girl in front of me. I try hard to conceal my laugh, feigning irritation instead.

"What, Sydney?" I snap as she moves back in her posture, taken by surprise by my unwarranted reaction. I want the women to ask questions, but with the way this girl's been acting around me, who knows what's about to come out of her mouth.

"When will we discuss what to do if they come at you from behind?"

I let out a breath and then turn to answer her. "Next week. We usually start with front attacks because they're easier and a lot of the moves can be adapted to that situation."

"Oh ... okay, thanks." She gets quiet and immediately withdraws, which piques my curiosity. But I shake it off quickly and resume the demonstration.

I show the women how to use slight movements as simple as how to position their body when their attacker is moving toward them or when they have their hands on them. We even discuss simply using their voice as an intimidation tactic or their car keys as a weapon if the situation escalates quickly.

After the hour is up, the girls prepare to leave, but I can't help but feel like Sydney is lagging behind on purpose. She's dawdling, staring at posters on the walls instead of exiting the room in a hasty fashion.

"Did you need something else, Princess?" I ask from my hunched over position, retrieving my water bottle before I stand and take a long drag.

She sighs and then walks over to me slowly, taking enough time that it gives me a moment to study the curves of her body, not that I hadn't noticed those before. It took everything in me to avoid checking her out as she moved around during the workout, her shapely figure covered in black and lime green spandex today. The bounce of her breasts as she ran, the jiggle of her thighs as she jumped, the flex of her biceps as she performed her push-ups—every movement of hers caught me in some way, and it wasn't one that I was anticipating.

But when she looks up at me again beneath dark lashes and a mischievous grin spreads across her lips, my gut tells me that this woman might just make me want to go back to prison so I don't have to deal with her entitled ass.

“You may have made me sweat today, Javi. That I won’t deny. And I hope I showed you today that I’m serious about this class.” Her smile fades as her face grows serious, a total transformation from the playful thing she was five seconds ago. “But I’m not here to mess around, and the sooner you understand that I’m not leaving, the better things will be between us. I don’t know what it is that you have against me, but you need to take your preconceived notions about me and shove them up your ass.” As her chest begins to rise and fall with her heated breaths, the sight of her getting angry with me again is making blood rush south. “I’ll be back next week, and I’d appreciate if you treated me with the same respect and attitude you do the other girls.”

With that, she spins on her heel and heads for the exit, never once looking back to watch me watch her walk away, contemplating what the hell just happened. Even though I didn’t know Sydney personally back in high school, if there’s anything the past week has taught me is that maybe there’s a fire inside of her that I never cared to notice. That or something happened to her to put it there.

Whatever it is, the memory of her glaring up at me as she told me off becomes the image I channel that night in the shower. As soon as I recalled the turn of her lips, the silk of her skin, the intent in her voice, my dick grew painfully hard in an instant.

I lathered up and stroked myself to thought of her, a notion that both intrigued and confused me at the same time. If you ever told me ten years ago that there would be a moment in my life where I found myself lusting after Sydney Matthews, I’d bet you that pigs would fly first. And yet here I am, a world away from the boy I was once, a man now with a record and intent to fly under the radar, avoid trouble and unnecessary distractions as I try to put my life back together, and yet I find myself face to face with a temptation that I never knew I could have.

A woman that as much as I want to believe I know who she was and still is, is proving to me that she may be a world away from the girl she used to be too.

As I pull and rub my dick, drawing on her lavender smell that would hit my nose as she walked past me in the deli, or the way her neck seemed longer with her hair pulled back off of it, the onset of my orgasm begins to form. With each stroke, the vision of Sydney on her knees taking my cock all the way back in her throat has me gasping for air and yearning for release.

The vision of her body bared for me to see—the good girl that might just be bad behind closed doors pulls on every temptation in my marrow and before I know it, I’m spilling my release all over the tile floor.

“Fuck,” I mutter, resting one arm and my forehead on the shower wall as I bring my heart rate back to normal. But I don’t think that after jerking off to Sydney Matthews, my mind will ever be normal again.

The next day, Cory, Trilch, and I head for the Ashwood community to work on one of the new builds. I do a damn good job of pushing Sydney from my mind, focusing on pounding nails, positioning boards, and getting the frame of the house ready for plywood sheets to prepare for stucco and brick work on the outside. We work in sync throughout the long, humid day, taking rests when needed. And as five o’clock approaches, a red convertible Mustang goes cruising past, stopping at the mail boxes down the road.

I swear my eyes play tricks on me as the smooth legs of the driver appear underneath the open driver’s side door, but when she stands, I have no more doubts about the siren in front of me.

Sydney Matthews places a key in one of the boxes, standing on her white heels in a red pencil skirt and white blouse with her hair pulled away from the front of her face.

“Damn, *güey*.” Trilch comes up beside me as Cory joins and we all enjoy the vision in front of us. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen a lady as fine as that.”

“Isn’t that the girl we saw at Russo’s?” Cory asks, turning to garner my reaction.

“Looks like it.”

“You hittin’ that?” Trilch inquires.

I scoff sarcastically and then turn back around as not to draw attention to how much seeing her is rattling my resolve. “Fuck, no. That woman is a nuisance.”

“Ay. But you know her, right?”

“We used to go to high school together. Now she’s just a pain in my ass.” I start gathering tools from around us and moving toward the truck to put them away. I lift my hard hat from my head and use my bandana to wipe away the sweat, turning just slightly in my stance to see if Sydney is still standing there, and she isn’t. As I turn around fully, I notice her car is pulling away from the mailboxes and cruising up the street, where she turns into the driveway of a residence I know a family lives in. We’ve been on this site for

weeks now, so it becomes a habit to scope out the people that come and go around you.

“Damn. Maybe you can try to smooth things over though? Because I’d hate to see you pass up a piece of pussy that looks like that.”

I twist abruptly and glare in Trilch’s direction. “Don’t fucking talk about her like that!”

“Easy, *güey*. No need to get testy.” He throws his hands in the air and I continue to stand there, my pulse firing rapidly in my veins.

“Women aren’t just for their pussies, alright? It fucking pisses me off when I hear men talk about that. Until you realize what women have to face on a day to day basis, being treated like a goddamn piece of meat, I don’t ever want to hear you talk about them like that in front of me, understood?”

My reaction may seem like it’s coming out of left field to Trilch and Cory, but watching my sister be raped by her ex-boyfriend while she was unconscious is an image that will never leave my mind, and it reminds me why women need men in their lives to protect and respect them. And if I have to teach every other fucker I come across to change their way of thinking to that to, then that’s what I’m going to do.

“Alright, Javi. I get it, man. Jesus.” Trilch blows out a breath and stalks off as Cory comes up closer to my side.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fucking fine,” I grate out, throwing scraps of wood into the bed of the truck.

“If you say so. But hey. It’s Friday. Wanna join us at Gibson Brewery tonight?”

I shake my head. “No thanks, man. Good work today though.”

We finish up and I drive the guys back to the office and yard for Gibson Construction, ruminating on how angry I got at Trilch’s reaction to Sydney.

Was it really just because he was disrespecting her? *Which he was.*

Or was there more to my outburst than just the need to reprimand him for his remark?

Part of me does think it was something else—and I’m not sure if I’m ready to admit just exactly what that was.

Chapter 9

Sydney

Nothing like a splitting headache and waking up to the start of your period to ruin your Monday. Of course, the dinner with my parents yesterday left me with pounding temples *before* I went to bed—I was just hoping they would have subsided when I woke.

Every weekend my parents invite me over for dinner, especially since my brothers left for college four years ago. And now that they're almost done with school, I anticipate that they'll be forced to attend the same inquisitions I face on a weekly basis.

"What cases are you working on right now?"

"You're making sure to budget yourself each month, right? You don't want to be one of those women who doesn't know how to control your spending."

Or my personal favorite, *"Have you thought anymore about Andrew?"*

But this week my father threw me for a loop when he brought up Elite Gym, even though I knew it was only a matter of time before he did.

"How's that little excuse for a self-defense class going?" He mocked as he lifted his wine glass to his lips.

I directed my eyes over to him in an irritating glare, but then focused back on my plate. "Great, actually. I feel better already."

"Ha! After four classes? You can't be serious?"

My mother eyed me from across the table, keeping her lips sealed as I prepared to endure to my father's belittling.

"I am. The instructors are very informative and encouraging, and I leave there feeling empowered. I also get a killer workout while I'm there." It's been two weeks now since I started the class, and after standing up to Javi at the end of my second class, he's surprisingly cooled off. But the scowl he wears like a badge of honor has failed to disappear as well.

My thoughts travel back to images of Javi helping each woman practice getting into position last week. We practiced moves like heel-palm strikes and elbow strikes to use during a frontal attack. When it was my turn,

my body hummed with nerves as I realized that he would have to touch me as well. The feel of his hands on my hips as he pivoted my legs and lifted my arms sent me into a tailspin. I can't deny that there's sexual tension crackling between us, at least on my end. And when I felt his fingers graze my skin, my body came alive like a livewire and left me feverish. The rush that barreled through me made me dizzy and I thought I might pass out. My breaths were short, his voice in my ear cast goosebumps all over my body, and by the time I left, I was so wound up I had to relieve the tension between my thighs myself that night.

I've never had that sort of physical reaction from a man's touch before. Even though my list of lovers is miniscule, the way my body reacted to him was uncharted territory for me, and it's making our interactions even more confusing. I can't decide if Javi hates me just on principal, or if treating me with disdain is his way of keeping me at arm's length.

Whatever it is, every interaction leaves me more curious about this man that apparently I grew up with but never noticed.

But I'm definitely noticing him now.

"I'm not happy with this decision of yours, Sydney," my father grated against his teeth as he paused mid-air with his fork full of food.

"You don't have to be happy about it, Dad. All I'm asking you to do is accept it." I dropped my silverware and turned to face him head on. "Why can't you be proud of me for taking the initiative to empower myself? I'm twenty-eight years old. I know you want to protect me, but I need to be able to live my life."

"I will never stop trying to protect you, Sydney. But I would feel so much better if I knew you had a man that could offer you the same type of security that I can. I really wish you would consider going out with Andrew." He lifted his food to his lips and continued to study me while chewing.

And here we go again. "I appreciate your concern, but I want to be able to stand on my own two feet. I don't want to have to depend on a man for survival." My eyes veered over to my mother and I could see that my words had hit her. She did depend on my father for our survival, but our circumstances were different.

While my mother barely graduated from high school, I went to college, worked diligently for a career that I felt was honoring a calling, and I don't want to feel like the only way I can live is if I have a man beside me to keep the bad guys away. I want to be taken seriously, and I just don't know how to

make my father see that.

“Well, I hope we’ll see you at the country club Friday night for the Chamber of Commerce mixer. A lot of important people will be there and we need to keep up appearances.” His change of subject told me the conversation was over and I was being called upon to be the dutiful daughter once more. Although I’m sure this topic will be brought up again soon.

As I hover over the sink while brushing my teeth, reliving the conversation from the night before, I glance up in the mirror and see the anguish on my face. It’s like I told Ally—I’m afraid of waking up one day and realizing that I lived my life for someone else. Seems it took having a gun being held to my head for me to come to that realization, but maybe it’s been a long time coming.

No. Not maybe. It truly has been in the back of my mind for years, but I never felt the courage to take action. Now, with the amount of fire I feel running through my veins, I want nothing more than to keep this momentum going, even if that means ruffling a few feathers along the way.

With my mind still reeling, I make myself look somewhat presentable, throwing my hair back in a ponytail and dressing in my workout gear for my run.

Running has always helped me relieve stress and maintain my weight, but I haven’t had the time in the past few weeks between work and my new class in the evenings. However, this week I’ve made it my mission to get back into my before work routine.

Even though my body is aching from my headache and cramps in my abdomen, I know working up a sweat will help me feel better. My legs are itching to hit the pavement, so I pop my earbuds in and leave my condo, locking the door behind me and placing my phone deep in my pocket as I exit the steel gates that provide security for my complex and take off on my normal trail.

Running through Newberry, Texas in the quiet of the morning always helps me put things back into perspective. As I contemplate how strained my relationship is becoming with my father and my desire to gain some independence from my family’s wishes, I realize that I need to focus back on all of the things I should to be grateful for.

I may not be married and have a family yet, which I thought would have happened by now, but I have my health, a job I genuinely love and gives me a purpose, and I feel like even though things aren’t the way I imagined, at

least I haven't settled in the areas of my life where it matters.

But if my father has his way, I'll be betrothed to Andrew faster than I could run and hide. I'm not saying that my father is controlling and doesn't want to see me happy, but he's so adamant that he knows *what* will make me happy, that I feel like my voice doesn't even matter.

Andrew is not the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, no matter how right for each other my family thinks we are. Being compatible isn't measured by what two people have in common. It's dictated by how two people can balance each other out, support one another through trying times, and love one another, even when you disagree. Ally and Collin's marriage has taught me that and that is the type of love I want, even if it takes me longer to find it.

Andrew could never offer me that, and I know that for a fact. He's been raised to think that women serve a purpose, which doesn't entail speaking their mind. And as I learn to find my voice finally, I am positive that he would try to smother the fire in me that I'm trying to keep burning.

And as I recall the list of aspects in my life where I feel I'm falling short and battling for control, Javier's face pops in, which both takes me by surprise and annoys me. Just a few weeks ago I was admitting to Ally about how the physical satisfaction I've experienced in my life has been less than mediocre. But after how my body responded to Javier, I'm wondering if he could deliver the release of control I so desperately yearn for.

Get a grip, Sydney. The guy barely tolerates you. You obviously shit on him in a way you can't even remember in high school, or he really knows how to hold a grudge against you for spilling Coke on his pants.

About a mile into my run, I find my stride and decide to immerse myself in the music buzzing in my ears, fighting to block out my self-doubt and insecurities. My body is coming alive as I pump my arms and pound out my steps, so I decide to push myself and take a turn I wouldn't normally to add another mile, heading for Main Street as I calculate that if I keep up this pace, I can still make it to work on time. I might just be throwing my hair up in a bun instead of curling it, but at this point, the stress relief feels too good to care.

As my feet hammer the pavement beneath me, a sudden sprinkle of rain dots my skin. I reach up to swipe the moisture from my face in confusion. Tilting my head up to the sky, I'm caught off guard by the storm that has quickly moved in over our town in a matter of minutes. That's the

thing about Texas thunderstorms though, they sneak up on you and turn dire in an instant. By the time another minute passes, I'm caught in a torrential downpour several streets away from Main Street where I could take refuge under the eaves of a shop.

"You've got to be kidding me," I curse as I glance up and notice the dark clouds hovering above me while water continues to pelt my skin. I guess I was so consumed by my thoughts of my dad, Andrew, and Javi, that I was oblivious to the storm brewing in the sky. That and the sun was shining between the clouds when I left, so the possibility of rain never crossed my mind.

Water coats my skin as I try to pick up my speed, inching closer to the hub of town. But then the sound of a car rolling through a puddle to my left catches my attention, especially as it slows near me on the side of the road.

Like any smart woman and especially after my recent experience, I run with pepper spray tucked inside my leggings for instances like these. People are crazy, and you can never be too safe. You hear stories all the time of women vanishing, and I refuse for that to be me.

"Need a ride." That voice. It pulls me to a complete stop as I catch my breath and close my eyes. *Why, oh why does it have to be him?*

I turn my head to the car, finding Javier's smug grin through the passenger side window of his work truck as his hand rests on top of his steering wheel. God, he looks even better than I remember since it's been a few days since the Thursday night class.

Water droplets cascade down my face, my hair sopping wet and plastered to my cheeks, my entire body still humming from the momentum of my run. But as Javier keeps staring at me, all I can think about is how much I want to climb in his truck and straddle him. *Stupid vagina and her inability to help herself at the sight of him.*

"Nope. I'm good," I finally reply, relying on my anger for him to keep me from succumbing to his charming ways.

"Come on, Princess. It's fucking raining. Just let me give you a ride." He rolls his eyes at me in annoyance.

"I don't need to be saved. I can do that on my own."

"I'm not promising to whisk you away to a happily ever after, Sydney. And I'm not gonna kidnap you either. I'm just offering you a fucking ride to get you out of this storm." He reaches over and opens the door, pushing it open as the rain hits the inside of the vehicle. I arch a brow at him,

wondering why on earth he was polite enough to stop in the first place.

Deep down, I don't think Javier is a cruel person, but he sure does have trouble letting people in. And I guess the fact that he's showing me an ounce of kindness is something I shouldn't take for granted.

"You're a damn stubborn woman," he says as I relent, bracing myself on the handle and lowering myself inside. I don't respond though and I definitely don't turn to face him as he signals and eases back onto the road.

"So you're just going to give me the silent treatment then after I saved you from this storm?"

"I didn't need you to save me. I was fine." I cross my arms over my chest and stare out the window, stewing on how I ended up in this position right now. I don't want to be ungrateful, but I'm having a hard time understanding the dynamic between us.

He leans back in his seat and keeps driving toward Main Street. "Then why'd you get in the car?"

"The hell if I know," I huff.

"A simple thank you would be appropriate," he argues.

I let out a long sigh and then turn to face him. The bronze of his skin is so enticing, I wonder what it would look like pressed up against mine—the mixture of dark and light contrasting against each other as heat melted us together.

"You're right. Thank you. I'm sorry. I just ..."

"Thought I'd be the last person to pick you up on the side of the road?"

I huff out a laugh. "Yeah, something like that."

"Despite what you may think of me, my mother taught me some manners, and leaving a woman out in a storm is high up on the *not to do* list."

The corner of my mouth tips up. "At least there's that. I was beginning to wonder if you have a pleasant bone in your body at all."

He shrugs. "I'm not nice to most people. Don't take it personally." And even though he might see himself that way, that's not the man I see in front of me. The guy I've studied at the gym teaching others to fend for themselves, the worker that helps Andre with whatever he asks, the guy that works two grueling jobs—that's not a man who doesn't care about others.

"I'm not sure I believe that. But thank you again. If you could take me home now I would really appreciate it." I stare out the window and watch the water cascade down the glass.

"Ah, no can do, Princess. I need to go in here really quick," he says,

pointing to the Home Depot up on the corner as the truck closes in on it.

“You’re not going to take me home? I have a job, you know.” I reach into the pocket of my leggings to retrieve my phone, looking at the time. “Shit. I guess I’m gonna be late regardless now.” I sigh. “Let me just text my paralegal that I’ll be later today than I anticipated.”

“Paralegal? What are you now, like a lawyer or some shit?”

I can’t help but chuckle at his frankness. “Yeah, or some shit.”

“Does running make you late often?” He inquires, turning his eyes to me for a moment as he finds a parking space.

“No. Just sporadic storms and kidnappers.” I flash him a playful grin, trying to ease the tension, and then shoot off a text to Tessa as Javier parks the truck. Next, I check my reflection in the visor mirror and grimace when I see a wet dog staring back at me. Embarrassment floods my stomach when I realize that this is what I’ve looked like for the past ten minutes.

Quickly I remove the elastic from my hair and smooth it back in place, securing it again with the band. Then I wipe the remnants of my mascara from last night that have dusted across my cheeks and take a deep breath of courage before turning to exit the truck.

In a matter of seconds, my door is being ripped open and Javi’s holding an umbrella over the cab. “Come on. This won’t take long. But since our job is rained out for the foreseeable future, I need to pick up some supplies for my own house.”

“Oh. Okay.” I step out, grab the umbrella from him and follow him into the store, watching him get drenched in front of me instead walking under the umbrella beside me.

I follow him through the sliding glass doors, closing the umbrella and shaking the water from it, and then placing it in the cart that Javier grabbed. Silence falls between us as we glide through the store, my feet following him as he navigates the aisles like this is his second home. My eyes stay glued to his back, traveling down to his ass every few seconds as he stalks through the establishment with ease, clearly on a mission. The more instances where I get to peruse his body, the more I feel a throb develop at the apex of my thighs.

I wonder if Javier brings his same give-no-shits attitude in the bedroom? Is he a selfish lover, or would he be the type to do whatever it takes to get a woman off?

While images of his naked body flood my mind, I’m waiting to see if he’s

going to speak to me again or if this shopping experience will remain in awkward silence. I don't know exactly what to expect, but right now I don't have any say. Javier is my ride, so I guess I'd better buckle up and prepare for anything.

Chapter 10

Javier

Why did I stop and pick her up? The woman isn't my responsibility, more like a fly that won't stop following me around.

And yet I can't get her out of my mind since she ran into me a few weeks ago.

All I've wanted to do since getting out of prison was forget the past and move forward, vowing to do better, be better, and make something of my life with this second chance I've been given.

But my brain is a jumbled mess as I try to balance my irritation with this woman and my attraction toward her.

Ten years ago I never would have contemplated that Sydney Matthews would be woman I would be lusting after or a distraction I'd have to navigate. I guess I would say that back then she was always beautiful and stood out amongst most of the other girls in our school. But she was also from a completely different world, so the idea that she would give me any attention was never even a consideration.

And yet here we are—grown ass adults with libidos and lives far from where we were as kids—and each time we're near each other, my inkling of the person I thought Sydney was slowly melts away, but my desire to claim her only grows. Call me crazy, but I'm fairly certain I can sense a mutual attraction on her end as well.

I don't want to feel this way. Every bone in my body is fighting the carnal need I feel to kiss her, touch her all over, and claim her as mine. The desire to feel her writhe beneath my body is one that is waking me up at night. And when I have to put my hands on her body during the self-defense class, it's all I can do to control my dick from growing against her frame. Instead I punish myself with heavy doses of self-loathing and many jerk-off sessions in the shower, convincing myself that these fantasies of mine are all they'll ever be because nothing can happen between us.

We're too different. It would never work. All we could ever be is a down and dirty fuck, but the more I visualize it, the more I crave it.

I was all set to start the Monday off right and make progress on the house my crew is working on in the Ashwood community. If we avoid delays and issues with permits, we can usually put a house up in four to five months. That's always ideal, but never the scenario that plays out. Things like random thunder storms always seem to derail progress.

We got the stucco down yesterday which means drywall can go in now. The agenda for today was to complete it all, but seems mother nature had other plans for me—like leading a woman through Home Depot when she's probably never stepped foot inside the store.

I can feel Sydney's eyes trail me as we make our way back to the tile section. And as I walk ahead of her, the florescent lights beating down on us, I wonder what's going through her mind right now. Our little exchange in the truck had me thinking that maybe I should try to get to know her instead of staying firm in my opinion of her from the past.

But getting to know someone invites them to ask questions about you too, and the last thing I want to do is delve into what I've been up to for the past ten years.

Well, I was working as a line cook at Denny's and doing handyman work on the side barely scraping by. But then one night at a party gone wrong, my sister was raped after her ex-boyfriend punched her and knocked her out, so I beat the shit out of him and went to jail for two years for aggravated assault.

Yeah, seems like the perfect conversation to settle the tension between us.

So instead, I guess I'm back to warring with myself every time we see each other, like now. I know I should have just taken her home, but I needed to stop in here for a few supplies and it was right down the road. The owner of our company asks us to be smart about our gas mileage too, so taking her with me just made more sense. Besides, if she still lives on the other side of town, it's a little bit of drive to get there.

"You ever been inside of a Home Depot, Princess?" I ask over my shoulder, glancing back at her mostly just to make sure she's still there.

"Yes," she answers sharply, which means I must have offended her.

I find aisle fifteen and finally turn, knowing I need to get some more faucet grease so I can install the new fixture on my kitchen sink tonight. As I glance up at the sign that lists the items you find down this particular aisle, I take note of the list and can't help but laugh to myself. I wonder why the

sexual insinuation never came to me before today.

Lubricants, rope and chain, screws, and tie downs.

“Apparently people can find a good time in aisle fifteen,” I joke as I come to a stop in front of the selection of faucet grease and my eyes start trailing across the shelves.

“What?” Sydney asks, clearly perplexed as I point up to the aisle sign and wait for it to click for her.

And I can tell as soon as it does because her eyes go wide and her cheeks turn pink.

“What’s the matter, Princess? Are you that uptight you can’t handle a dirty joke?”

Then her stance changes and her hands fall to her hips as she glares in my direction. “No, Javi. I’m a big girl and I’ve had sex, you know. You’d be surprised by what I can handle.”

“So is this where you come to buy your supplies for you and your boy toys?” I can’t help the smirk that crosses my lips, but Sydney’s eyes flick to the side, avoiding mine. And as soon as I say the words, this pit develops in my stomach at the thought of some other man tying her up and pleasing her.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t have boy toys. In fact, I guess you could say that my experience with any of these items,” she flicks toward the sign with her hand, “is nonexistent.”

Not only does her confession make me sigh internally with relief, but the thought of doing those things to her on my own makes me rock fucking hard. I turn to try to adjust myself before reaching for the grease I need, throwing it in the cart, and then turning back to her.

“That’s a shame, Princess. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.” I try to keep the tone of my voice playful, but I can feel the crackling of lust firing between us.

It takes the right person to explore with sexually. There has to be a level of trust and comfort between two people and it seems to me she hasn’t found someone dedicated to the job. Such a shame that a body like hers hasn’t been driven the way it should. The idea of watching the woman who frankly still possesses a hint of innocence relinquish all control makes me want to throw her over my shoulder, lock her in my room, and show her what real pleasure feels like.

I’m no saint, and I sure know how to fuck like the devil.

“I take it you’re skilled in the ways of lubricants and tie downs?” She

inquires, lifting one eyebrow.

As our gazes lock, something within me snaps, one of the pieces of restraint that's holding me back from giving in to what I'm feeling.

I take a few steps toward her to close the distance between us, the hard swallow of her throat apparent the closer I get. Her eyes widen with each step I take, her spine straightens, and before I know it, the fiery woman from before disappears and leaves in her place a woman that is anticipating my next move with an aura of trepidation.

And with just a few inches left between us, I lean down and line up my lips to her ear, inhaling her floral scent mixed with sweat and rain as soon as it hits my nose. She stands perfectly still, waiting for me to speak or touch her.

What would she do if I touched her right now? Would she welcome it? Read too much into it? Would I want her to question why my hands are on her? Or am I risking an entanglement with this woman who should be off-limits and out of my league by crossing that line?

"You couldn't handle all of the skills I possess, Princess," I growl in her ear in a low whisper that leaves a flurry of goosebumps on her skin. I watch them scatter and form as I clench my fists to prevent myself from leaning down further and tracing them with my tongue. "I don't do nice and slow. I do hard and fast, and if that means you're down to be tied down so I can show you what it's like to give up control, then I'm game."

And then I snap back to reality in an instant. Did I really just say that to this girl who probably thinks doggy-style is experimenting?

And more importantly, I'm this girl's self-defense instructor, and a man she clearly would have no interest in. Maybe this tension I think I'm feeling is all one-sided and festering because it's been months since I've gotten laid.

Yeah, that's it. I just need some no-strings-attached fucking and this little problem developing with Sydney Matthews in my head will go away with one good orgasm.

As I step back, I catch one quick look at her face and notice the slack in her jaw. I surprised her, probably more than I surprised myself. But there's nothing more to be done here.

There's nothing more that *can* be done.

My feet carry me away while I try to calm my racing heart, pumping full force with anger that I left my resolve slip. I try to brush off the moment

and focus on locating the tile, which is only a few aisles away.

As I find the displays and start browsing, I feel Sydney's presence behind me, but I'm too chicken to say anything. What do you say after you basically tell a girl you could fuck her within an inch of her life and she'd love it.

My eyes are moving across the selection, but my mind isn't following. It's still ruminating on the exchange that took place moments ago. Thankfully, Sydney breaks the tension first with a complete subject change.

"So, what is the tile for?" She comes around the back of the shopping cart and starts assessing the different tiles in front of us.

"The floors in my house."

"Oh, nice. Are you doing it yourself then?" There's a timidity behind her voice, but I'm choosing to ignore it.

"Yeah."

"Wow, quite the conversationalist, aren't you?" She nudges my shoulder, forcing me to acknowledge her. But when my eyes meet hers, there's an acceptance there that wasn't before. And I'm not sure what to make of it.

So I clear my throat and offer her more. "I live in the guest house of my sister's place. Part of the agreement of me staying there was to renovate it in my spare time."

"What spare time? Between your construction job and working at Elite Gym, you must not have much."

I shrug and then run a hand through my rain soaked hair. "I do little things in the evenings after work if I feel like it. But most of it I do on the weekends."

She nods. "Ah, I see. So, what are you looking for then?" She steps forward and grabs a sample tile, a desert sand sort of color that would hide dirt well and actually brighten up the house a bit against the dark paint and hardwood floors I chose. "Something like this?"

I accept the tile as she hands it out to me and study it under the light, tilting it from side to side. I hate to say it, but Sydney found almost exactly what I had in mind. "Yeah, actually. This is right along the lines of what I was looking for."

She smiles proudly, her face still slightly wet from the storm she got caught in. In that moment I realize she's completely devoid of makeup and

more stunning that I initially realized. Her natural beauty is shining through at the moment, especially because her smile seems genuine and lighthearted, which isn't something I've experienced from her yet. Most of our interactions have been laced with annoyance and sarcasm.

I shake off those thoughts and lean forward, checking to see if there's anything comparable to the tile I'm holding. I find another brand that's slightly darker, but it's more expensive. And since I'm splitting the cost with Andre, we're going with the cheaper one.

"Hey, excuse me?" Sydney flags down one of the employees as they're walking by. "Do you mind helping my friend here? He needs some tile."

"Sydney ..." I interrupt, but she continues without acknowledging me.

"He already knows what he wants. Can you just bag up as much as he needs please?" She turns to me with the cutest fucking grin on her face like she just saved the day, but all I want to do is laugh at her right now. She may have stepped into a Home Depot before, but obviously she doesn't know things work.

The employee darts his eyes over to me and I barely shake my head, letting him know I have it handled. I've actually seen this guy around here numerous times and he knows I'm a regular.

"Why are you just standing there?" I can sense her starting to get frustrated, but Clyde just looks past her at me, nods his head, and starts to walk away. "What the heck?" She says with a raised voice, drawing attention to us. Before she can say another word, I grab hold of her forearm and pull her closer to me, our bodies bumping together slightly. And boy the friction ignites my need for her again.

"Sydney. I don't need his help to get tile. All I have to do is go down that aisle there," I point behind me, "and find the brand I want. The tiles come in boxes and I load them into the cart. No help needed."

Her shoulders fall and her mouth drops open slightly, giving me a view of the pink of her tongue. I release my grip on her as she smooths down her hair, trying to act like she's not embarrassed. "Oh. Okay then. Let's get this done. I need to get to work." She storms pass me and I fight desperately to hide the chuckle that's rocking my body. Damn, that was funny.

Once I get what I need and pay, Sydney helps me load it into the cab of the truck since the bed is still sopping wet, and I head for the other side of

town to her condo. She gives me directions, but other than that, we stay in silence during the drive.

When we approach her place, I get smacked in the face by the wrought iron gate and guard stationed in front. Like a knife to the gut, the difference in where we live is just another reason to remind me to squash this interest I've developed for her. We obviously live two very different lives and even though there's a simmering physical connection, nothing good could come from the two of us crossing that line.

"Well, thanks for saving me and kidnapping me," she teases as she turns to me in her seat.

"Just me being in the right place at the right time." I shrug and then give her a tight-lipped smile.

"Oh my gosh! Did Javier Montes just smile at me?"

"Ha. No." I direct my eyes away from her as I fight my lips from spreading wider, but I can hear her chuckling behind me.

"If you say so. See you tomorrow then, Javi. Enjoy laying your tile." The innuendo in her words is easy to hear as I turn back to face her and watch her slide out of the truck with a smirk on her face. She gives me a small wave, slams the door shut and turns to walk through the gate, greeting the guard as she passes. The sway of her hips mesmerizes me for a moment, torturing me with the curves of a woman that clearly needs to be handled in a certain way. I just can't be the man for the job.

"You need to move," the guard says through the window, averting my attention from Sydney's ass to his face.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." I shift the truck in drive and then pull back onto the road to return to my side of town—the only clear indication that the crazy thoughts bouncing around in my brain have failed to remember the boundaries drawn between our lives.

The good girl and the bad boy.

The innocent and the damaged.

The lawyer and the criminal.

Sometimes lines are clearly defined and there's no changing them, no matter how badly you might want a taste of the other side.

Chapter 11

Sydney

Once I finally made it into the office after being held prisoner by Javier, our interaction got pushed to the wayside as reality set back in. I scrambled to make it to court on time for a probate case that was finally being settled almost seventeen months after the mother of the siblings had died. This brother and sister absolutely hated each other's guts and were fighting for every dime of worth their mother possessed upon her passing. The mother thought she had everything in place for when she died, but apparently, she didn't. It's been dramatic and trying, but finally got settled that day.

With the weight of that case now cast off my shoulders, I returned to the office and met with both of my paralegals for the paperwork I would need for them to complete this week to stay on track on my clients and caseload. Tessa can be trusted with just about anything, but Yerelin is still learning. Sometimes relying on someone else to do research and case briefings for me was more stressful than if I'd attempt to do the work on my own. The reality is though that there is not enough time in the day to do everything that needs to be done on my own, so relinquishing that control is necessary.

I woke up bright and early this morning before my alarm even went off. Squinting, I realized the sun hadn't crested the sky yet, so I launched myself out of bed and peeked through the window to witness it. I can't remember the last time I was actually anxious for the day to start, but for some reason, I felt ready to tackle whatever this Tuesday had to throw at me.

I skipped my run since I knew I had my self-defense class this evening, and even though I wouldn't admit it out loud, part of me was itching to see Javi again.

The words he whispered in my ear about how he likes to fuck have been circling in my mind repeatedly since that morning, the image of him soaking wet in front of me in the middle of Home Dept torturing me at times when I need to focus. I can't help but think that the exhilaration I felt when my eyes popped open is because I know I'll get to be in his presence soon. And I swear my thighs are getting a workout from clenching them together each

time his face comes to mind. How I went from not knowing who the guy is to craving him is beyond me and my reaction to him is alarming.

“Please tell me you remembered that you offered to watch my children tomorrow night?” Ally’s voice comes through the Bluetooth speaker on my Mustang as I drive to work early, a pleasant result of rising a few minutes earlier than usual this morning.

“Of course I remember. Do you not know who your best friend is? The queen of planners?” It’s true. I have three and use different colored pens for each category of scheduling.

She exhales. “Thank you. I know it sounds sad, but I’m actually looking forward to getting the hair ripped out of my nether regions just so I can get a break from my kids.”

I can’t help but laugh at her. “Who knew a Brazilian wax could actually be like a vacation for a mom?”

“You have no idea. And then the best part is when Collin gets to take pleasure in it. Makes the pain worth it.”

“Well, don’t dawdle though because my appointment with Sonja is right after you.”

“We are on the same wax schedule, huh?”

I nod, even though she can’t see me, and signal to turn into the parking lot of the firm. “Yup. Are we still on for brunch Sunday morning too?”

“Syd, any event that gets me out of the house is one I never forget.”

“Perfect.” I smile and shove the stick shift into park.

“So how’s the self-defense class going?”

As my eyes veer out over the parking lot, I feel my heart rate pick up just at the mention of what I’m looking forward to tonight. “Um, good. I forgot to tell you last night, but Javi actually saved me from the thunderstorm yesterday.”

“Wait? What?”

A small laugh escapes my lips. “Yeah. I was running and it just started raining out of nowhere ...”

“Like it does in Texas,” she interrupts.

“Exactly. And he happened to be driving by at the time and offered me a ride to get me out of the rain.”

Ally is silent for a few moments and then the sound of her hum comes through the phone. “Hmmm ... so then what happened?”

“He took me to Home Depot with him so he could pick out tile for his

kitchen floor.”

“What the hell?” She shouts, and then instantly lowers her voice. My bet is she remembered her kids are still sleeping and this time in the morning is the only peace she’ll get all day until it’s nap time.

“Yeah. It was ... interesting.” I debate telling her what Javi said to me about what sex is like with him since I can’t seem to stop thinking about it. But then I glance at the clock on my dash and realize I don’t really have the time.

“Interesting? How?”

“Hey, I’d love to keep chatting, but I need to get into my office to get a head start on the day. I’ll fill you in more tomorrow night when I come by to watch the kids. Or, on Sunday at brunch.”

“You’d better not leave me hanging. I can’t believe that guy ... I’m baffled right now.”

I scoff. “Believe me, you and me both. But I gotta go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Go kick some ass ... or help people plan their deaths, whichever you have to tackle today.”

My chuckle shakes my body as I disconnect my phone from the Bluetooth, stand from the car, gather my purse, and lock the doors behind me, striding toward the front of the building. “I will. Love you, Al.”

“Love you, Syd.”

It seems I’m the first person here, so I use my key to get in and head straight for my office. I love this quiet time in the morning when no one else has arrived yet so I can get my head on straight for the day. Unfortunately, I only get ten minutes to myself before the rest of the staff and attorneys make their way through the doors.

“Good morning, Sydney. Do you need anything from me right away?” Tessa pops her head in to my office as I glance from my computer screen to her.

“Nope. Just get started on that paperwork I told you about yesterday and let me know when Mr. Nickson comes in for his meeting.”

“Sounds good.”

I ask her to close the door to my office so I can get work done in peace in the meantime, and then the day flies by in a blur. When my eyes find the clock and I see it’s already after five, I sink into a panic not wanting to be late for my self-defense class.

I launch my body up from my chair and reach for my purse, side-stepping my desk just as Byron, my boss, slides right into my office, blocking me in.

“Hey, Byron. I was just on my way out.” I hope he can sense the urgency in my voice because I really don’t want to be late.

For my class. Not to ogle the instructor for a good ten minutes before the class ever begins.

Nope. That’s not it.

“I’m glad I caught you, Sydney. We have another custody case consult that came through today, but everyone is already full and doesn’t want to take it on. Do you have any room on your caseload?”

I know I should say no because the longer I pick up the slack around here, the more I’m going to be expected to do it. Although I did just close a case out yesterday.

But that’s beside the point. *This is about standing up for yourself, Sydney. This is about being taken seriously.*

“You know I wouldn’t ask unless we were in a pickle. And I know I can count on you to be a team player. Your dad would be so proud of how hard you work for this firm.”

Damn you, Byron—using my father’s approval to get your way. I revert back to bad habits in the blink of an eye.

I relent with a sigh as I bring my purse up further on my shoulder. “Yeah, I suppose I can. Give Tessa the client folder and I’ll glance over it tomorrow.”

Byron’s hand finds my upper arm as he gives it a tight, reassuring squeeze. “Thanks, Sydney. I know you’ll never say no to me.” He winks and then hobbles back down the hallway as I stand there, slack-jawed and fuming.

When I slide into the seat of my car and fire up the engine, I have to remind myself there is a speed limit on the roads as I race across town, my adrenaline fueling my car more than the gasoline in the tank.

“I know you’ll never say no to me.”

It’s like every instance in my life where I’ve said yes to avoid being a disappointment filters through my mind with that one simple statement by my boss.

I’m a pushover. I always have been. And just when I finally felt like I was finding my voice, I retreated and was slapped in the face by what everyone has always thought of me.

I've avoided conflict because I wasn't allowed to stir it up. I've smiled and did what was asked of me because that's what was expected from the poised Sydney Matthews. I bit my tongue in instances when I thought something was unfair because heaven forbid I should have an opinion of my own that differed from the ones of my family.

And apparently people in my life have seen it and used it to their advantage—and I've let them.

By the time I arrive at the gym, I'm so angry I slam my door closed on my car so hard that it echoes throughout the parking lot and with my gym bag in hand, pull open the door of the gym with such force that it slams into the wall outside. I stomp inside, heading right for the locker room, not bothering to acknowledge anyone around me.

I'm fuming mad—at Byron, at my mom and dad, at myself. How did I end up in this position in my life?

As I strip my clothes from my body and glance down at the outfit I packed, I remember that earlier this morning when the buzz of anticipation of seeing Javi was coursing through my veins I thought this little number would have him clenching his jaw real tight tonight. But now that nothing but fury is running through me, I don't feel like flirting anymore.

The tight red sports bra and shorts combo I packed was with the intention to tease Javier a little bit, hoping to get a rise out of him again. Why I felt the need to poke the bear is still something I'm having trouble processing, but now my resolve has crumbled.

I feel lost and sad, berating myself for not having the courage to speak up for myself yet again.

Knowing I can't hide in the locker room forever and having no other options for attire, I put on the skimpy outfit, pull my hair in a high ponytail, and check my appearance in the mirror.

Even though I feel like shit on the inside, at least I feel confident in my appearance on the outside.

By the time I make it to the mat, the other five girls are there, but there's no sign of Javi yet. When I take a seat, I stare down at my hands in my lap, tearing at my cuticles while anger still runs through me and the sting of tears threatens to make me crumble in front of these people.

But I can't. I just need to focus on why I'm here and take out my aggression on the punching bags later.

A throat clearing behind me causes my head to turn as I see a hesitant

Javier make his way to the front of our group. We all move to stand and that's when our eyes lock before his trail down my body and back up so slowly that I can feel the heat of his gaze travel along my skin.

When his eyes find mine again and widen when he realizes I saw his perusal, he shakes his head and then turns to address the group. I can't help the sly grin that pulls at my lips, knowing my outfit did exactly what I wanted it to. And in turn, it makes me feel a little better.

"Good evening, ladies. How are we today?"

The rest of the girls answer, but I just nod my head. I'm not sure I trust myself to speak just yet.

"Alright. Well, let's get to it. The warm-up is on the board." He points behind him to a whiteboard where a list of various exercises is written and I hear the collective groan from our group. And as much as I didn't want to stay here just minutes ago, I know that working out my aggression will help me feel better.

After we do several rounds of jumping jacks, weighted jabs, squats, and crunches, Javier and Clay move to the front of the class to demonstrate today's maneuvers. And we finally get to work on being attacked from behind, which definitely makes my ears perk up.

When that man came up behind me and held that gun to my head a few short months ago, I froze. I had never encountered a moment in my life where I ever felt so helpless. And the entire reason I'm here is because I never want to feel that way again.

"Okay, so today we're going to talk about escaping from a bear hug attack," Javi says and then Clay gets into position as the attacker so he can demonstrate. "The key is to bend forward to shift your weight and make it harder for your attacker to pick you up." Javi's upper body leans forward as Clay wraps his arms around Javi's waist. "This stance will also make it easier for you to throw elbows side to side as we learned last week." Mimicking the movements, Javi's arms move side to side as he simulates elbowing Clay in the face. "This should give you enough space to turn fully so you can use another move to strike the groin area. With the space you've created from your attacker, you should be able to get out of their reach and run away."

The girls all look to each other and nod in agreement. Seems simple enough.

"Alright, let's practice on each other." If we're doing this the same way

we have before, then two girls will work with Clay and Javi while the other four pair off. I turn to face Jessica next to me just as a shadow hovers over my head.

“Sydney. Come work with me first.” I crane my neck back to see Javi standing above me with an outreached hand.

“Oh ... okay.” I swallow down the lump in my throat, hoping my nerves move with it as Javi brings me away from the other people and looks almost as nervous to be alone with me.

“Are you okay today?” he asks, pulling on the back of his neck.

“Uh. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You’re awfully quiet. Usually by now you’d be trying to tell me off.” He grants me a sly grin on his lips as I feel mine do the same.

I shake my head. “Just tell me how to elbow you in the face and kick you in the crotch, Javi.”

That comment earns me a full-fledged smile from him as he moves behind me to get in position. The warmth radiating off his skin is hitting my own as my bare torso feels the fabric of his shirt brush against me. That slight touch has my spine straightening just as his calloused fingers grip my upper arms.

“I’m going to wrap my arms around you now,” he says in my ear in a low voice that makes my pussy quake. *Dear lord, I need sex.*

“Okay,” I breathe out in response.

His hands slide down my biceps ever so slightly, cup my elbows, then leave my skin for just a moment before they encase my waist as I feel his chest press against my back, every inch of my skin that’s touching his coming alive from the proximity. And since I only wore a sports bra and no actual shirt, that’s a lot of skin.

“Now, lean forward,” he directs as I bend at the waist, pushing my ass into his crotch. I’m vibrating with nerves as I wonder if I’ll be able to feel how I affect him. A hardness starts to push into my cheeks and I have my answer.

He clears his throat and then speaks again. “Now carefully throw your elbows up toward my head as you twist from side to side.”

I nod, taking a deep breath and then mimicking the movements, careful not to actually hit him.

A slight chuckles passes through his lips. “Good. Now as my arms loosen, shift your weight to the side so you can act like you’re going to strike

my groin.”

As I look back over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Javi’s face. His brow is furrowed almost like he’s in pain and his entire body is tense.

And in that moment, I realize I’m not. Since Byron came into my office and I forgot how to say the word ‘no’, being in Javi’s arms is the first time I’ve felt relaxed in an hour, even though I’m getting ready to simulate hitting him in the crotch.

I don’t want to read too much into that and instead try to focus on practicing hitting him without actually hitting him. As I make my first movement, he slides his body back just enough that I don’t make contact with his groin, which if what I felt earlier was any indication, is quite the package.

“Excellent,” he says after clearing his throat and stepping away from me now so not one part of our bodies is touching. “You did well.” He gives me a curt nod and then walks away—not over to another girl or even to say something to Clay.

No. He walks completely out of the room and down the hall, leaving me even more confused than before.

Clay commands our attention after he watched Javi walk out without uttering a word. “Alright, girls. That ends today’s class. We will work more on those moves on Thursday. Have a good evening.”

We all help sanitize the equipment we used and the mats where we sat before grabbing our water bottles and heading for our cars.

And as I cruise home, rolling the top down to enjoy the slightly cooler air as the sun sets, I overanalyze my demonstration with Javier, wondering if there was something I did wrong or if I actually hurt him. Whatever it was, I’m no closer to understanding our relationship after that encounter. And I don’t even know how to describe our ‘relationship’ in the first place.

Chapter 12

Javier

“So, how are things going for you, Javi?” Lisa Peterson directs her attention to me in the small group of people sitting in a circle in my court-ordered anger management class in Dallas. I didn’t particularly want a group setting where I had to talk about my feelings, but now these people are like an extension of my family.

“Fine.”

“Come on, Javi. You know we need more than that.” She smiles politely and waves her hand in encouragement.

I blow out a breath and then lean forward in my chair, resting my forearms on my thighs. “I haven’t felt triggered in months, but that’s probably because I haven’t put myself in a position like the one I was in that landed me in jail.”

“How so?”

“Well, no parties. No drinking in social settings. I’ll have a beer at home when I’m alone, but I’m not drinking to get drunk.”

“Good. And how is work?” Lisa jots down a few notes as the group continues to stare and listen.

“Great. Construction helps me take out my aggression since I get to destroy stuff and pound nails into wood daily.” That remark earns a chuckle from the group. “And then at the gym, I get to punch bags and work out my aggression in a healthy way.”

“Are you still teaching that self-defense class for women?” One of the guys, Hector, chimes in.

I nod. “Yeah. And I think that helps too, knowing I’m contributing something positive to someone else’s life. I don’t want other women to end up like my sister.”

I spent two years in prison seething about how I let her down, how I never taught her to protect herself because I always thought I was going to be there to do so. That was the expectation my father held of me too, which only made the guilt even worse. And during one of the only times I left her

alone, her pathetic excuse of an ex-boyfriend pounced when he had the opportunity.

I told her Jesus was a piece of shit, but she didn't listen. I think part of her wanting to date him was because she knew I didn't approve. Selena has always been a little of the rebellious type, especially after our dad died. She and I both put our mom through the wringer by getting into trouble and sneaking around, doing drugs, and barely graduating from high school. Add on my shoplifting charge at sixteen, and let's just say it wasn't necessarily a surprise that I ended up in jail.

But Jesus and I always had animosity between us growing up, and when my sister started seeing him, he knew it grated my nerves. Honestly, I think that's what part of his intentions were—he just wanted to fuck with me.

And when I walked in on him raping my unconscious sister, it gave me all the more reason to beat the shit out of him. If Andre hadn't pulled me off him when he did, I probably would have killed him, not that the fucker didn't deserve it.

When my sister regained consciousness, she had no idea what happened. She remembered asking him what he was doing there at the house party where most of the guests had gathered outside around the bonfire. But Jesus cornered her inside when she went in to use the bathroom, locking them in a room where the music was so loud outside that it would cover up her screams.

Selena was mortified when I told her what I saw after Andre grabbed us both and pushed out of the house before someone called the cops. I took her to the hospital to get her checked out, which she only agreed to after I begged. Luckily, the fucker had enough sense to use a fucking condom, but my sister was processed as a victim of rape as she sobbed in my arms. And she didn't want to press charges because she was so embarrassed and didn't think anyone would believe her. She was also weeks away from finally opening up her salon and didn't want the gossip mill to ruin her chance at her business.

I had no choice but to accept that it was her decision, but when she didn't speak up, Jesus decided to, pressing charges against me for aggravated assault. Selena was frantic and offered to tell the police, but at that point, I knew that taking my punishment and keeping her secret was more important than the potential of doing time.

My life was headed down a dangerous path anyway. I was smoking pot

every chance I got, drinking heavily and partying, and living complacently, accepting that there wasn't anything better to do with my life. Even though she felt like I was sacrificing a lot for her, I saw going to prison not only as punishment for failing to prevent it from happening, but also as a way for me to get my life back on track. I'd do my time and vow to start over, make the right decisions, and try to be the man my dad would have expected me to be if he hadn't died suddenly when I was thirteen.

"That's wonderful, Javi. Keep up the good work," Lisa praises me before moving to the next person, and a little part of me inside that's still a boy looking for approval lights up like a firecracker.

After I leave my anger management class that I attend every other Wednesday, I head home, now mentally and physically exhausted. My job makes my body tired, but my mind aches after I leave those meetings. They serve as a constant reminder of the past, but also an encouragement to keep moving forward. And I'm desperately trying to do so.

When I arrive home, I decide to stop inside the main house to say hello to my sister and Andre. I've seen Andre in passing at the gym this week, but it's been a few days since I've annoyed my sister.

"Knock, knock," I yell as I pry the backdoor open on the porch. It's the easiest method of access from my house to theirs.

"I'm right here, Javi. No need to yell." My sister stands at the stove in the kitchen to my left, stirring something in a pot with her back to me.

I close the door behind me and then make my way over to the fridge to grab a beer. "Well, I just want to make sure I don't walk in on something that could blind me." I walk to the closest stool at the counter and perch my tired ass on it.

"Don't worry. We lock the door if we decide to have sex out here." She peers over her shoulder at me with a teasing grin before turning her attention back to whatever she's cooking. And it smells amazing.

"Lovely."

"So, how was your anger management class?" She takes a bite of the rice to test it and then places the spoon back on the counter.

Popping the cap from my beer, I sling back a large gulp and then answer. "It was fine."

She makes her way over to the other side of the counter, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "How much longer do you have to go to those classes anyway?"

I huff. “It’s a six month long class, but I didn’t start them right away when I got out, so I still have about a month or so.”

Selena stares down at the counter before her apologetic eyes glance up at me. “Do you think they’ve helped you at all?”

I shrug and take another sip of my drink. “I’d like to think so. I didn’t consider myself an angry person until I realized what I could do in a moment of fury, you know? I blacked out a bit that night when I was hitting Jesus. Now I just know not to put myself in situations that could make me get like that again.”

She squeezes her eyes shut while swaying her head back and forth before coming around the counter and throwing her arms around me. I hear the sniffles that usually accompany her tears, but her head is buried in my shoulder, so I can’t see if she’s actually crying. “I’m sorry, Javi.”

“Stop apologizing, Selena. It’s over and done with, okay?”

“But ...”

“No buts. I’m not going to pretend like it was a vacation, because it wasn’t. Prison fucking sucked. But I’m trying to twist the narrative ...”

Her head pops up and sure enough, tears are running down her cheeks. She swipes them away quickly with her hand before urging me to continue. “What do you mean?”

Letting out a harsh breath, I remove my hat and run my hand through my sweat soaked hair. “I was in a bad place back then, sis. You know that. Prison made me realize I needed to get my head on straight. I’m doing better now than I ever thought I could. We both are. Look at you,” I say and gesture toward her with my hand. “You’re a successful business owner and you’re married. We both grew up because of the things that happened that night. They’ve left behind some scars, but I think we’re doing okay.”

She nods with a small smile on her lips.

“So stop fucking apologizing to me. I did what I did, and I’d do it again. Jesus is lucky I didn’t kill him.”

“I know. I think about that. If you’d have killed him, Javi, you’d still be in there.”

I swallow harshly and then look down at my hands. “I know. But luckily I didn’t.”

“And that fucking asshole had the nerve to press charges against you after what he did to me.” She grinds her teeth together while her tears still fall.

“I think he believes you didn’t remember what happened. And since you

never pressed charges against him, he grew balls and came after me.”

“I just love you, Javi. I hope you know that.” She kisses my cheek and then turns away, heading back to the stove.

“I do, Selena.”

“How many times have I told you not to make your sister cry?” Andre’s deep voice comes around the corner as he steps into the kitchen and kisses my sister’s temple as he passes by her.

“I can’t help how emotional she gets,” I tease.

Selena glares at me as she reaches into the cupboard for three plates. “Watch it, or you don’t get any dinner.”

I chuckle and then stand, walking over to the table to set my beer down. “You won’t let me go hungry,” I mock.

“She won’t, but I will.” Andre winks at me from behind my sister as he grabs silverware and napkins and then hands them to me over the counter.

Once Selena loads our plates with chicken, rice, and veggies, we sit down to eat in comfortable silence until Andre decides to open his mouth.

“So, how is the self-defense class going?”

My knife slides across my glass plate, screeching and making us all wince at the sound. “Uh, good. Great.”

Selena and he share a look before he presses further. “I take it things are going okay with Sydney then?”

“Yeah. She’s doing well, actually.”

“Clay said you seemed eager to help her yesterday ...”

The next time I see Clay he’d better walk the other way.

“I help all of the girls, Andre. It’s my job.”

“Well, then he said once you were done helping her, you walked off.” He’s smirking through his chewing and I’d love nothing more than to punch that look off his face right now.

“I ... I had to go to the bathroom.”

Selena snorts and Andre starts to laugh. “I bet you did.”

“You know what? Fuck you both.” I shake my head and take another bite of chicken.

“Javi ... do you have a thing for Sydney Matthews?” My sister chimes in, pulling my eyes over to her.

“No ...”

“You know she’s the last person you should be getting tangled up with.”

“You think I don’t know that? That girl is nuisance. She’s different than I

thought she was back in high school, but that's beside the point. There's nothing going on, so drop it. Both of you." I point my fork in Andre's direction.

"Just be careful, Javi. Getting mixed up with a girl like her is just asking for trouble."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Isn't she a lawyer now too?" Andre finds his voice.

"Yeah."

"And her dad's a judge, Javi. With your record, I wouldn't exactly be rushing to meet her parents."

I scoot my chair away from the table and clear my plate. "There's nothing going on, so fucking drop it, alright?" I place my plate in the sink and then move for the back door.

"Okay. I just don't want to see you make another mistake," Selena says as she stands and comes near me. She doesn't say it in a chastising way though, as if she's reprimanding me for what I've done in my life. My last mistake was for her benefit, so she can't very well judge me for that.

No, she's got that sisterly tone in her voice that tells me she just wants me to be careful and think about my decisions.

But there are no decisions to be considered. Nothing will ever happen between Sydney and me. There's no way.

"I won't. Thanks for dinner." I kiss her on the cheek and then exit the house, making the short trek back to my own sanctuary where I shut the door behind me and lean up against it.

My mind veers back to yesterday when I walked out of the class after helping Sydney practice her movements. The way her skin felt in my hands, the way her body pressed up against me and made me rock hard—that was why I walked away, because I had a fucking hard-on in the middle of class and there was no way it was going to go away quickly. I locked myself in the bathroom to calm myself down, contemplating whether to rub one out at the gym, but ultimately deciding against it. By the time I got myself under control and came back out, Clay had dismissed the class.

I don't know why I tortured myself with demonstrating the movement with her first, but I was itching to touch her. And that fucking outfit she had on was like a miniature version of the red leather suit Britney Spears rocked in that music video. I think most teenage boys remember that.

I couldn't decide if Sydney wore it intentionally, or not. But whatever the

reason, the girl was torturing me slowly as I watched her move around the gym. Every encounter with her makes me more curious about who she is now, but I'm not stupid. I fucking know that nothing could ever happen between us. And after hearing my sister's warning tonight, my mind is getting clearer. The less interaction between Sydney and I, the better.

Chapter 13

Sydney

“You couldn’t be bothered to change at the office before coming here?” my mother whispers in my ear before I even get to take a sip of my wine.

“I didn’t know my outfit mattered.” I get out the words and then take the largest drink I can fit in my mouth.

“You should know by now that it does, Sydney. At least you don’t have pants on.” Her eyes veer down to my skirt and my bare legs sticking out of the bottom of it.

“Heaven forbid a woman would wear pants,” I mock.

“What has gotten into you this evening?” Her face portrays a creepy smile as she berates me through her teeth, waving casually to people that pass by us.

“Forgive me for not wanting to be chastised the second I arrived. I need to use the bathroom,” I say before turning on my heel and walking in the other direction.

As if today wasn’t hectic enough, the impending events of the evening only added to the stress tightening my chest. The case that Byron convinced me to take on is another custody battle that’s even nastier than the last one. I clenched my teeth all day after that first meeting, cursing him and myself for agreeing to take it on.

So now I have a splitting headache and my feet are aching from my heels, but I have to smile and slip into perfect, supportive daughter mode for the Chamber of Commerce mixer at the country club this evening.

As my eyes scour the room, all I see is a group of people more concerned about outward appearances and the balances of their bank accounts than what they can actually contribute to the community of Newberry, Texas. If they truly did, they’d be working toward bridging the gap between the two sides of our town, one which is way more affluent than the other.

Which brings Javier back to my mind. Last night at the self-defense class, he barely looked at me. He avoided working with me and right when the class ended he stormed off again. I’m not sure what happened over the

course of two days, but apparently broody and silent Javier is back, which frustrates me more than it should.

It's not like we're best friends or even on the way to becoming that, but after he picked me up in the rain, I thought we were making progress in squashing the animosity between us. But I guess I was wrong.

I find the bathroom and rest my purse on the counter, staring back at my reflection in front of me. I reach up to remove the bobby pins in my hair and the clip holding it up, letting my thick, dark brown strands fall down over my shoulders. The ends are still curled so it doesn't look half bad.

And neither does my outfit, while I'm on the subject of my appearance. My mother can kick rocks. I have on a white silk blouse and a navy-blue skirt—professional but still adding a touch of sexiness. I knew I wouldn't have time to change between rushing from the office to make it over here on time, so I figured this outfit would be good enough. Apparently I was wrong about that too.

After reapplying my lip gloss, fluffing my hair, and using the toilet, I grab my purse and muster up as much energy as I can to plaster a smile on my face for the next two hours so my parents are happy and I can go home as soon as possible to pass out after a long week.

“Sydney.” A voice that sounds eerily familiar calls out to me from behind. And as I turn around, I instantly wish I had invisibility powers.

“Andrew.” I flash him a tight-lipped smile while wondering how long I have to stand here.

“You look lovely tonight.” His dark blue eyes bounce up and down my body in a slow gaze that doesn't heat me up, but instead makes my stomach churn.

“Thank you.”

“How are you? Did you get my flowers?”

Ah, yes. The flowers he sent a few weeks ago that I never responded to.

“Oh, yes. Thank you. I told my assistant to send a thank you note, but it must have slipped her mind.”

His eyes narrow at me before he relaxes again. “No worries. So, have you thought about when I can take you out?” His feet move a few steps closer so now there's only a few inches between our bodies. People are milling around us, conversing and garnering deals while the clatter of plates and dishes rings out from the kitchen as they prepare dinner.

“I'm so busy, Andrew ...” I start, but he cuts me off, leaning in so he can

lower his voice.

“The sooner you accept that we belong together, the easier this will be.” His words come out in a condescending whisper, and it instantly makes my hackles raise.

I step back and place my free hand over my heart as it beats erratically. “Excuse me?”

“Our parents are not going to rest until we end up together, so you might as well just give in.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know that what they wanted mattered.”

Andrew huffs out a half-assed laugh. “I didn’t take you for naïve, but apparently you’re forgetting who you are. You are Sydney Matthews and you have a reputation to uphold. We both do. Our relationship would do wonders for us both in our social circle.”

I clench my jaw again, my temples pounding while I try to remain calm. “I’m not naïve. I’m just not a piece of property that can be wheeled and dealed. I don’t want to date you, Andrew. And the sooner *you* realize it, the better.”

His lips curl up in a patronizing grin before he raises his glass of bourbon to his lips. “You’ll come around eventually.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” I storm off to find our table before being stopped by my father.

“I see you were talking to Andrew,” he says through a mile wide smile.

“Talking is relative.”

His face falls when he senses my annoyance. “You should just give him a chance. You two have so much in common.”

“I don’t want to have this discussion here, Dad. Let’s just eat.”

The mayor comes over the microphone and asks everyone to take a seat as dinner is served. I sit in my cushioned chair silently, eavesdropping on the conversations milling around me while trying to avoid Andrew’s stare across the table.

My father dotes about my accomplishments and work with my firm as I smile and answer when appropriate. My mother brags about my brothers graduating from college in just a few short weeks. His buddies ask about his court cases and how his next big profile case is coming up next month, which sparks a debate about privacy and security.

I zone out for who knows how long until a throat clearing next to me pulls back to the present.

“Join me for a drink out on the terrace?” Andrew is standing behind me with an outstretched hand as our entire table watches our interaction. I could kill him right now for putting me in a predicament where I clearly can’t tell him no.

So I fake a sincere smile and stand, reaching for my purse from the floor. “Sure.”

“Aw, young love is in the air,” my father sing songs as the table snickers and Andrew places his hand on the small of my back, leading me outside.

As soon as we clear the doors, I step out of his reach and turn to face him. “That was uncalled for.”

“Nonsense. That’s called being smart.”

“By putting me in a position where I can’t say no.”

All he does is smile knowingly with his hands stuffed in his pockets. “I just wish you’d give us a chance, Sydney.” My eyes move across his features while I ponder just for a minute if I would even want to consider his offer. His dirty blonde hair is combed to the side, dark blue eyes stare back at me as he waits for my answer, and although Andrew is tall and relatively fit, I can think of a man whose muscles are far more appealing to me at this moment.

I shake my head, frustrated for the seventeenth time today. “I need to use the restroom.”

“Well, what would you like to drink? I can grab you something from the bar while you’re in there and meet you right back here. All I’m asking for is a little bit of your time.” His tone softens with me, replaced with a slight plea as he stares.

“Water is fine.” I twist away from him and head back inside, intent on using the restroom, but then something in me decides against it. Instead, I spy a discrete exit up ahead and waste no time scurrying toward it, never bothering to look back as I plan my escape. As I shove open the door, greeted by the slightly humid air of the night again, I find my car in the parking lot and slide inside to flee the shackles of a life I don’t want any part of and race toward any place that isn’t here.

I sigh into the welcoming silence as the only sound I can hear is the traffic moving around me while I drive further and further away from the country club. But it’s a far cry from the meaningless conversations and fake people I left behind.

As the wheels of my car spin beneath me and I feel the tension leave my body, I pass by a warehouse that is lit up with nightlife. Large steel doors are

propped open and bright light peeks out from under them along with the sounds of laughter and music. The sign on the top of the building proudly displaying Gibson Brewery catches my eye, and the noise coming from within makes my ears perk up as I slow down at the stop light. Those people sound like they're having fun, not biting their tongues, or playing a part in a show they want nothing to do with.

Without thinking, I move my car into the turn lane and signal to turn into the parking lot once the light turns green. I quickly find an open parking space, grab my purse, and head inside where merriment rings out loud and groups of people have sectioned off around high-top tables in the huge space that boasts a country feel.

Giant steel barrels line the back wall through windows behind a long bar, housing hundreds of gallons of beer, I presume. Shuffle board tables are positioned in one corner, and several board games are scattered about among the picnic tables in the middle of the floor.

I look around and realize I've never been in a brewery before, and as my eyes move around, I spot an empty seat at the bar and beeline straight for it.

"Hey, there. How are you this evening?" A short blonde woman comes up to me as I get comfortable on my stool, wiping her hands on a towel hanging from her hip.

"In need of alcohol," I answer, which grants me a knowing smile from her.

"Then you came to the right place," she says in that southern drawl that makes me think she's a little more country than most of us here closer to the city. "What can I get you?"

"Well, I've never been here before, and I'm not a huge beer connoisseur. What would you recommend?"

She turns around and grabs a wooden plank with five small circles in it, then small shot glasses and plops them with ease into each space. "I would do a sampler then, so you can taste a variety."

"When did this place open?" I ask as my head spins around the room again.

"Just a few weeks ago. This is a tasting room that Wyatt Gibson, the owner, wanted to open closer to the city. Gibson Brewery is actually stationed a few hours from here at the Gibson Ranch. Have you heard of it?"

I shake my head. "Afraid not. But I think a place like this will do well in a town like Newberry."

“That’s what we’re counting on.” She nods and then points me in the direction of the menu, where what seems like a mile-long list of beers are written out in multicolored chalk.

“The list goes from lightest to darkest beer, so I would recommend starting at the top, especially if you’re not too keen on beer. Unless something pops out at you.”

I read through and agree that the top five would probably be best, so she takes my tray, fills up each sampler glass from the taps that are installed in the wall behind the bar, and then carefully places the wooden plank back in front of me.

“Here you go. Just let me know if you need anything else. I’m Kelsea.” She places a small strip of white paper in front of me, which I’m assuming is my bill, and then scurries off to help another customer.

“Thank you!” I call after her as she waves me off with a charming smile and greets the newest person at the bar.

I lift the first glass to my nose and smell it, a pale blonde ale that reminds me of Coors Light and take a sip, pleased that this beer actually has more flavor than one of America’s favorite drinking beers. I continue along the line of samples, taking a sip of each for good measure when a familiar voice hits my ears from behind, sending off a flurry of butterflies in my stomach.

“Didn’t take you for a beer drinker, Princess.”

And when I turn around to confirm the owner of the voice, his smug grin flashes back at me, along with a glimmer in those gold eyes I’m beginning to feel could hypnotize me.

I feel my legs start to shake as I take in his appearance. He looks very similar to how I vaguely remember him the night I ran into him at The Jameson. Black jeans encase the muscular legs I know he’s hiding beneath, a white shirt clings to his well-defined torso, and a black baseball cap sits backwards on his head, all giving him that signature bad boy look I’m beginning to realize I’m a big fan of.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. I mean, I’ve had beer before. But I’ve never been to a place like this,” I reply as I wave my hand out.

He chuckles and then stares down at me while I wait for him to speak again, his eyes moving back and forth between mine. After the way he’s behaved toward me this week, I’m not sure how to take him or why he even came over to say hello in the first place.

“Is that all I get from you today? A laugh? Well, I guess it’s better than

the silent treatment.” I twist back around and grab one of my samples, throwing back the remaining liquid in the glass.

“The silent treatment?” His head tilts to the side and then his brow furrows.

“Yeah. I’m not sure which is worse. That or the animosity you’ve been so gracious to show me since we bumped into each other.”

“I only reserve all of my animosity for you, Princess,” he jokes, but that confession makes me curious.

“Why? I don’t get why you act like that toward me. And quite frankly, I’m sick of it.” That anger from before comes back to the forefront as I find a clear culprit standing in front of me. “Did I do something to you back in high school I’m not aware of or something?”

He huffs before taking the vacant seat beside me, holding his soda in his hand. “Not intentionally. But I’m guessing you put two and two together about how we know each other.”

“Actually, Ally did. She remembered you saying something that night at The Jameson, alluding to the fact we went to school together. We looked you up in the yearbook. Seems you’ve changed quite a bit since then.”

“I think everyone has. I’m not the same person I was back then at all.”

“Well, neither am I,” I declare as Javier spins in his seat so he’s facing me. “So whatever it is that I did or didn’t do, maybe you could consider your own experiences and see that they pertain to me too.”

He pulls his drink to his lips as his eyes narrow. “There’s no way you and I have ever experienced the same things in life, Princess.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that we come from two completely different worlds,” he counters.

“Does that mean you have to be an ass to me then? Because that’s not a good enough reason. If you want me to leave the class, just say so, Javi. You want me to leave the brewery right now, let me know. But deep down, I don’t think that’s the truth.”

“Oh, really? Then what’s the truth?” He sits up taller on his stool, staring me down.

I take a deep breath and figure what do I have to lose at this point? My day and night have both been shit, but Javier has had a tongue-lashing coming for a while. “I think my presence stirs something up in you that makes you feel some sort of way, whether that’s transporting you back in

time to a point in your youth you want to forget, or now by making you feel the need to keep me at arm's length to protect yourself from actually caring about someone. I know you don't just teach that self-defense class for the hell of it. I know that you picking me up on the side of the road and rescuing me from the rain is because you have a heart somewhere in that hollow chest you try to convince everyone you have. There has to be a reason why you take your job so seriously, why you encourage us each week to channel the reason why we showed up. I just can't figure out what it is."

"It's none of your business."

"Fine. But stop taking out your issues on me. I think if you'd take the time to get to know me, you might actually find that you and I aren't that different."

He huffs and then drains the rest of his soda, licking his lips as he sets his glass down on the table. "What are you even doing here tonight, Sydney? Shouldn't you be at the country club with a sweater tied around your shoulders or at some fundraiser for underprivileged kids to make you feel better about the gobs of money your family has?"

"Wow. That's what you think of me, huh? That everything comes down to money?"

"I know that money makes a world of difference between two people and how they think."

"Well, get ready for a lesson in privilege, Javi. I'm here tonight because I escaped the Chamber of Commerce meeting at the country club because my father is trying to set me up with a man he thinks I should marry." His eyebrows pop up but I keep going. "He's adamant that because our families run in the same circle, we'd be perfect for each other. Did you know that he also almost forbade me from training at your gym too?"

"It's Andre's gym," he corrects me.

I wave my hand through the air, realizing the beer is taking affect now. "Well, you work there, so it's your gym for the sake of the argument. He thought his security team was more qualified to teach me how to defend myself. He means well, but I also feel like he doesn't trust me to make decisions for myself."

"That's ..."

"It's bullshit, right? I'm twenty-eight years old and survived law school, yet somehow my father thinks I'm incompetent." I laugh as Javi studies the table for a minute. Then those gold eyes lock back on me and I see a

determination in them that's he's rarely shown me before. "The person I was back in high school? Well, you might think you knew who I was—the perfect student, cheerleader, class president, and valedictorian—but deep down I was a nervous wreck, always afraid of letting him down, making him regret taking me in, not living up to his expectations ..."

Javi narrows his eyes at me again, but he stays silent.

"So you might think that I had this perfect life, but believe me. Nothing about it has been perfect. Are you telling me that you can't even relate to not wanting to let your parent down?"

I feel the rush of warm air leave his mouth and hit my knee as I sit with my legs crossed on the stool, waiting for him to respond.

"Actually I do," he mumbles, but then speaks up the second time. "I'm sorry for judging you. I guess you never really know what's going on behind the scenes of somebody else's life, do you?"

I sit there, dumbfounded that this arrogant and cynical man I've grown to know the past few weeks just gave me an apology.

"And no, you didn't ever do anything in particular to me in high school. I just really hated all of those kids you hung out with and what you all represented."

I actually laugh a bit before I take a sip of my beer. "I hated them too. Those kids were pricks, and legitimately thought they were better than everyone else. The only reason I hung out with them is because of my parents. They were friends with their parents and that was the expectation."

"I see."

We sit there in silence as I finish my beer and Javier looks anywhere but at me. The bustle of the brewery echoes around us as customers come and go and trays of glasses are filled and stocked.

Not sure of how to move past my little declaration, I decide to change the subject. "You come here a lot?" I finally ask.

Javi shrugs. "Not really, but it just opened a few weeks ago. The guy who owns it is the brother of my boss, so I try to support the family."

"The Gibson family?"

He nods. "Yeah. Forrest gave me a job when ..." he trails off and then rubs his palms on his jeans.

"When what?" I feel like he was about to say something and he caught himself.

"When I needed one," he finishes. "So I try to repay the favor in any way

I can. A lot of the guys that also work for Gibson Construction like to come in here on Fridays after work and relax with a few beers.”

“I feel like any alcoholic beverage is necessary at the end of the week,” I tease. “But why aren’t you drinking then?” I point to his empty soda glass.

“I don’t drink and then drive. Ever.” His tone is stark as he declares his stance with a passion that twists my stomach. His voice can be so authoritative sometimes that it makes me yearn to hear him boss me around behind closed doors.

“That’s admirable.”

“No, it’s smart. And technically the right thing to do.”

“So if you’re not here for the beer, why even come? Shouldn’t you be at home working on your house? That’s what you told me you typically do in your spare time.”

The corner of his mouth tips up in recollection. “That’s my plan for tomorrow. I need a break though too, just like anyone else, Sydney.”

“Fair enough. So what project are you planning on completing tomorrow?”

“Laying the tile that we bought earlier this week.” I don’t miss his use of the pronoun *we*. It almost makes it sound like we’re a couple, even though I know that’s the furthest thing from the truth.

“I can’t even imagine how hard that is. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

Javier laughs at me. “Yeah, I can’t imagine you’re used to getting your hands dirty, Princess.”

I squint at him as he enjoys teasing me. And in that moment, I want to prove him wrong so badly that a blaze ignites in my body. “Then teach me.”

He tilts his head at me curiously. “Teach you?”

“Yeah,” I declare confidently. “If you think I can’t handle it, then teach me and let me prove you wrong.”

He scoffs. “Sure. I can always use free entertainment. When?”

I look around the brewery that’s hopping with people all around us, but right now the only person I’m interested in talking to more is Javier. I don’t have anywhere else to be tonight since I ran out on my prior commitment, so that boldness I found earlier continues to grow. “How about now?”

“Now? Aren’t you up past your bedtime? Won’t your dad be mad if you’re out too late?”

I stand up from my stool and land between his legs that are open as he’s

seated in front of me. Our eyes bounce back and forth between one another as I find the courage to push him more—and in turn, I’m pushing myself to fight for what I want.

“Are you afraid that I might show you up, Javi? That I can lay tile better than you?” I arch one eyebrow as a smug look crosses his features.

“No one is better at laying tile than me, Princess,” he replies as he grabs his wallet from his back pocket, throws a twenty on the table, and then stands so he’s taller than me. And as his eyes veer down at me and my body comes alive, lightening shooting through my limbs from how close he is and how good he smells, all I’m thinking is whether we’re actually talking about laying tile, or something else.

“Then prove it.”

Chapter 14

Javier

I glance back in the rearview mirror of my truck to check if Sydney is still following me, even though a part of me wishes she weren't.

What the fuck was I thinking inviting her back to my house? Or Andre and Selena's house really ...

The girl is gonna take one look at the deconstructed guesthouse and wonder what the hell she's doing spending time in a place like this. Although, she is aware that the place is under construction. But still, I'm sure it's a far cry from the opulence she's used to being surround by, especially in that complex I know she lives in.

As I turn down the gravel drive way that leads to the back of the property, I hope that Selena and Andre are preoccupied with the television or they went to sleep early so they don't see the second set of headlights following me in. It's a little after nine now, and even though I was exhausted and ready to call it a day before I saw Sydney at the brewery, my adrenaline is running so hot right now, there's no way I'd be able to go to sleep even after she leaves.

The echo of our car doors slamming makes me cringe as I watch Sydney look around her. Andre's property is a little over an acre and full of mature trees. The moonlight peeks through the branches, illuminating the rocky ground beneath our feet just as the porch light clicks on from our movement.

"This place is so cute," she murmurs as I flick my head toward the door of the guesthouse and take a deep breath to calm my nerves. There's no going back now, Javi. She's fucking here. Let's just hope she's not judgmental and can understand the place is still a work in progress.

"Come on in." I hold open the door for her as she steps inside and I flick the light switch to my right. The ceiling fan turns on in the living room, which lights up the entire open concept living area and the kitchen to the left of us.

"Wow." Sydney looks awestruck as she steps in and moves straight for the couch, lowering her purse on the cushions before twisting her head around, admiring the paint, molding, and fixtures I've installed so far. "You

did this all yourself?” Her eyes find mine again as I stuff my hands in my pockets, uncomfortable with her praise.

“Pretty much. Like I said at Home Depot, the place is my sister’s and her husband’s, but I’m renovating it for them.”

“I love the dark blue walls.” Her hand reaches out to touch them before she glances down to her feet. “And the dark hardwood. Did you make the design choices?”

I nod. “Yup. I picked out the tile too.” I tease as she smirks across the room at me.

“I vaguely remember that *I* found the tile you purchased.”

“Well, I was going to pick that one out anyway.”

“I see.” She moves into the kitchen and then finds the concrete floors beneath her heels. “I was about to kick off my shoes, but I don’t want to walk on concrete. You definitely need to get cracking on installing that tile, Javi.”

“Well, how about you sit up on the counter then.” I pat the granite that I installed last week. She eyes me skeptically before fully entering the kitchen and hopping up on the flat surface. Her heels comes flying off as she arches her feet and lets out a groan that awakens my dick. He was half-awake just watching her walk around my place, but after that noise, he’s fully aware and raring to go.

“Would you like some water?” I open the fridge and take out two water bottles, handing one to her without waiting for an answer.

“Thank you.” We both take a drink, stewing in the awkward silence. I’m not sure what to say to her. But the way she looks perched on my countertops makes me envision multiple ways that the evening could go. I’m a guy and that’s the first place my mind veers instead of focusing on why the woman is in my house to begin with.

“So, are you going to show me how to lay some tile, or what, Javi?” There’s a challenge in her voice that has my heart beating wildly in my chest.

“You’re not exactly dressed to do dirty work, Princess.” My eyes travel down her body, appreciating every curve and stretch of bare skin I can see.

Sydney looks phenomenal in workout gear, but seeing her dressed professionally does something to my libido that I’ve never experienced before. Scenarios of bending her over and hiking up her skirt play through my mind quicker than I can push them out. I turn around to adjust myself before she speaks so softly, I almost miss what she says.

“We don’t have to do that then,” she mutters and my neck coils in her direction again, catching a glimpse of her looking across the room at me.

The confident little vixen from before has diminished slightly, revealing a timidity in her eyes that wasn’t there before. This woman sitting high up on the counter is sparking a curiosity within me that I know I should ignore. I shouldn’t push to see what she suggests we do instead. I should just let her go, encourage her to leave, and go back to the way things were.

But the other part of me, the needy man I’ve been stifling for months is begging to see if the way she’s eating me up with her eyes means she wants me as badly as I want her. It’s the first time I’ve admitted it to myself, but I’m beginning to think that I’m not the only one coming to that realization.

I stalk across the space, landing in front of her as she uncrosses her legs and invites me between them. My body moves willingly as the heels of her feet dig into my ass and her arms move up from the counter and toward her neck.

“What is it that you want, Sydney? Why are you really here?” If what I think is going through her mind is true, I want to hear her say it out loud.

My heart lodges itself in my throat as I watch her hands slowly trail up her chest, landing on the buttons of her white, silk blouse as her fingers deftly pop the first button open. A prick of awareness shoots up my spine while my eyes find her aqua ones and there’s a heat mixed with fear in those bright blue orbs, studying me as her fingers release the next button.

“I want ...” she trembles before clearing her throat, channeling more resolve, and then speaking stronger, commanding me with her voice and body. “I want you to show me what it’s like for someone to make decisions for me that don’t result in frustration or anger. I want you to show me what it’s like to be pleased, wound tight within an inch of my sanity until I’m begging for you to let me come.” She takes a deep breath of courage and then continues. “I don’t want to think about what comes next, whose expectations I have to live up to ... I just want to let go. Be owned. Can you do that? Can you show me what it’s like to be with someone like you?”

I arch my brow while the speed of my heart increases three times the normal rate. Sydney Matthews is basically commanding me to fuck her and I’m speechless. Never in a million years did I ever think I’d be in this position.

“Someone like me?” I question, wondering exactly what she means

by that as my hands move from the counter to her hips.

How does she see me? Does she look at me the same way I look at myself? Like a man with a past, a boy inside that never felt good enough, that vowed to protect my family at all costs, a vow that haunted me in prison? Does Sydney know about my past? Does she look at me like I am just someone to pass the time with? Or is she looking for more than that?

What are her intentions here?

“Yeah. A bad boy. A man that knows how to fuck. A man that I shouldn’t want, but do.”

Fuck if those words didn’t give me goosebumps and send blood rushing full force to my dick. It seems to me that Sydney Matthews needs someone to fuck her into submission. And I can’t deny that I want to be the man for the job, despite this inkling in my gut that tells me this couldn’t possibly end the way I want it to.

It’s been six months since I’ve felt a woman wrapped around me, since I’ve felt the soft and silky skin of the female form that could easily become an addiction.

And the more I stare at Sydney, the more of her delicate, white flesh she exposes to me as she splits the row of buttons on her blouse and pulls the fabric apart, the more I realize that I could easily become addicted to her—like a drug that only one hit of could send you into a downward spiral.

“You want me to fuck you, Princess?”

She pauses in her movements and juts her chin out. “I’m not a princess, and I don’t want you to think of me that way, Javi. You may think you know me as someone from your past, but I’m not that girl anymore, and something tells me you’re not the same boy from all those years ago either. So let’s not be them. Let’s be two consenting adults with so much sexual tension burning between them that the only way to release it is to smother it with so much hot sex, we’re left a sweaty mess afterwards.”

Seems Sydney knows when to relinquish eloquence in her words and simply ask for what she wants. The question is, do I want to give it to her?

Sydney

Javier’s eyes penetrate me as I slowly pull the fabric of my shirt apart, revealing my satin demi-bra beneath. It’s not the sexiest thing I own, but there’s no contemplating that detail now.

As I was following Javier to his house just moments ago, something within me snapped. Maybe it was the pressure this evening from Andrew and my father to give him a chance. Maybe it was the hellish day I had at work, or hellish week really.

Or maybe for once in my life, I just wanted to give in to temptation, ask for someone to fulfill the desires that flood my mind at night. And the more I thought about it, the more I drew on every interaction between us, the more my mind was made up.

Javier was the man for the job, and I wasn't about to walk out of his house without at least putting myself out there.

Now his golden eyes are searing across my skin, his hands digging into the flesh at my waist, and his body is so tense, I'm afraid he might snap like a rubber band. My body is shaking as I wait for him to acknowledge that I'm basically stripping in front of him and asking him to fuck me. It was a risk, but I'm hoping he won't ask me to leave. The last thing I want is to drive home with my tail tucked between my legs from being turned down by the first man I've felt brazen enough to tell what I want.

"I didn't hear your answer, Sydney. I asked if you wanted me to fuck you?" His voice is cracking as I feel like his resolve is crumbling.

So I nod, and then confirm with my words so there's no doubt. "Yes. I want you to fuck me, Javi."

He tilts his head to the side, watching me as I fight my nerves. "I'm not programmed for more, Sydney. If you want sex, I can offer you that. But nothing more."

I'm not going to acknowledge the twinge of disappointment that forms in my gut with those words because in all honesty, what I truly need from him right now is just sex. Even though the more I get to know this man, the more I want to know all about him—who he was back in high school, who he is now, why he walks around and keeps everyone at a distance. But for right now, I'll take what I can get.

"Understood." I bob my head up and down as Javier's hands climb up my arms and push my shirt off of my shoulders. I move my arms out of the sleeves and then toss the fabric to the ground somewhere below us. The tension crackling between our bodies is enough to ignite a stick of dynamite, but I'm waiting to see where he takes this.

"Good. Now let me show you how a bad boy likes to fuck."

An incomprehensible sound comes out of my mouth as I salivate for his touch.

“You want to be told what to do, Princess?” he asks, as he trails his fingers up and down my arms and then across my collarbone, as if he’s committing a map of my body to memory through his touch.

“Yes.” I sigh as my head falls back and I soak up the heat that lingers on every inch of skin he caresses.

“You want me to be rough?”

“God, yes. I want whatever you give me, Javi. I want you to tie me up, fuck me hard and fast, and make me scream. I want you to deliver on the words you told me in Home Depot.” I’m writhing as his fingers dip down into the cup of my bra and he pulls the fabric down, revealing my hardened nipples.

“Fuck,” he mumbles lowly, but I catch it. And then with a snap of his fingers, my bra is unclasped from the front and my breasts are completely exposed to him.

“I hope you’re sure you can handle this, Princess, because once I start, I’m not stopping.”

“Don’t you dare stop,” I exhale, craning my neck forward again to watch him hover over my chest. His eyes pop up to mine just as he darts out his tongue and licks the tip of my nipple, hardening it to a sharp peak. I’m so fucking turned on right now, I could probably come just from him doing that a few more times.

“I’m the one in control. Now, stop talking and let me do what I do best.” His lips move across the skin of my breasts, teasing every inch around my nipples but never landing on those peaks again. My breaths are a struggle as every touch ignites my need for this man even more.

When did this out-of-body craving for him develop? How did I not see this freight train of need coming as it’s hitting me? Because the more his calloused fingers run across the skin of my stomach and his lips tease my collarbone, the more I realize that I’ve never felt this buzz from a man’s touch before.

And as that realization hits me, his mouth finally closes over my nipple again, causing my entire torso to arch back and revel in the sensation of his hot and wet mouth.

“Pinch your other nipple,” he commands before returning to his work—

licking, sucking, and biting my right nipple with ferocity.

A spark of lust hits my chest from his command, turning me on even more. That's exactly what I wanted, for him to tell me what to do, to not have to make decisions on my own, especially when it comes to my pleasure. And it seems that Javier is an expert in that arena.

I find my left nipple frantically and pinch, rolling the nub between my fingers as his mouth continues to work the other one as I let out a low moan. Then one of his hands slowly snakes up the inside of my thigh and my breath catches in my throat.

"Move your hand," he says, swatting mine away as he latches on to my left breast now and his other hand moves higher between my legs, his finger scraping against the drenched fabric of my thong.

I'm barely breathing at this point and all he's done is suck on my breasts. I don't know if I'll be able to remain conscious if we ever make it to sex because I'm struggling to take in air so badly right now.

His head pops up and our eyes lock as Javi retracts both of his hands from my body, a wave of sadness washing over me from the loss of his touch. But then he reaches up to his head, flicks off his hat, and then pulls on the neck of his shirt, lifting the cotton up his body until it passes over his head and reveals the chiseled chest to me that I've been dying to see. And lord, was it worth the wait.

Mountains and valleys of muscle grace my eyesight as I study his pecs and the ripples of his abs. The man clearly takes care of himself and it shows. And that skin, the bronze flesh that is such a contrast to my own, calls out to me as saliva pools in my mouth. I have a sudden need to lick every crevice on his body, but I guess that can wait.

"Lift up your ass." His hands move to my skirt as he pushes the fabric up my waist until it pools at my hips, leaving me sitting on the cold granite in nothing but my thong. And it's at that moment I'm so very grateful I just got waxed.

Javier eyes the scrap of white satin covering the apex of my thighs and then flicks his eyes up to me. "I hope you're not fond of these," he says, and before I can answer, his hands grip the strings at my hips and rip the fabric apart. He pulls the flimsy remains of my thong from my body and holds it up in the air while maintaining eye contact with me. Then he brings it to his nose, inhales deeply, and stuffs them in his pocket.

Holy fuck.

“Damn, you smell good. I bet you taste even better.”

I gulp down the inadequacy I feel in my throat as Javier lowers himself to the ground between my legs and pushes my thighs open. I can't recall the last time a man went down on me. Even my last boyfriend only did it a handful of times.

But as I watch Javier lick his lips and then nudge forward, I have a feeling it won't even compare to what I'm about to feel.

“Spread your legs wider, Princess.” His palms press me open and lift my feet to rest on the counter, and then his hands move around, grip my ass, and pull me closer to the edge of the surface. “I can't wait to devour this pussy,” he growls before he dives in and steals the oxygen from my lungs with the first swipe of his tongue across my flesh.

“Holy shit!” I yell before lying back on the granite while trying to concentrate on everything Javier is doing between my legs. His tongue has a mind of its own, moving so meticulously across my slit while flicking my clit, that I can barely follow or track what he's going to do next.

I close my eyes and remind myself to breathe, gasping each time his mouth closes over my clit and sucks the nub between his lips. On instinct, my hands reach for his head, gripping the soft strands of his hair as my entire body tightens. He's working me over like it's his job and a part of me wonders if he applies that same work ethic in every aspect of his life.

The loss of his tongue on my sensitive flesh alerts me that he's moving, so I open my eyes and bend my head up to assess what's happening. But Javier's eyes are still locked between my legs as I feel his hand now move along my slit.

“Do you trust me to give you pleasure, Sydney? To know what you need, even if it's something you've never done before?”

“What ... what do you mean?”

His gaze lifts to meet mine as he licks his lips. “Has anyone ever played with your ass before?”

I shake my head, even though that's something I've always been curious about.

“Can I? I know you're not ready for my cock, but I want to show you how good that can be ...”

“Okay ...”

“Trust me, Princess. You'll wonder what you've been missing out on once you come with a finger in your ass.”

He doesn't give me a chance to respond before licking his fingers and plunging two inside me, the force causing my body to coil in response.

The slide of his fingers through my wetness starts to build an orgasm within me in seconds, especially once his tongue finds my clit again.

I track his movements, wondering when he's going to cross the boundary that I've never played with before, keeping me on edge as I anticipate it.

I never thought I'd let a man have this much control over my body before, but the way Javier is owning me right now, I question why I've waited.

Maybe I've been waiting for him.

Suddenly, I feel a slight pressure between my cheeks right below my pussy as one of Javier's fingers starts to press against my other hole.

"Relax, Princess. Don't fight it." Using small pulses, he pushes past the barrier and enters me so now three of his fingers are working in and out of me at the same time in two different places.

And I'm trembling from how good it feels.

"Oh, God," I mewl as his tongue returns to my clit and he works me over, higher, and higher until the pressure is so strong, I break and fall over the edge. Javier never lets up, licking me and fingering me faster through my climax until he senses I'm coming back down to earth.

I'm lying limber on the counter, willing my heart to slow down before Javier's voice brings me back to reality.

"Stand up," he demands, and it takes me a few moments to realize that he's already done the same. I was in such a heady post-orgasmic state that I never sensed that he moved.

Sliding down the granite until my toes touch the ground, I glance up at him and see an animalistic need in his eyes, like he's about to break free from his cage and devour me.

"Take your skirt off." As I look down, I realize my bra was still around my arms and my skirt is pushed up past my belly button, so I do as I'm told and remove them both, loving how free I feel right now having someone else tell me what to do.

Javier pops the button on his pants, shoving them down his legs along with his underwear, granting me a full frontal view of his beautiful, ink-covered body as he stands back up, and a cock that makes all of my other lovers look like chumps.

His hand grips his dick while he strokes himself and I feel myself start to drool at the sight. I watch him for a few moments before he grabs my hand

and takes me over to the couch, positioning me so I'm bent over the arm of the dark brown leather.

"Don't move." He walks away, leaving me perplexed until I see him retrieve a condom from his wallet and make his way back over to me. The telltale tear of foil builds even more anticipation as I look over my shoulder and watch him roll the condom down his length.

"God, this ass," he growls while grabbing both of my cheeks and squeezing them hard. And then he slaps me, startling me with a sharp pain that morphs into pleasure as it subsides.

"Did you like that, Princess?"

"Yes ..."

"Have you ever been spanked before?"

"No ..."

"Do you want me to do it again?"

I nod, unable to speak anymore as I feel wetness drip down my legs. My God, I'm in trouble. This man is exactly what I needed, what I've been missing, and I don't think one time with him will be enough.

Javier grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking me gently back toward him so my ass is still perched over the arm of the couch, but my back is bowed slightly.

"Look at me when I fuck you, Princess. Watch me smack your ass and fill your pussy with my cock."

"God, please." I'm begging, desperate to feel him inside of me.

Javier smacks my ass once more with his free hand before lining himself up to my entrance and pushing forward.

"Fuck, you're tight," he growls before pulling out and pushing in again even further.

"Yes ... more, Javi."

Smack! "Don't forget who's in control here, Princess." He pulls all the way out, making me groan in frustration.

"Please ... I need it. I need you to fuck me. Own me, Javi. Fucking own me!" I plead just as Javier thrusts forward and fills me completely.

"Shit!" he barks, before pulling back out and barreling forward once more, hitting deep inside of me, making me scream out in pleasure.

"Is that what you wanted, Sydney?" he asks, as he thrusts harder and harder with each tilt of his hips.

"God, yes!"

He turns my face back to him so we can stare in each other's eyes as he continues to move in and out of me, the sound of our bodies smacking against each other echoing in the room.

His lips find my neck as he drags his tongue up the column, bringing goosebumps to the surface of my skin and making my body come undone from his touch.

Dear God, I needed this.

This raw, animalistic fucking.

This brazen comfort to ask him for what I desire.

This out of mind experience that is allowing me to focus on nothing but the sensations cascading all over my body.

My nipples are hard, my pussy is drenched, and my legs are shaking, but I don't want this to end.

Javier lets go of my hair and pushes me forward so my torso is resting on the couch again, but he never breaks his pace. His hands find my hips now and grip me tightly as he continues to slam into me. And then I feel his finger again moving against my asshole and excitement builds in me as I wait for him to cross the barrier once more.

I never thought it would feel as good as it does, or it would develop a sense of empowerment in me to know that the perfect girl I am on the outside actually likes to be a little naughty behind closed doors. But fuck if it doesn't make me question what else I've been missing out on.

"Yes, do it," I say as I look back at Javier again, marveling in the way his muscles are tightening as he moves, the sweat that's dripping off his forehead and hitting my ass, and the clench of his jaw as he watches where the two of us are joined while he keeps sliding in and out of me.

With no warning, he breaks through the rim of my ass and moves his thumb in time with his dick, bringing my orgasm forward so fast, I barely have time to catch my breath.

"I'm gonna come, Javi!" I shout in warning, but that's all I can get out before the tremors of pleasure rock through my body and I scream out in pleasure.

"Fuck!" he yells, throwing his head back as I feel him pound into me a few more times and then still, the pulsing in his dick twitching inside of me.

We're both breathless, sweaty, and physically drained, but as my body begins to relax, I can't fight the smile that stretches across my lips, knowing that asking for what I wanted finally paid off.

Chapter 15

Sydney

The crisp, sweet flavors of my mimosa hit my lips as I take a sip, waiting for Ally to arrive for our brunch date Sunday morning. It appears that ten o'clock is when most twenty-somethings find the courage to roll out of bed and nurse their hangovers with the eclectic food of The Rustic, an up and coming restaurant just outside downtown Dallas.

"Sorry, I'm late." Ally plops down in the chair across from me, blowing her hair out of her face and removing the few strands that got stuck to her lip gloss.

"Damn, Mommas. You look nice." I survey my friend, beaming from how gorgeous she looks right now.

"I would only go through all of this trouble for you, bestie."

"Not even Collin gets this treatment?"

She laughs. "Nope. He's lucky if my legs are shaved at this point."

"So romantic."

Ally glances at the mimosa that I ordered for her and immediately moves to drink it. With a smack of her lips, she studies the orange liquid and then sighs in pleasure. "The drive was worth it just for that."

"Not to see your best friend?"

"Well, I guess that's important too," she says with a wink. "So, how is everything going? I feel like we barely got to talk Wednesday between shuffling my kids around so we could get our pubic hairs ripped out. What's happened since then?"

My eyes veer to the side as I fight the smile trying to form on my lips. In fact, my cheeks have been stinging ever since Friday night when I left Javier's house thoroughly satisfied.

"What's that grin about?" She points a finger at me and then narrows her eyes. "Wait. Something's different. You seem ... more relaxed, maybe? Your skin looks brighter. You look lighter ..." she keeps going as I take another sip of my mimosa again, hiding my smile behind my glass.

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to keep guessing?" She crosses

her arms over her chest just as our waiter arrives.

“Good morning, ladies.”

“Jared?” Ally blurts out as I look up and see a familiar face staring down at us.

“Hey, Mrs. Murphy. Sydney. How are you two doing today?”

Ally and I widen our eyes at each other before I clear my throat and speak. “We’re doing great. How about you?”

“Yeah. When did you start working here?” Ally adds.

“The same week I came home from school. The ice cream man gig is nice, but it doesn’t pay the bills. This place is poppin’ on the weekends, so it definitely helps with the cash flow.” Jared looks over at me and flashes that boyish grin I recall making me warm from the inside out.

But today, it does nothing.

“Well, that’s nice then,” Ally says before glancing back at me and shrugging.

“Are you two ready to order?”

“What would you recommend, Jared?” Ally bats her eyelashes at him now, upping her flirting game. That or the mimosa has gone straight to her head.

“The sampler seems to be the most popular item on the weekends. It has a little bit of everything sweet and savory we have to offer.”

“Perfect. We’ll take two then. And two coffees with cream too, please,” I declare.

Jared clicks the buttons on his iPad as he enters our order in his palm and then nods. “Sounds good. Be right back.”

As I watch him saunter off, Ally shakes her head in amusement. “Small world, huh?”

“You can say that again.”

“So, don’t think you’re off the hook since Jared came along and interrupted us. I know something’s going on with you. You’d better spill.”

Another waitress comes by to deliver our coffees, but I avoid Ally’s eyes while I stir some cream and sugar into mine.

“Well, I do need to tell you something, but you have to promise not to make a scene in this restaurant.” I glance around the room, assessing the increase in customers since I arrived. The last thing I want is for the wrong person to overhear my confession.

Ally nods, bringing her coffee to her lips. “I can do that,” she states,

feigning confidence because I know once I tell her about my Friday night, she's going to want to scream.

The hot coffee hits my tongue as I delay speaking a few seconds longer. "So, Friday night was the Chamber of Commerce mixer."

"Yes, I remember."

"And I had a hell of a day leading up to it. By the time I arrived, I was irritated beyond belief and then my mother started chastising my outfit."

Ally snickers and then motions for me to continue.

"So, I escape her only to be cornered by Andrew."

Ally's face scrunches up in disgust. "Ew."

"Yeah." I sigh. "It's not like he's not a decent looking guy. But the way he told me to basically get over myself because we are destined to be together brought on severe nausea."

"I'm getting it right now just listening to you."

I nod in agreement and then keep talking. "So, we sit down to dinner where my dad plays the doting father, bragging about his kids and chatting with a few of the other judges and business owners, you know, the usual..."

"Uh huh ..."

"And then Andrew asks me to have a drink with him in front of everyone so I can't say no."

"I wanna punch this guy in the junk so hard right now."

I chuckle and take another drink of my coffee. Jared comes by at that moment and delivers our meals, two giant platters that cover the entire table, causing us to shift things around.

"Jesus, Jared. You could have told us to just order one," Ally reprimands. "This is a ton of food."

Jared just shrugs. "You can always take home what you don't eat. And this way you don't have to share." He winks in her direction and then places a condiment basket on the table. "Enjoy and let me know if you need anything."

"Will do." I smile up at him and then stare back down at the meal that could feed a small army.

Chicken fried steak, cornbread, scrambled eggs, avocado toast, bacon, sausage, French toast, and pastries of every kind cover the wooden plates the food was served on.

"I will bringing home food to Collin and the kids for sure," Ally mumbles around a bite of a cinnamon roll. "Okay, so get back to the story. Andrew

laid on the charm and took you from the table ...”

I finish chewing a bite of chicken fried steak and then answer. “Yes. He took me outside where I reprimanded him for doing that, but then he pleaded for me to just give him a chance.”

“And so you did?”

I look down at the ground beside me, avoiding her eyes until I can prepare to tell her what happened next.

“Sydney ... You didn’t!”

My head flies up almost immediately. “What? No!” I shake my head. “Nothing happened with Andrew. He offered to get me a drink from the bar, but I ended up faking having to go to the bathroom and ran out a side door to my car.”

Ally smiles proudly across the table at me. “Nice. So that’s your story?” She shoves another bite of food in her mouth and then studies me while she chews.

I bite my bottom lip, nervous for her reaction to my secret. “No, but remember what I said. Please don’t freak out.”

Ally rolls her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Now get on with it, woman.”

I take in a deep breath and then continue. “When I left, I drove past Gibson Brewery. Apparently they opened up a tasting room in Newberry and the place was packed. I decided to stop in and check it out, not having anything else to do and needing another drink to calm down after my frustrating day and night. But I ran into someone ...”

Ally perches up on the edge of her seat. “Who?” Her eyes widen and I swear she looks like she’s drooling.

“Javier.”

Her smile stretches as her mouth falls open slightly, clearly intrigued by the turn in my story.

“And ...” She reaches over and takes another bite of food.

I inhale and then get it out as quickly as I can, not able to contain my secret any longer. “He came over to give me shit, as usual. I told him to knock it off and stop being an ass, and then asked him to teach me how to lay tile. So he took me back to his place where we did not lay tile. Nope. We had life-altering, dirty, sweaty, panty-melting sex in which he made me come twice, and now I want to do it again.”

Ally’s jaw falls open and her food comes tumbling out.

“Ew, Ally! Get a hold of yourself.”

She scrambles to clean off her lap and the table beneath her and then settles her sight back on me—eyes wide, smile huge, hands resting firmly on the table. “You had sex with Javier Montes?”

“Lower your voice,” I warn. “But yes, I did. And it was ...” I sigh, fighting the cheek burning smile from coming back.

“Laying tile, huh? Is that what you kids are calling it these days?” Ally laughs and then empties her mimosa.

“I helped him pick out tile for his kitchen on Monday when he picked me up in the rain.”

“I feel like I’m missing so many details.” And she is, so I fill her in on the Home Depot incident.

I bite my lip again, waiting for more of a reaction from her. “Well, is that all you have to say?”

She reaches for my hand across the table. “I’m proud of you, Sydney. I think this is exactly what you needed. I don’t know that I would have recommended Javier for the job, but I think he got it done.”

“I can’t even describe what it felt like, Ally. It was raw, but also comfortable. I didn’t feel self-conscious. I just felt ... pleased.”

“That’s how it should feel when you let loose with someone. Now you know it’s out there.”

“But I want more ...”

“Well, duh. Sex is amazing, and sex like *that* is even more so. What did Javier say about the evening though?”

I stare off in the room, recalling how Javier acted once we were done. He cleaned himself up and then returned to me with a warm rag to do the same. We got dressed quietly before he walked me to the door and said he’d see me Tuesday at the self-defense class, kissing me goodbye on the cheek. It was at that moment that I realized we had sex but never kissed, which stirred up something I decided to shove back down.

We didn’t talk about what happened at all, which is the number one thing making me so nervous because I don’t want to just experience that kind of sex once. I need it again.

“Well, he told me that all he could offer me was sex before we went there. But we didn’t discuss where we go from here after.”

Ally purses her lips before leaning back in her chair. “Are you sure you’d be okay with that? I mean, I know you, Sydney. We’ve been best friends for half of our lives now. You’re not exactly a one-night stand kind of girl, nor a

friends-with-benefits kind of girl either.”

I shrug as the level of discouragement rises within me. “I know. But this was exactly what I feel like I’ve been missing, Ally. And I got it with Javi, for crying out loud. I got the nerve to ask him for what I wanted. I commanded him to fuck me. I even got some kitchen counter action.”

Ally smacks the table, excitement radiating out of her. “Yes, girl!”

“Jesus Christ, Ally. Shut up!”

She laughs, holding her arms across her stomach before relaxing and returns to eating. “Well, I say go for it then. What do you have to lose? I know it’s been hard for you to let go and feel comfortable standing up for yourself. Maybe getting railed by Javier a few times will knock some sense into you and then you can tell your father off.”

I tilt my head at her, giving her an annoyed look. “You know it’s more complicated than that, Ally. He’s my dad. He means well, he just doesn’t like to listen.”

“I know. And I love him, Sydney. He’s practically a second father to me. But you need to make him listen. For a judge, he sure is close-minded. Aren’t judges supposed to be all about looking at all of the facts before making a decision?”

“Yes ... what’s your point?”

“My point is,” she says, directing her fork across the table at me, “that he doesn’t seem to want to listen to the fact that you *don’t* like Andrew and want to do things that *you* feel are in your best interest. So use this newfound freedom of yours to explore that and maybe it will give you the courage to demand to be heard once and for all.”

I arch a brow at her, contemplating her words. “So you think that by screwing Javier a few more times, I’ll magically find some courage and get my father to listen to me.”

She shrugs. “Maybe.”

I can’t help but laugh as I shake my head at my friend. “Wow. The way your mind works sometimes ...”

“It’s a gift. In the meantime, enjoy some wild sex, Sydney, because I’m telling you, once you’re married, it’s a lot less frequent with kids around.”

I leave brunch with my best friend feeling renewed in my decision. Asking Javier to fuck me was one of the most audacious things I’ve ever done. It felt emboldening. I lived in the moment for once and letting him have his way with me gave me a high that I don’t want to fade.

I know he said that all he could offer me is sex, so why not take advantage of that? I'm a grown woman. I'm capable of casual sex—at least that's what I try to convince myself of over the next two days until Tuesday arrives and it's time for my next self-defense class, which is also the first time I've seen Javier since our night of steamy sex.

When I walk into the gym, I look around for him but I don't see him anywhere. Trying not to focus on the sudden wave of disappointment rolling through me, I head for the locker room and change my clothes before putting away my things. By the time I make it back out, the rest of the girls have arrived and Javier and Clay are standing in the front of the room with their arms crossed over their chests.

I lock eyes with Javier instantly as the heat of his gaze burns my skin, but I can't get a read on what he's thinking.

Is he excited to see me? Does he keep picturing us from the other night like I do at random times throughout the day? Is the lack of expression on his face a sign that he regrets what happened between us?

Dear God, I hope not. The idea of not getting to experience that kind of pleasure and freedom again makes me worried almost instantly.

I don't have much time to overthink the situation before the boys get us started with our warm-up. I can feel Javier track my movements throughout the class even when our eyes aren't meeting. But I know he's watching me. I just wish I knew what he was thinking.

When we move into the demonstration portion of the evening, Javier doesn't choose me to practice with, and the reality sits in that maybe I can't handle this. Extreme jealousy bursts in my chest as I watch him touch another girl. I end up working with Clay a bit, and then Justine, one of the other girls, all while trying to ignore the stabbing feeling in my chest watching Javier talk and teach the other girls. I attempt to fake a smile and polite easiness during the rest of the class. But as soon as we're dismissed, I run out of the room.

Right before I'm heading out the door, that voice that's been taunting me in my dreams whispers in my ear. "Meet me at my house at nine o'clock."

Like a thief in the night, Javier disappears as quickly as he came, but his words don't leave my mind as I drive home and take a shower.

Should I go over there after he ignored me all night? I know he said this is just sex, but after sharing that experience and after our talk at the

brewery, I figured we'd be on more friendly terms than how this evening panned out. I expected at least a smile or a hello—anything that didn't make me feel like he went right back to looking at me the way he always has—like a girl he couldn't stand being near.

Even though part of me wants to tell him to fuck off after the way he acted, another part of me wants to know what his deal was. So against my better judgment—which might be seriously lacking right now—I dry my hair, slip on a pair of capri leggings and a loose tank top, and drive across town to Javier's house.

As I park, I see the porch light flicker on and then Javier's head pop out of the window for a brief moment. When I move to knock on his door, the wood swings open and Javier greets me bare chested in nothing but a pair of blue jeans.

God damn, this man is hot. Why on earth did I never notice him?

His muscles appear shiny from the beads of water dripping down his bronze skin and the light reflecting off the back of him. His hair is styled in that messy perfection that only comes with just having taken a shower, and his scent hits my nose, confirming he must have just cleaned himself up, the fresh and woodsy smell of his soap drawing me into his house and closer to him.

“Thanks for coming,” he says as he shuts the door behind me, presses his chest to my back, and then rests his hands on my shoulders. Before I can speak, his lips find the crevice where my neck meets my shoulder and he kisses the skin ever so slightly, igniting my entire body.

Focus, Sydney. Remember, you came here to ask him what his problem is.

“Why were you such a jerk earlier?”

His lips stop moving and lift from my body completely as he turns me around to face him.

“What do you mean?”

I scoff and then place my purse on his counter, followed by my hands on my hips. “You barely said anything to me tonight. I thought we agreed to move past the animosity, Javi? I let you fuck me and then you treated me like dirt earlier.”

He stares at me for a moment before moving forward and placing his hands on my hips, causing mine to fall. “I didn't mean to treat you like dirt, as you so eloquently described. I just didn't want to bring any unnecessary

attention to us so people wouldn't think there was something going on.”

“Oh ...”

He grins. “Yeah, oh. I figured privacy was important to you and it's nobody's business anyway if we're having sex.” One of his hands lifts from my waist and then he brushes his thumb across my bottom lip, bringing me back to that high I felt when his lips touched me. “And in case you forgot, you *asked* me to fuck you, Princess. So I did. And tonight, I'm going to do it again.”

I can't fight the anticipation that radiates all over my body with his promise. “Is that so?”

“As long as that's what you want. No matter what you might think here, Sydney, you're the one in control. We don't do anything you don't want to do, okay?” He bends slightly at the knee so his eyes are level with mine as he searches them for answers.

I give him a slight nod. “Sounds good.”

“Good. Now turn back around, Princess. I've been thinking of this ass for the past three days and I want my hands on it again.”

I do as I'm told, shaking with excitement as Javier's voice slips into the deep, controlling rasp that I've grown to crave—and when that craving started, I have no idea.

“I don't want Clay touching you again,” he growls in my ear, massaging the flesh of my ass cheeks.

“Well, he only did because you were avoiding me.” My words are sharp, mostly because I don't want Clay touching me either.

His tongue darts out and licks my neck again as I reach behind me to weave my hands through his jet black hair. “And I thoroughly regretted that decision once I lived through it. He doesn't get to touch what's mine.”

“What's yours?” I ask breathlessly, growing wetter with his declaration.

“You're mine if I'm fucking you, Sydney. No one else's. Do you understand?”

“Does that work both ways then?” I look behind me so I can see his eyes.

He lifts his head and nods, staring at me intently. “Yes.”

I line my mouth up to his ear and whisper in a silky voice. “Then do whatever you want with me, Javi. Break me for all I care. Just make me scream.”

“Fuck, Princess. You don’t know what you’re asking for.” He reaches into his pocket and extracts a piece of black satin that looks like a tie.

“What’s that for?”

The corners of his lips rise as he stares at me. “Have you ever been blindfolded, Sydney?”

I shake my head. “No.”

His smile grows wider. “Then that’s another first of yours I get to claim.” His hands rise with the fabric and he carefully places it over my eyes, blocking out the minuscule light in the room. Once he’s satisfied with the knot, he grabs my hand and brings me over to another point in the room. I can hear my breathing and my heartbeat in my ears as I anticipate what comes next.

The graze of his fingers on my hips startles me, but then I melt into his touch as he lifts my shirt from my body, the cool air hitting my skin and raising goosebumps along my limbs.

I stand there waiting for more just as his lips press against my stomach right above my belly button, making my breath hitch. He plants gentle kisses along my abdomen, dipping his tongue beneath the waistband of my leggings just as his thumbs hook inside and he drags them down my legs. He helps me step out of them, and then I’m standing there alone again.

“God, you’re fucking perfect,” he mutters as his hands move up and down my arms and then to my back where he pops the clasp on my bra and relieves it from my torso, leaving me standing in front of him in nothing but my thong. I’m naked and blindfolded, and yet, I have no qualms about this predicament.

In fact, I’m bursting at the seams for his next move.

The sudden touch of his nose on my slit has me lurching forward, bracing my hands on his shoulders as he kneels between my legs, inhaling my scent and pressing his tongue along the already soaked fabric.

“So sweet,” he says against my pussy.

“Javi,” I moan just as the slap of his hand on my ass makes me jump.

“What did I say? Who’s in control here?”

“You,” I reply.

“That’s right. Now let me do what I’ve been thinking about for days.” He rips my thong from my body, yet another sacrifice being made in this game we’re playing.

But I’m not sure it’s the only one. No ... I feel like my heart is

wanting to put in her two cents too because no matter how attractive I find Javier, there's a part of me that's drawn to his soul as well.

I feel like we understand each other in an unspoken way. It makes me want to know more. And maybe I'll just have to push for that down the line.

This isn't about that, Sydney. This is about sex. Focus on that, not whether you'll be able to give this up when it ends.

Before I can overthink the future too much, Javi dives his tongue between my legs, pushing them open wider so he can fuck me with his mouth.

And boy, does he do the job right.

Short flicks, long drags, teasing circles—his tongue works me over like I'm on a rollercoaster—except I can't anticipate what's coming next because I can't see. All I can do is feel.

“God, you're so fucking wet.”

“You do that to me.”

“You're stroking my ego, Princess,” he says, chuckling between licking me.

“It's true.”

That causes him to stop and I wonder if I've said the wrong thing.

But then Javier is guiding me to another part of the house, far from where we were just moments ago. Before I know it, I feel something soft behind me and as I put my hands out, I sense a bed with a down comforter placed on top.

“Stay like that,” he commands as my hands freeze on the bed behind me. My back is slightly arched, pushing my chest out.

And then Javier smacks my breast, causing me to shriek and then moan in pleasure.

“You like that?”

“Yes.”

Then his fingers are on my tits, twisting my nipples. “Fuck. The things I want to do to this body, Princess. I want to tie you up, fuck you hard ... I can't decide what to do first.”

My breaths come out in short, little pants. “Then do them all.”

My body is flying within a second, landing on the bed behind me as I hear Javier remove his pants and rip a foil packet. And then the bed dips, his weight inching closer to me, hovering over me but never touching my body.

A light flick of his tongue hits my nipple, and then it moves to my hip

bone, and then my clit. My chest is heaving as he grants me short flicks of his magical tongue at different places all over my body before I feel another piece of satin graze my wrist.

“Lift your hands above your head, Princess.” I follow his directions, bringing my hands above my head and clasping my fingers as he ties them together and rests them back down on the bed.

“Leave your hands up there. You move, I stop.”

I nod, but say nothing, knowing that the more I speak the longer he’s going to drag this out. My core is on fire right now, burning so hot for this man as I wait for him to give me what I need—what I think I’ve always needed and just never found.

Until him.

The head of his cock presses against my entrance as his palms widen my legs, and the intrusion makes me gasp.

“Let me in, Sydney. Relax, baby.” His term of endearment twirls in my brain for a second, causing all sorts of havoc, before his cock dives deeper into my pussy, effectively pushing that thought out.

“Yes ...” I mewl as he begins to move. Keeping my hands above my head and following my order, I relish in the darkness that allows me to just focus on everything I’m feeling.

The smack of his balls on my ass.

The feel of his hands gripping the flesh on the inside of my thighs.

The tightening of my nipples with each of his thrusts.

The exhilaration building in my body with each movement that connects us.

I need more. I can’t believe that running into a guy from my past has brought out my deepest desires, a gift I’m willingly putting in his hands.

Javier’s thrusts pick up speed and then my entire body is shaking as the bed slams into the wall over and over again. I feel his weight hover over me again, his hands clasping the satin at my wrists while he pounds into me, his breath touching my ear as he whispers attentively.

“Who owns this pussy, Princess?”

“You do,” I answer. “God, yes! More, Javi!”

“Fuck, you feel so damn good. So wet. So tight ...”

A loud moan escapes my lips as he continues to slam his cock deep inside of me, bringing on my orgasm. His lips close over one of my nipples as he prolongs his movements, and the feeling is exquisite. Then as if he can

read my mind, I feel one of his hands travel south between us before his fingers start to rub my clit, building my release quickly.

His fingers move as his cock continues to slide in and out of me, and my mind goes blank, nothing but the sensations of my orgasm on my mind—something I don't think I've ever been able to achieve.

“God, yes. Right there. Keep going,” I encourage as I feel that tightness form, my breath tethering as I wait for my orgasm to break free.

And then it does, hurtling me off a cliff I'm willingly falling over. My body shakes and trembles as each tremor rolls through me just as Javier releases my hands from his grasp, sits upright again, and grips my hips, pulling me against him harder than before.

And then he stills, groaning into the room, and emptying himself into the condom.

“Fuck!” he shouts before I feel his torso thrust forward and land on my own.

As he catches his breath, I feel his hands move to the back of my head, releasing the knot on the satin before he gently removes it from my eyes. And as I blink to adjust to the dim light, he also frees my hands and then looks down at me.

Our eyes are locked, our breaths heavy, and so much is spoken by our lack of words, our eyes holding a conversation as we stare at one another.

Holy shit. That just happened again, and it was even better than before.

We connected.

It wasn't just fucking. It wasn't just sex. Javier read my body like a treasure map and I lead him right to the prize. We were a team on a mission to satisfy and please, and I think we both won.

“Are you okay?” he asks me, his golden eyes bouncing back and forth between mine.

I nod slowly while studying his face. His forehead is wrinkled from the narrowing of his eyes, his dark stubble is prominent around his mouth and jaw, and his lips are full and a soft shade of pink—lips that I still have yet to taste.

And as the silence grows and his eyes dip down to my mouth, I wonder if he's finally going to kiss me. We've had sex twice now and I've yet to feel his tongue and lips against mine.

“I need to, uh ...” He points down to where we're still joined and

slowly pulls out of me, jumping off the bed and heading for what I'm guessing is the bathroom.

While he's gone, I take that moment to veer around the room I'm in, which I'm guessing is his. It's not very large as the bed takes up most of the space, but it's exactly what I'd imagine Javier's room to look like—dark, cold, but functional. The walls are a dark gray and his bed spread is black. He has one dresser along the wall to my right and a laundry basket in the corner next to another door which I'm going to assume is a closet.

Javier returns quickly with a warm rag and runs it between my legs gently, cleaning up my wetness. He reaches out a hand and pulls me to a sitting position before looking down at the ground and finding his pants, stepping in the legs, dragging them up, and buttoning them as I watch him.

“Where are my clothes?”

“The living room.”

“Okay ...” I start to get up, but Javier stops me.

“I'll get them for you. But you, uh, don't have any underwear.” He smirks.

“Yeah, if you could stop ripping them apart, that would be lovely.”

He shrugs and then heads for the door. “I don't make promises I can't keep, Princess.”

I watch him leave, wondering how this departure will go, and if it will grant me more clarity than the last.

Javier sets my clothes down on the bed and then gives me privacy to dress, which I find weird since we just had sex and were naked. But I digress.

Once I'm clothed minus my underwear, I head back to the living room, but find Javier in the kitchen drinking a glass of water and leaning up against the kitchen counter.

“Thirsty?”

“Sure. I could use a drink.”

He opens the cupboard, grabs a glass, and moves to the fridge to fill it from the dispenser on the outside.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I take a large gulp, not realizing how parched I was from screaming.

“So, I was thinking ...” he starts, piquing my curiosity. “We should probably exchange numbers so we can communicate easier about meeting

up.”

I set my glass down and reach for my phone in my purse, but encourage myself to get clarification from him before I leave.

“So you want to keep doing this?”

He eyes me like I’m fucking stupid. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I mean, I do. I just didn’t know if you wanted that too.”

He chuckles. “I’d be a crazy fool to pass up sex like that, Princess.” His comment makes me swell with pride, even though I didn’t feel like I did much. Overall, I felt like I was the one reaping the reward, but I’m glad to know that Javier felt like he was winning too.

“Okay then. Exclusive sexual partners.”

“You can just say friends-with-benefits, or fuck buddies. No need to be politically correct.”

My indifference comes out as a laugh. “Okay, sure.”

We exchange numbers and then I grab my purse to leave. “Thanks, I guess.”

Javier grins. “You’re welcome. Talk to you soon.”

“Yeah. See ya.” I leave his house without another word and hop in my car to drive home.

This is exactly what I wanted—no-strings-attached, hot and heavy sex—so why does my chest ache a bit with how nonchalant he was about the entire arrangement?

Perhaps I need to rewire my brain if I’m going to keep this up. Otherwise I have a feeling someone is going to get hurt—me.

Chapter 16

Javier

I'm fucking Sydney Matthews.

The thought that has been on repeat in my mind for the past week weaves its way to the forefront again as I drill in the next piece of drywall in the bedroom of the house we're building.

It's been seven days since I lived out a high school fantasy I think most men would admit to having—sex with the cheerleading captain, prom queen, and as an added bonus, the valedictorian. The seventeen-year-old boy in me is raving with confidence knowing that girl was in my bed and screaming out my name just a few days ago.

But the twenty-eight-year-old man I am now is having trouble accepting the predicament I now find myself in—drowning in need for a woman I never thought I'd have, let alone want. Sydney has not only infiltrated my bed and my spank bank highlights, but she's digging herself into my everyday thoughts. I knew she was there before, but now that I've tasted her, felt her wrapped around my cock, and heard her moans of pleasure, it's all I can think about.

I told her this could only be sex, and honestly, I feel like that's all I could give her. I'm not the type of man she needs—a stuffy suit that rolls around in hundred dollar bills before he falls asleep on his eight-hundred count Egyptian cotton sheets at night. I'm just a blue-collar worker with a past that would probably make her run for the hills the second she realized what a monster I can be.

And that's part of the reason why I didn't kiss her. Kissing is intimate, more intimate than sex, I might argue. Believe me, I want to taste her, but if her lips pull me in like her pussy has, I don't think I'd come up for air.

Even though I'm striving to move beyond my past indiscretions, that part of me is still in there—a man who can snap at the drop of a hat. Beating the shit out of Jesus wasn't the first time I'd lost it. But given the other details of that night, it was first time I almost killed someone.

Sydney is too pure for someone like me.

Pure—funny how I would use that word to describe her after she begged for me to fuck her. The woman definitely surprised me with how brazen she can be and how willing she is to let me have my way with her. Of course, it's always the prudes in public that are freaks in the sheets, right?

Regardless of how she likes to be handled in bed, the woman is tight-laced and upstanding, and I am not. I'm jagged and flawed. A little broken and lost. I have no idea what my future will hold, which is yet another reason why sex with Sydney can only be a momentary distraction.

"Hey, Javi?" Trilch calls to me from the other side of the house we're working on, pulling me from my self-deprecating thoughts.

I set down my drill and then trudge across the concrete floors, finding him in the master bathroom. "What's up?"

"I don't think this is the right tile, man. I'm looking at these plans and it says white marble, but this is more gray, don't you think?"

I grab the paper from his hands and check the product number on the plans with the box. Fuck, he's right. These aren't the right ones.

"Shit. How the fuck did this happen? And why wasn't this checked after it was delivered?"

Trilch just shrugs and then moves his hand up to swipe the sweat from his brow. "That's not my job, boss." I glare at him, knowing he's insinuating this is my fault. "You've been a little distracted lately, so something was bound to get fucked up."

"What are you implying, Trilch?"

He shrugs again. "Nothing. I just know that there's usually a reason a man can't focus. And my money is that reason is a woman."

I scoff, throw the paper down on the work station, and then begin to walk away. "Get back to work, fucker. I'll go get this tile debacle situated." I bend down to grab the boxes of tiles and then walk out to the truck, loading them in the back.

I wonder if Trilch can sense that something happened between Sydney and me? He was there when she ragged on me at Russo's. He saw the tension between us. But he couldn't possibly know that we crossed that line from enemies to lovers ... could he?

As I drive across town to the supplier that Gibson Construction uses for flooring, countertops, and tile, I can't help the grin that graces my lips as I think about the last time I went to buy tile—Sydney's smug look on her face when she picked out the tile I'm installing in my house, her challenge when

she asked me to teach her how to lay it, the scream she let out when I gave her an orgasm, or two, instead.

The fucking woman won't leave my mind, even when I'm at work and should be focused on anything but the next time I get to taste her.

I arrive at the business and rush inside to get the problem squared away. Bill, the owner, apologizes profusely and luckily, had the tile we ordered still in stock. We make the switch, and I'm back in my truck, heading back for the job site within twenty minutes. As I cruise down the road, I pass by a few office buildings, noticing the sign for the law firm Sydney works for. I may have done a little social media stalking in the past week, wanting to know more about the woman who's been running through my mind without straight up asking her.

Because questions are personal, and that's not what we agreed to.

I'm sitting at a stoplight, wondering what's she's doing at that moment. Is she speaking to a client? Is her head buried in paperwork or staring at her computer? Is she thinking about my cock the way I think about her pussy at random times in the day?

The light turns green and I hit the gas pedal, just as the gas light indicator comes on in the truck.

"Shit." I search for the nearest gas station which is just a few feet up the road and signal to turn into the driveway, pulling up to a pump. As I run the company gas card and start the fuel, my hands move to fetch my phone from my pocket.

Since I can't help but think about Sydney right now, I think we need to schedule our next rendezvous. Knowing when I get to fuck her again should help me concentrate once I get back to the job site. I search for her number in my phone, which I labeled *Princess* for anonymity purposes, and shoot off a text to her as nerves hum through me.

Me: What are you doing tonight? I need to taste your pussy.

Princess: Well, hello to you too. I'm actually leaving for Fort Worth tonight.

Well, fuck.

Me: What's in Fort Worth?

Princess: A lawyer's conference that my boss paid for me to attend.

Me: When will you be back?

Princess: Late Sunday night.

Me: Well, there goes my plans.

Princess: Yeah, sorry. But just knowing you wanted to meet up tonight has me wet.

Disappointment rolls through me as the gas pump clicks off. But then I do a double take and read her text again. Seems Sydney wants me as badly as I want her right now.

Me: Where are you right now?

Princess: My office. Why?

Me: Lock your door.

I slide back into my truck just as Sydney's number flashes across my screen, forcing a smile from my lips instantly.

"Why do you want me to lock my door?"

I pull the door shut on the truck and start the engine. "Because you're going to relieve the ache in between your legs at your desk right now, Princess. And I'm going to enjoy listening to you come on the phone with me."

She pauses, so I know she's overthinking this. "Javier ... you can't be serious."

"This is what you wanted, wasn't it, Sydney? You wanted someone to tell you what to do, be in control of your pleasure? Well, since I can't have you tonight and boss you around the way you need in person, this is the next best thing. I've had a half-chub all day thinking about licking your pussy tonight, but seems that's not going to happen. So I say we satisfy our need for each other right now."

I can hear her breathing through the phone, telling me she's definitely turned on. "Where are you?"

I pull out of the gas station and into an alley way between two buildings, secure from eyes around me. This needs to be quick though so I don't draw attention to myself in a company truck. "In my work truck."

"Aren't you supposed to be working right now?"

"I had to run an errand. Have you locked your door yet, Sydney?" I reach down and stroke myself through my jeans as the click of metal hits my ears. "Good girl."

"This is insane. I can't believe I'm about to do this." Her voice is shaky, but I think she needs to live on the edge a bit.

"Take off your panties, but leave your skirt on."

"How did you know I was wearing a skirt?"

I huff out a laugh. "Lucky guess. Now send me a picture so I can see

them.”

“Okay ...” I hear the phone hit her desk and movement come through the speaker. Then in a matter of seconds, a notification pops up on my screen. The sight of Sydney’s black lace thong hanging off her finger has me rock hard in seconds.

“Good girl. Now pull your skirt up over your hips and touch your pussy. Tell me how wet you are.”

I hear more movement and then she’s moaning. “So wet, Javi.”

“Have you been thinking about me?” I ask as I squeeze the phone between my ear and shoulder, and reach down to extract my dick from my pants, sliding my hand up and down my length. My other hand pulls my shirt up so I don’t blow my load on it in a few minutes.

“Yes ...”

“What have you been thinking about?”

I hear her swallow and then she speaks. “About your cock. How it feels sliding in and out of me. How desperate you make me feel.”

“You like feeling out of control with me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “It’s exactly what I wanted.” Fuck, I love knowing this girl is hard-up for me.

“Good. Now finger yourself. Send me a picture to show me how wet you are.”

I wait for a moment and then groan when I see the picture of her glistening fingers come through the phone. “Fuck. Play with your clit, Princess. Get yourself off.”

“I’m so close already, Javi. Just your voice has me close to the edge.”

How does the woman already have me ready to burst like a fucking teenager? Knowing I can affect her like this gives me a sense of power I feel like I’ve been missing lately.

Maybe that’s what this thing with Sydney is giving me—control when I’ve felt like I’ve had anything but control in the past. I’ve never had a plan, I’ve never known where I’m headed or what comes next. I’ve never strived to be more until I got out of prison, and then we ran into each other.

And now she’s asking for it, begging for me to lead her down a path I never saw us traveling, which gives me a weird sense of purpose. If nothing else comes from this run-in with her, maybe we both leave feeling satisfied and renewed.

Even though the thought of this ending twists my stomach in knots.

“Are you almost there, Princess?” My words come out in a growl as I feel that tingling in my spine.

“Yes. Fuck, I’m so wet, Javi. I’m gonna come ...”

“Let me hear you,” I command as her breath hitches and her whimpers come through the line. I know she’s probably trying to stifle her noises so her co-workers don’t know what’s going on in her office, but hearing her lose control pushes me off the edge as I spill my release on my stomach and moan alongside of her.

She takes a few deep breaths and then I can hear her chuckle. “Did we really just do that?”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, we did. I feel better though. I hope you feel the same.”

“Definitely.”

“That should hold us over then until next week?”

“Yeah. Sorry I didn’t tell you I was leaving, but ...” I can sense her hesitation in discussing our lives with one another.

“It’s not a problem. But hey, if you need another release while you’re alone in your hotel room, you have my number.” I’m teasing, but part of me hopes she’ll give in to my offer.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Have a good day, Javi.”

“You too, Princess.” I hang up the phone and then reach for a napkin from the glovebox to clean up the mess on my stomach.

As I drive back to the jobsite, I wonder what the hell has gotten into me. I’ve never been the type to jerk-off in the middle of the day, let alone while I’m on the clock. But fuck if hearing Sydney get off over the phone didn’t give me the push to complete the day’s work with one less added distraction.

Now the countdown is on for when I can make her come again in person. Seems I’ve found a new addiction to keep me occupied for the time being—but the question is, will I be able to give her up when the time comes?

Chapter 17

Sydney

Javier: I have a feeling I could entertain you more than your stupid conference.

The text from Javier comes through just as my first session is about to start, and I don't miss how knowing he was thinking about me in that moment makes a smile build on my lips.

Me: I don't doubt that. Guess you'll just have to show me what I'm missing when I get back.

I shoot off the text and then turn my phone on silent, willing my mind to focus on the presenter of my first session. Byron signed me up for this conference months ago, and back then I was eager to attend.

That was before I had a sex-friend as a distraction.

On the drive down here for the conference, I kept replaying the events that led me to this point, wondering how I ended up with a man from my past that has me questioning my future—not in the way where I think Javier and I would end up together—but more as in, how have I managed to go through my life at this point missing out on the type of comfort I feel with him?

I honestly don't know him very well except for the fact that we went to high school together. I know he definitely grew up differently than I did and that's part of the reason he had this disdain for me that I finally broke through.

But other than him living in the guest house on his sister's property and working for Gibson Construction and Elite Gym, there are so many holes in his persona that I'm yearning to fill. And yet, when we connect physically, I feel as if I've known him forever—like he knows exactly what I need and can take, and I trust him to give that to me. I've never experienced that with any other man, even ones I was with for a long period of time. And now that I have it, it's filling that void I felt growing recently, especially after my attack. Wasn't that what I was looking for when I spoke to Ally?

Hours of legal jargon and note taking consume me until the conference pauses for us to feed our stomachs. On my lunch break, I check my phone to

make sure I haven't missed any important calls or emails, forgetting that Javier and I had a small exchange a few hours ago. And when I open his response to my message earlier, I can feel the pink in my cheeks develop as I swallow hard.

Javier: I'm going to have your ass so red and your voice so hoarse from screaming my name that sitting at your desk and doing your boring job is gonna be painful, but you'll love it because I gave you three orgasms before.

A flash of his handprint marking my ass and the promise of multiple orgasms has me clenching my thighs together, but I pick up on a detail in his text that makes me pause.

Me: As much as that promise makes me itch for our next meeting, I'd like you to know that I actually love my job.

The three little dots pop up on the screen as I wait for his reply.

Javier: What made you want to become a lawyer? What is your specialty anyway?

Could it be that Javier Montes is actually trying to get to know me, asking me about my life without throwing stones about who he thought I was? But wait, isn't that against his rules?

I ponder my response before I ultimately decide that I kind of want to see how this plays out. I know I want to discover more about the man that is rocking my world between the sheets, so perhaps if I open up, he will too.

Me: My main focus is in probate law, conservatorships, guardianships, contract formation, and I dabble in family law from time to time. You probably know that my stepfather is a judge, so affiliation with the law runs in the family. But my main reason for choosing that avenue was because of what happened with my real dad.

Javier: And what happened?

Me: He died suddenly when I was one, and he and my mother were never married. Because of that she wasn't entitled to any of his assets, which wasn't much, but it left her struggling financially. We got kicked out of his house and scrambled to find somewhere to go. If he had just taken the time to set up his estate in the event that he passed, my mother and I would have been a lot better off after he died. I know people can't plan their deaths, but I use my own personal experience to encourage people to think about what would happen if they did die unexpectedly. I know it sounds morbid, but people need to be prepared.

Javier: I'm sorry to hear about your dad. I didn't know that.

A few seconds pass and then my phone vibrates again.

Javier: My dad actually died too.

Holy shit! He gave me a morsel. No, more like a chunk of him that helps explain who is a little better. And what do you know? We actually have something in common.

Me: I'm sorry. How old were you?

Javier: Thirteen.

Me: If you don't mind me asking, how did he die?

I see the bubbles pop up again, but then they vanish and I realize I don't have time to wait for his response. I stare down at my phone, wondering if he'll begin typing again, but nothing comes up. Feeling slightly deflated, I throw away my trash and make my way down the hall of the convention center to my next session, checking my phone a few more times before I finally have to silence it again.

By the end of the day, I'm itching to see if Javier ever responded to me because I'm afraid I messed up this thing between us by prying. But at the same time, he pried first, although his question was about my job and I voluntarily divulged the information about my dad.

When I turn my phone on, disappointment slams into me. There's no response from him, which just makes my uneasiness fester.

My stomach is a bundled mess of nerves by the time I make it to my room with takeout, opting to stay in and purge instead of going out with a few other lawyers I met today. They all seemed like nice people, but my mental capacity to hold small talk went out the window as I struggled to stay awake during the last session of the day.

After stripping off my clothes and throwing on my pajamas sans bra, I rest my back against the headboard of my bed and balance the Styrofoam container of Chinese food between my crisscrossed legs. Reaching for my Kindle, I wait for it to wake up before I dive back into a series by one of my favorite author duos since the latest book just released yesterday. I'm hoping that reading will help me forget the twinge of fear that rests in my chest after my text conversation with Javi earlier.

Enthralled with the story, I spill Chow mein down my shirt but swipe it off, continuing to scroll my eyes across the words until my phone vibrates next to me, pulling my attention to the text lighting up the screen. I set my food to the side and swipe at the screen, bubbling with nerves as I read

Javier's text.

Javier: How was the rest of your day?

It's not a reply to my question from earlier, but at least he's not ghosting me. In fact, he's actually trying to have a normal conversation, which both relieves some of the tension I felt earlier and piques my curiosity.

Me: Good. I learned a lot. Now I'm just reading and eating Chinese takeout in my hotel room.

Javier: If you say Panda Express is Chinese food, I don't think we can be friends anymore.

My eyes veer to the lid of the container as the Panda Express logo stares me in the face.

Me: I happen to love their orange chicken.

Me: And I didn't know we were friends...

Javier: Friends with benefits, remember?

Me: Hmmmm ... I definitely recall the benefits, but not so much on the friendship.

Javier: Remind me when you get home to show you this little hole-in-the-wall, family-owned Chinese restaurant down the street from the gym. Then we'll see how much you love that crap you're eating.

Me: Thank you for your concern, and I would love to find a place near home that's delicious.

Javier: What are you reading?

Me: You sure are interested in what I'm doing tonight ... it's kinda strange. Don't you have plans this evening for debauchery with your boys or something?

Javier: Andre is my best friend, but he's married ... to my sister, so he doesn't go out much. And truth is, neither do I. I'm actually in the middle of a barbeque at their house. A few of their friends are over, but I'm not much for partying these days.

Me: So you'd rather talk to me instead?

Javier: Something like that. I wish you were here instead so we could cause some debauchery all over my house.

The throbbing between my legs starts to grow. Just talking to Javier right now is sparking a need for him, but there's also a feeling of calm washing over me as well, knowing he'd rather me be there, even if it is just for sex.

Javier: You never told me what you're reading ...

Me: A romance novel ...

Javier: Like Fifty Shades of Grey?

Me: LOL No. Not all romance novels are like that, Javi.

Javier: We can't get off together, so you're getting off to some fictional guy instead?

Me: You should read his description, Javi. He's dangerous, brooding, covered in tattoos and pining after a girl he's loved his whole life and he's not afraid to tell her how he feels. He's hot!

I chuckle to myself, wondering what his face looks like right now. Are his lips pursed, his forehead scrunched in disgust or confusion?

Javier: He's not real. Why would you want to imagine a man when you could have the real thing?

Me: Women are more complex when it comes to sex, Javi. Things are much more mental for us, and the imagination is a powerful thing. Sometimes reading a sex scene in a book gets me more turned on than if I were to watch porn. And the buildup between the characters always gets my heart racing. There's more to the stories besides sex too. I think people forget that about love—the physical stuff can come and go, but the connection between two people beyond sex is what keeps the magic alive.

I press send and then realize I got way too philosophical on him. All he asked was if I'd rather have the real thing, and I go into a lecture about how sex isn't everything. Which it's not, but the only thing between Javi and I is sex—at least I think it is. Suddenly I'm not so sure as this conversation continues to progress.

Javier: I guess I can understand that. I mean, I still think nothing can replace sex, but I understand that women need more than just the physical. Kind of like when I blindfolded you ... I bet you got off harder from that.

Me: I did.

Javier: Then next time I'll try to think of something else to please you.

Me: Do you think about that often? The things you're going to do to me ...

I bite my lip as I wait for his reply, struggling not to smile. I know I wonder multiple times a day what Javier is going to give me next, so I wonder if he does the same.

Javier: All fucking day. I never thought you and I would ever be

doing something like this, Princess ... but fuck. I'm not mad about it.

Me: I'll just have to use my imagination until I see you next week then.

Javier: You'd better be thinking of me and not some fictional character as you get off. If I could sneak away right now so I could get you off over the phone again, I would. But I just got roped into playing Cards Against Humanity.

Me: I LOVE that game! I even have the version made based off of the television show, *Friends*! We mixed those cards in with the original game and it made it so much better.

Javier: Fuck. You and my sister would get along great. She's obsessed with the show too.

I'm not sure how to take that response. Does he want to formally introduce me to his sister? I mean, I met her for a second at the gym on that first day, and I remember her vaguely from high school. She was younger than us, but I think we had art together or something.

Me: Well, have fun. I'll just be over here with my book and Panda Express.

Javier: You too. Well, fuck that. Don't have too much fun, Princess. In fact, I dare you not to make yourself come until I see you again. It will make it that much better.

Just thinking about my next orgasm from Javi has the ache between my legs skyrocketing. Can I hold off? These characters are just about to get it on and I was itching for a release anyway.

Me: I don't know. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Maybe once you see me you'll be able to tell if I came all over my fingers or not.

Javier: Fuck. Now I'm hard. Don't do it, Princess. Wait for me.

I know you can't sense tone and emotion in a text, but there's something about those last three words that squeeze around my heart. What the fuck is happening here between us?

Me: You'd better wait for me too then.

Javier: Done.

Me: Go play your game, Javi. Have fun. Goodnight.

Javier: Goodnight, Princess. Sleep well.

My heart is thrumming wildly by the time we end our conversation, my adrenaline firing so high that I don't even have an appetite any more. I store the rest of my food in the mini fridge and get ready for bed, preparing to read

some more and fight the urge to relieve the tension in my body that Javier builds every time we talk to each other. And even though our conversation tonight was primarily laced with sexual innuendos and tension, there were the small glimpses I got of him today that fed another need I'm developing for him—the one where I wonder if we're joking ourselves that this thing between us can ever just be about sex.

After another long day of sessions and a few scattered text messages with Javier that had nothing to do with sex, I drive home from Fort Worth late that Sunday night. Byron knew I'd get in late, so he gave me that Monday off, in which I used my extra day to sleep in and get caught up on laundry and grocery shopping—you know, the extremely thrilling parts of being an adult.

By the time Tuesday came around, I was smacked in the face with reality as I entered the office, thrown back into the world of emails, client meetings, court appearances, and paperwork. But that night was my next self-defense class and the first time I'd see Javier since our phone sex incident and the text messages we exchanged this weekend.

The excitement I felt walking into the gym was different this time too. I knew I wasn't going to be able to jump his bones in front of everyone, so the thrill of an impending orgasm wasn't what made me jumpy. I think it was more along the lines of seeing his face after only talking through a screen for days, or wondering what his reaction would be seeing me after so long and actually opening up to me a bit.

After I change my outfit in the locker room and put away my things, I stride into the room where the class takes place and see Javier standing there in front of the white board with his back to me, giving me the perfect view of his toned ass and broad back. His tank top shows off the boulders of muscles in his arms covered in the ink that I've grown quite fond of, and of course he has his hat on backwards, which sparks a devilish side in me that wants to ride him with it still on.

I don't say a word as I soak up the sight of him, but as if he can sense me, a slight twist of his head over his shoulders grants me with a natural, blinding smile I've never seen from him before, and not just since we started sleeping together. This is a smile that genuinely shows that he's happy to see me, accompanied by what I could only describe as a twinkle in his eye, and suddenly my heart is leaping on the trampoline in my chest.

“Hey, Princess,” he says, turning completely now as his eyes bounce up and down my body, taking in my workout gear.

“Hi.”

His mouth opens to say something but then his face falls flat instantly, mine following suit. His eyes veer left, which spikes my curiosity to turn around and discover what changed his reaction to me in a second.

A man dressed in a black polo shirt and khaki pants comes waltzing in the room, staring at Javier. And as I take in his uniform, it hits me that I know exactly what this guy is here for.

“Javier. Nice to see you,” he says, stopping right beside me with an outstretched hand, waiting for Javier to shake it.

Javi moves forward, intercepting the gesture, but his face remains hard with a hint of astonishment.

“Gerald. This is a surprise.”

“Well, you know that’s part of the drill. Can we go somewhere to talk?”

Javi nods and then walks right past me as if I’m not standing there, ruminating on this man’s presence. As they saunter off and I take in the back of the man’s shirt, a million questions start rolling through my mind.

A parole officer just walked in here looking for Javier, it seemed. But then again, I could be wrong. There could be a million reasons why he came in—checking on another employee or client, trying to obtain information about another offender that has gone missing—this list of possibilities is endless.

Yet, remembering the way Javi’s face fell flat tells me there might be more to that man’s appearance than I realize, which means there’s a whole lot more about Javier that I don’t know.

And even though doubt could easily seep its way into my brain right now, the only thing I care about is making sure Javi’s alright. He seemed rattled by the man’s appearance, but something tells me there’s more to the story, which means maybe more questions are in order between Javier and myself.

Chapter 18

Javier

“I’m so proud of you ladies. I hope this class has helped build confidence and strength in you, both physically and mentally. Just remember to remain calm in a situation and recall your training here if you ever find yourself being attacked.” I flash an inherent smile at the women before dispersing the clipboards. “If you would please fill out this survey before you leave letting us know how the class benefited you or if there’s anything else we can improve on, we would appreciate it.”

Clay moves alongside me, handing the surveys and pens to the girls as they wait for us to pass them out. I purposefully made sure to start on the side where Sydney is seated so I can catch a glimpse of her without it seeming obvious. She flashes me a knowing grin and then I move along, counting down the minutes until she’s back in my bed with her legs spread, shouting my name.

It’s been over a week since she’s been back from her conference and we’ve been finding every moment possible to fuck, which unfortunately hasn’t been as often as I’d like. Just a few nights ago I had her riding me on my couch with a blindfold on again. Based on our conversation, I’d say she likes relinquishing her eyesight, and her intense orgasm that pulled one from me as well only confirmed it.

The woman now owns a slice of real estate in my mind, growing with every piece of her that I’m discovering. And yet, in the back of my mind, I’m chastising myself for going there, crossing the line that I was so hell bent on drawing the night this all started. I told Sydney I wasn’t programmed for anything but sex, and before her, that was exactly the case. Now this woman that six weeks ago I couldn’t stand is quickly becoming a person that I crave, not just for her body, but her mind as well.

Last weekend when she was away had me walking around with an ache in my chest that was all too unfamiliar. Irritation ran through me knowing I couldn’t have her the second I wanted her. I felt like a toddler wanting to throw a tantrum because I couldn’t get my way, and the desire I felt to hear

for voice made my stomach twist in knots.

So instead of waiting for her to return, I fucking texted her—curious about what she was doing, what she was wearing, or if she bites on the cap of her pen while deep in thought. I imagined her sitting in a cushioned chair during her conference, her long legs crossed with her heel clad feet dangling as she bobbed them up in down, enraptured by the speaker of the session, her long hair draped around her face and a wrinkle in her brow from concentration.

The woman didn't even have to be naked and I fantasized about her. And then she told me a little bit more about why she became a lawyer, causing something in my mind to shift where she was concerned. I never knew that Sydney Matthews' father wasn't her real dad, and come to find out, we share a loss deeply rooted in our childhood.

Losing my dad was the worst thing that ever happened to me, the catalyst that sparked a bomb that erupted my life as I knew it.

I remember that morning before he left for work like it was yesterday.

"I don't want to go. The girls are so mean to me." My sister whines as my mother hoists her backpack on her back and smooths down her hair.

"You can't avoid school because some little girls are acting like brats," my mother counters. "Besides, Javi will be there in case something happens."

"That's right." My father steps in, bending down in front of my sister so he's eye level with her. His cowboy hat rests on his head, his skin darkened by the sun he slaves away in all day. "We are a family and we protect one another, stand up for each other. Always. That never changes, no matter what."

His eyes find me standing next to him as he nods his head, asking if I understand his words. So I reciprocate, knowing that my father is bestowing a trust in me at a young age to watch over my sister and my mother, a responsibility that I know is not given lightly. "Especially us men, right Javi?"

"Si, Padre."

"You are a Montes, Javi. You protect your own, even if it's against little niñas at school terrorizing your sister. Be there for her, and your Madre, always."

I bob my head up and down again as a wave of responsibility passes through me, transforming me from a boy into a man with his words. His dark

brown eyes sear a promise between us before he stands, kisses my mother and sister on the cheek, pats my head, and leaves our home.

Little did I know that would be the last day I ever saw him.

“Thank you for everything.” A small voice pulls me from my trip down memory lane. Jessica, one of the girls in the class comes up to me, batting her eyelashes suggestively. I’m no stranger to girls coming on to me on the job, but I have absolutely no desire to feed into her games.

“You’re welcome, Jessica. Take care. And if you’re interested in a monthly membership, please talk to Bethany up at the front desk.” I dip my head to her in parting before walking around her and toward the door to get prepared for my next class.

I dodge Sydney as I leave since we have agreed to keep contact between us minimal at the gym. But not saying goodbye to her stirs up something deep in my gut, something that feels like missing her, especially since we hadn’t yet scheduled our next rendezvous. After last week, I wasn’t sure she would want to continue our arrangement when Gerald, my parole officer, surprised me at the gym. Impromptu visits are customary, but the fact that he showed up and Sydney was standing right there was a wake-up call, causing me to pull back from prying more into her life.

It reminded me that by asking her questions, I was inviting her to do the same, and there were so many details about my life that Sydney didn’t need to know, things that would probably make her think twice about the arrangement between us. And even though it makes me sound like an ass, I didn’t want to sacrifice the incredibly satisfying physical relationship we started by bringing my past mistakes into it. If Sydney really knew who she was sleeping with, I’m almost positive she’d think twice about it.

After my last class ends and I head home, my stomach is growling at me for sustenance. Reaching into the fridge, I grab some grilled chicken from the other night, some brown rice, and some fresh veggies to sauté for a quick meal. I not only try to eat healthy to maintain my physique, but after eating prison food for two years, I will never take vegetables for granted ever again.

Just as I’m about to turn the stove burner on, there’s a knock at my door. I’m not expecting company, but that doesn’t mean that Andre and Selina hadn’t decided to pop in and say hello. They tend to keep to themselves mostly during the week since we’re all busy working, saving most of their pop-ins for the weekend, but I wouldn’t put it past them to drop

by unannounced.

Much to my surprise, I open the door to reveal Sydney standing in front of me, freshly showered, but wearing a black trench coat with a bag of takeout in one of her hands. My eyes travel down her body, pausing to appreciate the tan skin of her legs peeking out beneath the hem of her coat and the black stiletto pumps strapped onto her feet.

Then I see the logo on the bag of food and my mouth crawls into a sly grin.

“I see you found Dingxiang’s,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest as I study her and the sexy smirk she has on her lips.

“Well, it was the only Chinese restaurant near the gym, so I assumed it had to be the place you were talking about last week.”

Fuck, that’s right. I did mention a restaurant that would put Panda Express to shame when we were texting.

“Please tell me you were wearing that get-up when you went in to order,” I tease, once again taking a moment to study how fucking sexy she looks right now.

She scoffs before rolling her eyes. “No. I went through the drive-thru, Javi. I would never live it down if my father or one of his friends ever saw me out in public in an outfit like this. If you let me inside though, I’ll show you what I’m hiding underneath and maybe share my food with you. The smell was making my mouth water all the way over here.”

There’s a playfulness to her voice and a fire in her eyes, intriguing me even more with what she could possibly have on under that coat. The man in me wants her to be naked, letting me give in to the cliché fantasy of a woman untying a trench coat to reveal her bare body to you—but the other part of me hopes that Sydney wasn’t driving or walking around completely naked under there where someone could potentially see what my eyes get to.

She steps beside me into my house as I shut the door behind her, watching her move around my kitchen before placing the bag on my counter. She starts unloading the boxes and opening the lids, reaching in with her fingers to sample a piece of sweet and sour pork without searching for a fork first. The way her lips curl around her food and the purse of her mouth as she pulls her fingers from her lips has my dick growing rock hard in seconds.

“Oh my God,” she moans around her mouthful of food. “You’re right. That is so much better than Panda Express.”

“Told ya.” I step up beside her and reach into a bag, pulling out a

spring roll. “What all did you order?”

“A little of everything. I wanted to sample it all and I wasn’t sure what you liked.”

“I eat it all, Princess,” I reply, just as a mischievous grin forms on my lips. I can tell by the way Sydney’s body tenses and she turns to face me with a glimmer in her eyes that says her line of thought ventured right to where my sexual innuendo was placed.

“Oh, I know you do, Javi,” she says, taking a bite of chow mein, dropping the noodles into her mouth slowly before meeting my eyes with hers again. I never thought someone could eat noodles in a sexy manner, but apparently Sydney can. She darts her tongue out to lick the corner of her mouth and I’m instantly swallowing gruffly. “But tonight, I think it’s time I return the favor.”

“Is that so?” I rest my back against the counter as Sydney moves to stand in front of me.

She bobs her head. “Yup.”

“Why did you bring food then if this was just about sex?” I mentally slap myself for asking that question at this moment, knowing that Sydney came here with clear intentions for a release. But part of me wonders why go to the trouble to bring a meal too? I mean, I’m not mad about it. She saved me from cooking and it gives us an excuse to spend some more time together.

But that’s not supposed to be what I want, what we agreed to. We agreed no strings, and all of a sudden, I feel wires wrapping around my ankles and wrists, anchoring me to her in other ways I wanted to avoid.

Her eyes veer toward the floor, alerting me to a shift in the confidence I saw from her before. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything, but the woman has me all up in knots with confusion.

“I guess I wanted to say thank you in some kind of way.” She shrugs and then pops her eyes back up to me. “I’m kind of sad that the self-defense class is over because I feel so much better than I did weeks ago, and I know that’s because of you, Javi. Even though we didn’t start out on the best of terms, wanting to prove you wrong pushed me to keep going, and now I’m harboring a confidence I didn’t have before. So thank you.” She gives me a small smile before glancing down at my crotch, and then back up to my eyes. “And I guess I should thank you for all of the orgasms lately. I think they’re making a difference in my life too.” She winks her right eye at me and then giggles, before taking a deep breath and moving her hands to the belt on her

coat tied around her waist.

“You’re welcome, Sydney. I never turn down food, but I’m glad the class did something for you. That’s the entire reason we offer it.”

She nods again, releasing the knot on her belt. “It did. And now I want to do something for you.” As her hands pull the tie open, the slit between the two sides of her coat widens, revealing her silky skin encased in hot pink lace. Sydney’s body is decked out in a pink, see-through corset that highlights her curves and the dip in her waist while the top pushes up her perfect breasts I’ve become very acquainted with. The fabric is so sheer that it gives me a peek to everything underneath, including her rosy nipples, but still teases me with covering the majority of her skin. The bottom is cut high on her thighs and just as I glance to her crotch, she tosses the coat on the ground and then spins on her heels, revealing the thong in the back that gives me the perfect view of her luscious backside.

Christ almighty, I think I might come in my shorts. I’ve never had a woman surprise me with lingerie like this before, but I don’t hate the fact that it’s Sydney who gets to claim that first for me.

“Fuck, Princess. You look ...”

“You like?” she asks, biting her lip while watching me move my eyes across her flesh like I’m marking a road map with which pit stops to make.

“Absolutely.”

“Good,” she declares as she turns back around to face me and then drops to her knees. “Now let me give you the other part of your present.”

“Sydney, you don’t have to ...” My hands grip the counter behind me as her fingers undo the string on the waistband of my basketball shorts.

“I know I don’t, Javi. But this arrangement can’t just benefit me.”

“Believe me, it doesn’t.”

“Well, sometimes I like a little control too. So shut up and let me put your dick in my mouth.”

I groan as she pushes my shorts down, freeing my cock. I didn’t bother with underwear since I was home alone. Sydney’s eyes light up as she flicks her tongue along the head of my dick before swirling it around and then taking me into her mouth. Fuck, she’s wet and hot and the noises she’s making as if she’s enjoying this more than me has me fighting off an orgasm almost instantly.

“Fuck, sweetheart. That’s good.” My hand finds her hair and grips a handful of it, gently guiding her up and down my length as I watch her work

me over with her mouth. Her hair is still damp from her shower, her face free of makeup, and even though my dick is currently sliding over her tongue and between her lips, I take a moment to appreciate her natural beauty.

She grips the base of my shaft to work me simultaneously with her hand and mouth, teasing me with short flicks and swirling her tongue again around my head before taking me back as far as she can. I see her gag, but it doesn't stop her and she continues to suck me, increasing the suction with each stroke.

And I feel it—the tingle in my spine, the draw of my balls moving up in my body, the warning signs of my orgasm coming on strong.

“Sydney,” I warn while trying to hold off, almost holding my breath as I continue to watch her. “I’m gonna come, babe ...”

She moans and nods with my dick in her mouth, giving me permission to let go. And with a few more strokes, I detonate, releasing my orgasm down her throat, watching her close her eyes and take it all, which is one of the sexiest things I’ve ever witnessed. I never pegged her for a swallower, but apparently this woman is full of surprises.

She slowly releases me from the silkiness of her lips and then peers up at me beneath her dark lashes with a pleased grin on her face.

“Fuck, Princess. I don’t even want to know how you learned to give head like that.”

A small chuckle passes through her lips before she rises and wipes her mouth with her hand. “Honestly, I’m not sure either. I’m not really a fan of doing that. But for some reason,” she pauses and shakes her head at me, “putting your cock in my mouth is all I’ve been able to think about all day.”

“Jesus ...”

“But now, I just want more Chinese food.” She giggles and then moves back to the food, opening up the remaining boxes. With a peek over her shoulder, she asks me, “You’re going to join me, right?”

Still trying to gain my bearings and realizing I’m standing there with my shorts around my ankles, I nod and then right myself, walking across the kitchen on shaky legs to the cabinet where I keep my plates. I grab two forks as well and then join Sydney at the kitchen island, serving up a plate full of food.

“Okay, Javi. You were right. This food is amazing. The shrimp with lobster sauce? I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Told you. Panda Express is swill compared to this.” I take a bite of my

spring roll and then twirl my noodles around my fork in my chow mein, waiting until I'm done chewing to take a bite.

"Definitely not the same, but it gets the job done in a pinch. Are there any other restaurants around town that I should know about ..." she continues just as there's a knock at my door.

We both freeze, our eyes locking and my heart pounding in my chest as I stare at Sydney standing in front of me in hot pink lingerie with her fork poised in front of her mouth.

"Javi, open up!" My sister's voice travels through the door as both of our eyes go wide.

"Fuck." I drop my fork on the plate and then scramble to clean up the mess while Sydney visibly relaxes and her face falls.

"What's wrong?"

"My sister is here."

"Okay ..."

"You need to hide."

"Javi," she says, reaching for my arm and halting my movements. "Even if I do, my car is outside so they know I'm here. Are you ..." she trails off again, dropping her eyes to the floor. "Are you embarrassed that I'm here?"

"What?" I bark out a little more harshly than I intended. "No." *I'm just more terrified of the shit talking that will commence after you leave.* I'm fairly certain my sister has seen Sydney's car here over the past few weeks, so she must know I've had company.

"Then why do I have to hide?"

"I just thought ... I thought you wouldn't want them to know that we're ..."

"Sleeping together?"

Another knock on the door pulls my eyes across the room. "Javi! I know you're home. The light is on. I just need to talk to you for a second."

I roll my eyes and turn back to Sydney who has now put her coat back on. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I can't very well have your sister seeing me dressed in what I'm wearing underneath this." She swats my chest playfully and then moves for the door. I watch stunned as Sydney turns the knob and pulls the door open, where Selena and Andre are standing, both of their brows rising when they see who is on the other side of the door.

"Sydney Matthews?" my sister spits out, which makes Sydney chuckle.

She's either extremely nervous or she's making the most out of this situation.

"You can just call me Sydney. No need for last names." She winks and then looks at Andre. "Hi, Andre. Nice seeing you outside of the gym."

"Uh, yeah. Nice to see you too."

"Well, come in guys. Javi and I were just sharing some Chinese food." She steps away from the door so they can squeeze inside and then shuts it behind them.

"You two were sharing food?" Selena points back and forth between us with a finger.

"Uh, yeah," I chime in. "We were, uh ..."

"Celebrating the self-defense class being over," Sydney continues, smiling brightly. "I brought food over from Dingxiang's since I know it's Javi's favorite as a thank you for being such a knowledgeable instructor. I really loved the class."

"Are you two ... friends?" my sister questions, her eyebrows still inching close to her hairline.

"Yup. Good friends," Sydney replies with a smirk on her face. "Seems Javi just needed someone to wear him down a bit. I knew behind this broody, asshole exterior was really a nice guy."

Andre starts laughing as Selena's eyes widen at me.

"Selena, I actually wanted to ask you something. I heard you own the salon over on Madison?"

"Yeah," she says with a nod, directing her attention back on Sydney.

"Well, my previous hairstylist moved away and I'm in desperate need of a color and cut. Any chance I can get an appointment with you or someone at your salon?"

Selena grins and then bobs her head up and down again slowly, as if she's soaking in Sydney's presence and politeness right now. "Sure. We can make that happen. I have some availability next week, I believe."

"Perfect." Sydney sighs dramatically. "I'll call the salon tomorrow to book something."

"Sounds good."

She turns to me now and rests her hand on my upper arm. "Thanks for celebrating with me, Javi." She winks again and smiles knowingly at me, concealing it from my sister and Andre. "We'll talk soon." Turning to wave at Andre and Selena, she bids them goodbye as well. "Nice to see you two. Have a good night."

“Bye, Sydney,” Andre calls out as she walks through the door and shuts it behind her.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and then turn toward the two of them before opening my eyelids and accepting the inquisition I know is coming.

“Sydney. Fucking. Matthews!” my sister shouts loud enough for the next door neighbor to hear.

“Jesus Christ, Selena. Calm the fuck down,” I growl, moving on my feet back to the kitchen to start putting away the food. “We were just eating.”

“Each other?” Andre interjects and then cackles.

“She was wearing a trench coat, Javi. In the middle of June. I’m not stupid, ass wipe.”

I close my eyes and blow out a sharp breath.

“And that car,” she says before looking back toward the yard. “That car has been here a lot lately. I just thought you had a lady friend over, but ... it was her, wasn’t it? Are you fucking Sydney Matthews?” Her hands are on her hips with one of her eyebrows raised, and the red of her headband brings out the fire in her eyes.

I shoot my gaze over to her and then cross my arms over my chest. To hell with it. I’m a grown ass man, and I can fuck anyone I want.

“What if I am?”

Selena’s jaw drops and then she smacks her hand to her forehead. “You have lost your damn mind, Javi. Didn’t we tell you to be careful with her? Getting involved with her is just going to ...”

“It’s just sex.” I cut her off, moving back to closing the tabs on the boxes of food and then placing them in the fridge. Even as the words left my mouth, they soured my taste buds. Sydney arriving here earlier was a welcome surprise. Don’t get me wrong, the blow job was definitely worth the interruption to my evening, but just seeing her and getting to hear her voice made my night turn around.

“Really? Because last I checked, fuck buddies don’t bring over meals to thank them for self-defense classes.”

Anger floods my veins as my sister continues to ridicule my time with Sydney. I don’t want to hear anymore, so I point a finger in her direction and then raise my voice. “Why does this matter to you, Selena? Why do you care who I’m fucking? I’m a grown ass man, and not that it’s any of your business, but *she* came on to *me*!”

Selena’s hands drop to her sides as her mouth parts. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“It’s ... it’s not. I just ...” She swallows while shaking her head and then moves closer to me. Andre has rested his ass on the back of my couch, watching the argument unfold between us like he normally does. He’s been around long enough to know when not to intervene when we’re screaming at each other.

“I’m a big boy, Selena. I can handle it.”

She brings her palm up to my cheek and stares at me with that loving gaze that tells me she’s done being mad. “I know. I just ... I just don’t think this is a good idea. Her family, her job ...”

“It doesn’t matter because it’s just physical.” My voice cracks at the end, causing Andre to chime in.

“I don’t know, Javi. I’ve been watching you two at the gym and even just now. I see something else. And babe, maybe that’s not a bad thing,” he adds, turning his sight to my sister.

“I don’t want her to hurt him. He’s been through enough ...”

“You don’t even know her, Selena,” I add, defending Sydney for once because now that I have gotten to know her, I don’t see a vindictive bone in her body. I see a woman who’s been locked in a cage created by expectations put on her throughout her entire life. I see a woman that is passionate about helping others prepare for the unexpected in their lives and devotes herself to that fully. I see a girl who is thoughtful enough to bring over food to share because she remembered me mentioning it in conversation and she just wanted to say thank you.

I see Sydney in an entirely different light than before.

“And you do?”

“Better than you. We were wrong about her. At least, I was. And yes, our arrangement leaves space for someone to misconstrue the point of it, but I’m not going to sit here and let you tell me how to live my life.”

Selena nods and then drops her hand. “Does she know? About your time in prison?”

I shake my head slowly before running my hand through my hair. “No. And I don’t think she needs to. That’s something personal and we don’t venture across that line.”

“Not now, but it’s bound to come up. Javi, I just want you to be happy, you know that, right?”

“Well, getting my dick wet at night makes me happy, so leave me the

fuck alone,” I reply sarcastically as Andre chuckles on the couch still.

“Gross,” Selena grits through her teeth and then takes a deep breath. “But okay. I guess I have to accept it.”

“Yeah, you do. And if she goes to your salon, you’d better be nice to her. She doesn’t deserve your nastiness. She hasn’t done anything to you.” I point my finger in her direction again.

She throws her hands up in surrender. “Fair enough. I can give the girl a shot. But now that that’s over, I came by to tell you that Mom called earlier. Her and Emilio are going to be in town in a few weeks and want to have dinner and stuff. You know how those two are. They’re going to stay for the weekend, so I wanted to have them use the guesthouse. Are you okay with that?”

My mother remarried about five years ago to a man named Emilio. He was a business owner that kept flirting with her every time he went in to the laundromat where she worked. He owned a chain of restaurants and would bring in his suits to get cleaned almost every day just to see her. After flirting relentlessly, she finally caved and agreed to go on a date with him, and the rest is history. Emilio retired a few years ago and now they live in Florida during the winter, and he has a place in Montana that they use in the summer. When they come back to Texas to visit, they always stay for a few weeks to visit their friends, us, and Emilio’s kids as well.

Seeing my mother happy again after losing my father made me realize how lonely she was. Maybe she hid her grief from us because she suddenly had to figure out how to keep the roof over our heads with one less income and two bratty pre-teens on her hands. But the way she came back to life after Emilio came into the picture was a wake-up call to how sad she truly was. Selena and I love Emilio too and couldn’t have asked for a better man for our mom to be with.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll just sleep in your guest room.”

“Exactly.”

“You know you could have texted me all of this ... you didn’t have to come back here and bang on my door.”

Selena smiles and then pinches my cheek. “I know, but I saw the car and wanted to know who the hell was here. I was being your annoying little sister. It’s what I’m good at.”

I smack her hand away as she laughs and her and Andre prepare to leave. “Yup. You’re a goddamn pro.”

“Love you, Javi,” she calls over her shoulder and then proceeds to walk back to the house as Andre stays back.

He turns to me with a narrow gaze and then smiles mischievously. “It’s more than sex, isn’t it?”

I stand there frozen, unsure how to respond. His question is the same one I’ve been asking myself after every meetup between Sydney and I, every text message conversation, every glance in each other’s direction.

“That’s what I thought.” He chuckles.

“I didn’t say anything,” I counter defensively.

“You didn’t have to. I like her for you, Javi, for what it’s worth. Your sister might not see it, but I know what you need. You need a woman like her.”

“A woman like what?”

“Confident, stable, beautiful. Someone who can tease you and remind you to have fun. You can’t go through life just working and not living. Even if it’s just sex, I can tell you’ve been more at ease lately, less irritated, and you’re smiling more. That means something.” He nods once and then walks through the door, leaving me speechless in my house when I realize that he’s right.

She might not be who I envisioned to bring me out of the hole I’ve been living in, but maybe she is exactly who I needed to do that.

Chapter 19

Sydney

“Hey, Sydney. The usual today?” Hattie greets me behind the deli counter of Russo’s once I make it to the front of the line.

“Yes, please. Vegetarian sub, extra dressing.” My mouth is salivating just knowing I’m about to sink my teeth into the fresh baked bread and mountains of veggies.

“You got it.”

I watch Hattie assemble my sandwich, adding extra pickles and tomatoes since she knows they’re my favorite, and then I meet her at the register to pay. Just as I hand her my debit card, a familiar voice pulls my attention to the right.

“Seems you and I had the same idea for lunch today.”

My head twists in the direction of the voice, and I’m taken by surprise when I see Javier in his construction uniform, sitting all alone eating his sandwich. His jet black hair is hidden beneath his bandana and his sculpted arms are hidden beneath a long-sleeve orange t-shirt. Except I know what those arms look like underneath, and the thought instantly makes me hot.

“Hey. Yeah, I guess great minds do think alike.” On a tilt of my head, I stare at him as I feel the corners of my mouth start to rise into a pleased smile. I didn’t anticipate seeing Javier today, but now that I have, the butterflies flying around in my stomach are making me giddy.

“Here you go, Sydney,” Hattie says, pulling my attention back to her as she hands me my debit card and my order.

“Thanks, Hattie. See you next week.” I grab my tray and turn to find a seat as Javier makes the decision for me.

“Come sit.” He waves me over as I close the distance between us on shaky legs. He’s inviting me to share a meal with him out in public, which is both alarming and confusing.

Isn’t this clearly against the rules of our arrangement? Won’t the two of us being seen together start to raise suspicion from people all over town? My family is very well known, and I can’t speak for Javi, but something tells

me this meal we're about to share could become juicy gossip.

Standing in front of his table, staring down at him, I ask, "Are you sure? Why are you alone anyway? Don't your co-workers usually join you for lunch?" My head twists on my neck trying to search out his friends.

"Sit down, Sydney." The harshness of his reply almost makes me want to turn him down just to spite him, but the woman inside of me who is starting to yearn for this man in more ways than one listens and sits down softly in the chair across from him.

The customers in Russo's Deli continue to mill around us while I ruminate on how my day has turned around drastically. Javier stares at me from across the table, finishing his bite before he finally responds.

"Trilch and Cory wanted to go to Max's Cantina down the road for burritos. I wasn't feeling Mexican food today, so I came here."

"Oh. Well, I'm always in the mood for Russo's, so you can never go wrong with that choice," I agree as I start to unwrap my sandwich. "I have to ask though," I whisper now while leaning in closer over the table, "isn't us being seen together in public against the rules?"

Javi lifts one brow as he purses his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about. We're just two old friends who are sharing a meal."

"Oh. Okay then." I fight my smile as I take a bite of my sandwich and let out an audible moan.

"But if you're going to continue to eat your sandwich like that, I'm gonna make you pay for it later." The insinuation behind his words has me clenching my thighs together under the table. God, will I ever stop reacting to this man in that way?

"I'll try to behave myself."

"That's all I'm asking." His stoic face continues to focus on me and then his eyes dip down to my sandwich. "Are you eating a vegetarian sub?"

I finish chewing and then answer. "Yes. It's my favorite thing on the menu. Sometimes I'm just not in the mood for meat."

"I don't think that's true." Javi's mischievous grin flashes across our table as my core begins to throb at the thought of his meat.

"Is this entire lunch going to be filled with sexual innuendos?"

"You're just making it too easy, Princess. But no. I can try to keep it PG if you insist." He reaches for his drink, quenching his thirst as I watch his lips curl around his straw. Damn him and that mouth. I know exactly what that mouth is capable of.

Needing to change the subject to distract myself, I clear my throat and then ask, “So where are you working today?” I pop a salt and vinegar potato chip in my mouth, hoping that Javi will engage in conversation with me and not just sit here in silence.

“Down off Main Street. There’s a new row of shops going in and Gibson Construction won the bid, so we’re trying to knock those out between waiting on inspections on the houses we’re putting up in the Ashwood community.”

“My friend, Ally, lives out there. It’s a really nice neighborhood, great for raising a family.”

“Sure.” Javi takes another bite of his sandwich, halting the conversation. “So, how’s work going today?”

A lengthy sigh leaves my lips as I lean back in my chair. “Today’s my long day. I stay late on Wednesdays to try to catch up on paperwork and prepare for Thursdays and Fridays. I have court tomorrow, so I need to make sure everything is ready to go.”

“Does the stress of your job get to you? I couldn’t imagine being stuck at a desk all day or arguing with people nonstop. I would go insane.” Javier chuckles lightly and the sound makes me smile at him appreciatively.

“Yes and no. There are days where I’m stuck inside, but that’s why I try to go out for lunch, so I can get a break. Then running back and forth between the courthouse makes some days go by in a blur. But when I’m on my game, when I’m checking off items with accuracy and helping people, it reminds me it’s all worth it.”

“Your enthusiasm tells me you enjoy it.”

“I truly do. But I also make sure to plan things to look forward to so I don’t feel like all I do is work. Life can get draining if that’s all you pour your energy into. You have to remember to enjoy life too. I learned that the hard way my first year out of law school. I worked myself to death, and my dad actually sat down with me and talked about the importance of balance.”

Javier seems to perk up a bit at this turn in the conversation, adjusting himself in his seat. “So ... what do you do for fun then? What does Sydney Matthews like to do in her spare time besides scream my name?” He smirks at me across the table and I can’t help but return the same knowing grin.

“You lasted a whole three minutes without a dirty insinuation. I’m impressed,” I joke which makes him laugh again. “Well, *that* activity is a new hobby I’ve added to the list, so I’m still trying to figure out how to balance that. Usually though I will read, go dancing when the schedule with

my best friend allows, or book a vacation somewhere far away where I can unplug and relax. But probably one of my favorite things to do on the weekends in the fall is watch football games at Ally's house. She buys all the best junk food and we gorge, drink wine, and cheer on the Dallas Cowboys."

Javier's face lights up as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Well, I'll be damned, Princess. Seems we have something in common then."

"Really? What's that?"

"I just so happen to be a Dallas fan myself."

Knowing we share another fragment of our individualities builds a pleasant warmth in my chest. "Damn, Javi. You'd better be careful. Before you know it, you're going to tell me that you like to get pedicures too, and then we're going to have to go together to solidify this 'friendship' you claim we have." I throw up quotations around the word, emphasizing it with a sarcastic tone.

Javi claimed we're friends-with-benefits, but I was under the impression that benefits was all he really wanted. The more we toy with the 'friends' part, the more confused my head and heart get.

My eyes scour the restaurant again, noticing other couples sharing their lunch and it makes me wonder—would Javier and I ever get to the point where we're sharing a meal because we want to? Not because we just ran into each other randomly on a Wednesday?

No, don't go there, Sydney. Don't let yourself daydream because you're only going to end up disappointed.

"No one will be touching my feet, thank you."

"What about dancing? When are you going back to The Jameson?"

He scoffs. "I never should have been there in the first place. Places like that aren't my scene."

I chuckle softly. "Yeah, but if you hadn't gone, we never would have bumped into each other."

His grin builds on one side of his mouth. "I'm pretty sure you bumped into me, Sydney."

I shrug, feigning innocence. "Don't remember. The night was kind of fuzzy."

"Sure, whatever you say."

Javier and I finish our lunch discussing football stats and players, laughing at each other when we outsmart the other. By the time we finish, I can't recall the last time I shared a meal with a man that made my face hurt

from smiling.

Once we make our way to the parking lot, I stand by my car, suddenly unsure of how we part.

“Well, I’m glad we ran into each other, Princess. Seems the universe knew I needed to see your face today.”

Why? Why does he have to say things like that which only confuse me further about what’s going on here?

“Glad I could brighten up your day. This was nice.”

“Definitely. But having you in my bed later would be nicer.” He travels closer to me, but still leaves enough space not to draw attention to our proximity.

“I wish I could, but like I said, today is my late day and tomorrow evening I actually have an appointment with your sister to get my hair done.”

Javier steps back as the shock registers on his face. “Is that so? I thought you were just making small talk with her the other night.”

“I mean, I was. But I also really need my hair done.”

He surveys my head as if a red flashing beacon will alert him to the issues going on with my mop that only a woman would understand. “Your hair looks fine to me.”

“Yeah, you’re a guy so you don’t get it.”

“Well, don’t be surprised if she pushes you for information or tries to be a hardass with you. She might be my little sister, but she’s also bossy as hell and puts her guard up with people.”

“I wonder where she gets that from,” I tease as he steps closer to me again, his eyes trained on my lips. I’d be lying if I said that I wasn’t desperately waiting for him to kiss me. It’s been almost a month of us fucking each other’s brains out, but not once have I felt this man’s lips on mine. By the way he’s eyeing my mouth right now, I’d say he’s starting to go insane with that thought too.

“Let me know how it goes, okay?” He reaches up and places a lock of my hair behind my ear, waking up my entire body with his soft and gentle touch.

I shouldn’t allow this game to continue—the fine line he’s skating along with each caress of his fingers against my cheek—especially since there’s nothing I can do about it for a few days. Between work and my brothers’ college graduation next weekend, I’m not sure when the next time will be when I’ll be able to quell the ache between my legs with the man in

front of me.

“Okay.”

“Have a good day, Sydney.” He drops his hand from my face slowly, his eyes lingering on mine before he nods his head at me and turns on his heels to approach his work truck. I watch his jean-clad ass climb into the vehicle, and then he’s on his way, back to his job, completely oblivious to the jumbled mess he just left me in.

Javier’s actions are certainly not matching up with his words, and I can’t decide if I want to call him on it, or just let it be to refrain from ruining our set-up. Giving up sex with him right now is the last thing I want, so I choose to push it aside, bask in the fact that the man makes my body hum with need, and drive back to my office to focus on work and *not* how rattled Javier Montes is making me.

Chapter 20

Sydney

“Thanks for fitting me in, Selena.” I’m trying to hide the shakiness of my hands as I secure my purse on the hook on the wall in front of me and take a seat in the chair at her station. I don’t think I was this nervous the other night when she and Andre showed up at Javi’s house, even though I was dressed in nothing but lingerie and a trench coat. I tried to make the best of the situation, and the look on Javi’s face made my easiness about it all the more entertaining.

But now that I’m alone with his sister, I feel like the stakes are higher.

A small part of me knows this is different because it’s just the two of us—us girls—and regardless of the fact that Javi and I are just having sex, a small part of me really wants Selena to like me. From our brief interactions so far, I get the feeling that she doesn’t. Maybe she had the same thoughts about me back in high school that Javi did, which means I have my work cut out for me—because if Javi was as standoffish as he was, I can only imagine how another woman may have perceived me.

“Of course. I’m glad I could be of service. Plus, it will give us a chance to talk.” She flashes me a tight-lipped smile and then grabs a cape, draping it over the front of my body and securing the clasp behind my neck.

Crap. That doesn’t sound like this will be a relaxing hair appointment at all.

“So, what would you like to do to your hair?” Her fingers drag through my strands as she gets a feel for the texture and thickness.

“Well, I definitely need a trim, and I was thinking of adding a few blonde highlights. Nothing drastic, but just enough to brighten it up for summer.”

She nods, separating my hair along the part line. “We can do that. You want peek-a-boo highlights? The ones that don’t go up to the root? Your hair seems to grow pretty fast based on the new growth I see up here.”

“Yeah, it does grow fast,” I say on a chuckle. “So peek-a-boo strands would be perfect.”

“Sounds like a plan. Let me go mix up your color.” She rests her hand on

my shoulder and gives it a slight squeeze before walking away and through a door in the back to mix up the products.

I take that moment to let out the breath I was holding and remind myself that this doesn't have to be awkward. Selena seems like a confident and pleasant woman, although she definitely has an edge to her, the same edge I've seen in Javi. And even though she said she wants to talk, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm facing a hardcore little sister inquisition. She could just genuinely want to get to know each other, which I'm not opposed to one bit.

My eyes veer around the salon once I see her disappear, appreciating what she's created here—a successful business that seems to be flourishing.

Rejuvenation Salon and Day Spa is bustling with patrons, even at five-thirty at night. The dark gray flooring and white washed walls covered in ship lap give it an airy and bright ambiance, crisp, clean, and fitting for a spa atmosphere. There are little pops of green everywhere in the décor and from plants strategically placed around the main room. Several hallways break off from the largest room in the building where the hair dressers work and a few nail ladies sit at their desks, serving their clients. One hallway is labeled for the estheticians, another for the massage therapists, and the last for the washrooms and restrooms. All of the employees are dressed in light gray shirts and black slacks, blending a look between casual and business attire.

As I wait for Selena to return, I grab my phone from between my legs where I tucked it when I sat down and open up my messages, responding to Ally's rant about what her children did that day. Apparently Taryn threw up in the pool during her swim lessons and the entire pool had to be evacuated and shocked with chlorine. Oh, dear. Poor Ally.

While my fingers fly past the keys assuring her that this will be a hilarious story she can use later to embarrass her daughter, a conversation to my left pulls my attention that way.

“Well, I'm just surprised by how elegant this place is, given that Montes girl owns it.” The older woman with platinum blonde hair leans closer to her friend who's sitting beside her at another nail station. The two women are both getting full sets of fake nails and gossiping like hens while doing so.

“She's not a Montes anymore. Didn't she marry that black guy that owns that boxing gym?”

“Oh, yes. I think you're right.”

Wow. These women are flapping their jaws about the owner right in front of her employees. Those girls must be biting their tongues to prevent

from berating their customers.

“Well, you know about her brother, don’t you?”

The mention of Javi makes my ears perk up, so I lean in slightly to listen closer. I know I shouldn’t feed into the gossip, but perhaps these women know something about Javi that I don’t. Of course, there’s a ton of information I don’t know about him, so I can’t help my curiosity.

“No. What about him?”

“I heard he did time in prison,” she whispers while widening her eyes, smacking her lips after she drops that bomb.

“You know what, I think I heard that too. At least the sister has half a brain to own a successful business. Shame that people like them can’t just learn how to be productive citizens of society.” The second woman shakes her head just as the employee does something to make her shriek.

“Ow! Be careful!” The woman chastises just as the employee apologizes, but not before shooting her neighbor a smug look. Good for her for putting that woman in her place through a small act of torture.

But then the words she spoke hit me like a brick.

Javi went to prison? For what? Does that mean that the parole officer that showed up at the gym was for him? My gut warned me that could have been the case, but my head didn’t want to believe it.

If what the woman said is true, what did he do time for? How long was he in there?

A barrage of questions starts running through my mind, but just as I try to listen further, Selena returns with two dishes full of hair dye.

“Alright. You ready?”

“Uh huh,” I stutter before clearing my throat and slapping a smile on my face to hide the chaos those women just instigated in my mind.

“So, how long have you and my brother been *friends*, Sydney?” Selena eyes me in the mirror with a knowing grin on her face while securing sections of my hair off with clips.

Okay then, getting right to the point.

“Well, it took a while to wear him down. It might come as a surprise, but your brother wasn’t my biggest fan back in high school, or even after we ran into each other at The Jameson.”

Selena chuckles while beginning to paint my hair. “I believe you were the one that ran into him.”

“Ha. Yeah, I was slightly inebriated that night.”

“No shame in that. We all need to let loose every once in a while.”

“Well, we just kept running into each other, especially after I signed up for the self-defense class at the gym, although he was less than enthusiastic about seeing me. He was quite the ass if I’m being honest. But eventually, I don’t think he had the willpower to push me away anymore. I can be quite persuasive.” Asking him to fuck me so the sexual tension between us could finally be released was definitely the most persuasive thing I’ve ever done.

“It seems that’s true. So, how did you like the class?” Selena’s eyes meet mine in the mirror again, and her entire demeanor softens with that question.

“I loved it. At first, I hated your brother for how hard he was on me, but eventually I loved the way the exercise made me feel. And when we started practicing the moves, I felt ... empowered.”

Her smile builds brightly as she nods. “I’m glad. Andre offers that class because of me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I begged him to give women an opportunity to learn how to protect themselves after I ...” She trails off, her face growing sad for a moment before she reapplies the façade she seems to have perfected.

“You what?”

She shakes her head and then clears her throat. “Nothing.”

“I was attacked a few months ago. Held at gun point. That’s why I took the class.” I offer her my story so maybe she’d feel more comfortable to share hers, but it doesn’t work the way I wish.

She pauses in her movements and looks at me again. “I’m sorry that happened to you, but I’m glad you did something to make you feel more at ease.”

“Thanks.”

“My brother is a good guy, Sydney, but he has some demons he’s working through,” she says, moving the conversation back to Javi.

“I can tell. He was adamant about not letting me in or even bothering to get to know me for who I am now. But once I put him in his place and we started talking a bit more, he seemed to ease up on the animosity.”

Selena chuckles as she folds a piece of foil around my hair and continues the process. “My brother needs to be put in his place. His asshole vibe gets out of control sometimes.”

I huff out a laugh. “Don’t I know it.”

“He seems to be more relaxed since you two have been hanging out too.”

Her eyes dart to mine again as she lifts a brow. Something tells me she's aware of our little arrangement.

"Well, it goes both ways. We've definitely been enjoying each other's company."

"Be careful with him, Sydney," she warns, sounding more like a protective sister now than just a woman I'm having a playful conversation with.

"I am." I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince with that declaration—her or me.

"I'm not sure he's ready to open himself up to more. But it's more for *you* though, isn't it?" She stands up tall and stares me down, tilting her head as she studies me.

But I can't speak, because as I watch her watch me, the reality of her words hit me square in the chest. I've been trying to fight it, but I think I know it's been more than just sex for a few weeks now. The conversations via text, the shared glances at the gym, the lunch we just shared yesterday, the way I can't stop thinking about him throughout the day.

Ally was right. I'm not programmed to be the girl who just does casual sex. And even though I wanted our arrangement to be just about that, it didn't take long before that line was blurred. The man hasn't even kissed me yet, but I know that I don't want our relationship to end, not when I feel like it's getting better every time we're together.

"That's what I thought." She snickers and then continues coloring my hair. "So what do you do for work now, Sydney?"

Her abrupt topic change throws me for a loop for a second, but I welcome it, bypassing her first question entirely and engaging in a lighthearted conversation that leaves me feeling like Selena and I could be friends if things ever progressed between Javi and me. We spend time trading information about our lives now as she continues to place foil pieces in my hair for highlights.

She tells me more about her business and why she decided to open up on this side of town, stating that it doesn't come without its downfalls and frustrations. We revisit some memories of high school too. Selena is two years younger than Javi, so she was a sophomore when we were seniors. Apparently she wasn't a fan of me and my friends either—shocking, I know. But I assure her that I wasn't a fan of those people as well.

I bring up my obsession with the television show, *Friends*,

remembering that Javi mentioned her love for the show in an earlier conversation. That common ground provides us with many laughs through the end of my appointment, where I stand from the chair feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, and my hair looking fantastic.

“I gave you a few internal layers to give you more volume, taking off some of the weight. And the blonde peeks through everywhere, especially in the back.”

“It feels great and the color is perfect. Thank you, Selena.” I swing my hair around, enjoying how much lighter and healthier it feels.

I follow her over to the receptionist counter to pay. “Would you like to book your next appointment?”

“Absolutely. I usually go seven weeks between ...”

Selena clicks around in the computer and we settle on a date.

“Sounds good. It was ...” Selena sighs and then comes around the counter so we’re closer to each other. “It was nice to get to know you, Sydney. I’m sorry if I seemed a little harsh at first, but I’m just protective of my brother. Seeing you at his house the other night instantly made my defensive walls come up. He’s been through a lot, and you two ...”

“I know. We’re very different.”

“Yeah. I just ... the past few years have been tough on him and he’s finally getting back on his feet ...” I can’t help but wonder if she’s alluding to his time in prison, if what that woman from earlier said is true.

“Believe me. I never anticipated anything ever happening between us. But now that it has ...”

“Just be careful with each other. All I see is someone getting hurt, and it might just be both of you in some way.”

I reach out and grasp her upper arm in a soft embrace. “Javi is lucky to have someone like you in his life, someone who truly cares about him but also understands that he can make his own decisions. Whatever happens between us, I hope that doesn’t affect his relationship with you.”

“That ass could never get rid of me.” She winks, and I can’t help but laugh at her term of endearment for her brother.

“Thanks for tonight, Selena. This was nice.”

“Surprisingly ... yes it was.” She pulls me in for a brief hug and then we say our goodbyes.

As I drive home that evening, I wonder what it would be like if Javi and I extended our arrangement beyond the bedroom. I would love to get closer to

Selena. It's rare that you connect with another woman so effortlessly, and that's what it felt like with her tonight in our conversations.

But then I remember what Javi said—that he can't offer me more than what we agreed to. I heard him loud and clear, yet part of me thinks he doesn't even know what he's capable of because based on the past few weeks, we've definitely crossed that boundary of just sex and he was the one that initiated it.

When I arrive home, I decide to text him to let him know how tonight went.

Me: I really like your sister.

Javi: Did she get you drunk so you'd agree to that?

Me: LOL NO. We talked about you mostly and seems she agrees that you can be an asshole 90% of the time.

Javi: Sounds about right. Seriously though ... she didn't give you any shit?

Me: Well, I'm pretty sure she knows about our extracurricular activities ...

Javi: Yeah ... she kinda put two and two together after the other night. Don't worry, I told her it's none of her business.

Me: She just worries about you.

Javi: I'm not a child. She doesn't need to.

Me: It came from a good place. Listen ... I was wondering ...

I momentarily contemplate asking him about what I heard earlier, needing to know if it's true. But then I think, should that be a question I ask him via text message? Wouldn't that be more of a conversation to have face to face? Do I really need to know? Is it going to change how I feel about him, or make me want to stop seeing him?

The answer leans more toward no, even though a small part of me wants to know the truth, but I decide against pressing it further just as Javi texts me back.

Javi: Yeah ...

Me: When are we gonna meet up again? ;)

Javi: You name the time, Princess. I'll never pass up sex with you.

Something about his response has me grinning like a fool, wondering how much underlying meaning there is to his words. He seems like he cares about me beyond just using me for my body, although I gave him permission to do so. His actions are fairly contradictory for a man that's just in this to

get his dick wet. But then on the other hand, he could just be a guy that would never turn down sex. I'm pretty sure most of them are like that.

Me: I'll be at your place tomorrow night around seven. I think I'll just have to make some time for you this weekend ;)

Javi: Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Sydney.

Me: Goodnight, Javi.

Chapter 21

Sydney

“Stand up straight, Sydney. We don’t want slouching spines in the pictures.” My mother speaks to me through her bleached white smile, wrapping her arm around my waist and drawing me in closer to my family. We are sandwiched between my father on her other side and my two brothers beside me.

Today is Beckett and Bentley’s college graduation at Texas A & M University, the alma mater of my father and me. The university is about a three hour drive from our home in Newberry, and any length of time in close quarters with my parents can be taxing. Surprisingly though, they weren’t as nosy or pushy as usual, which made me put my guard up instantly. Usually if there’s something we need to discuss, they’re happy to initiate the conversation almost instantaneously. But today, I feel like they’re holding back, or maybe they’re just trying to focus on my younger twin brothers.

“Forgive my sins, Mother,” I mock as she pinches my waist.

“What has gotten into you?” she whispers as the flash continues to spark.

Muttering under my breath while internally rolling my eyes, I reply, “Nothing.”

Once the picture is taken by the professional photographer hired by the university, I can feel myself visibly relax.

“You look great, Syd,” Bentley says as he pulls me in for a side hug before we all disperse from the close vicinity we were just in.

“You too, Bent. Both of you. Glad to see you’ve avoided the college weight.”

“Well, with the practices we put in during the football season, it’s hard to gain too much weight,” Beckett adds. Both of my brothers played on the team for the university. To the dismay of my father, they weren’t scouted to the NFL, but he’s still proud of the way they represented the school and the Matthews name—can’t forget about that.

“I’m proud of all of my children,” my father boasts, coming over to all of us and hugging my brothers before planting a kiss on my temple. “My boys

are now ready to take on the business world, and my daughter has established herself as a powerful and professional lawyer in our community. I couldn't ask for more successful children."

The tears in his eyes and the look of pride on his face right now—that's one of the reasons I've always done as I've been asked because seeing my father beam at our family, even though there are moments when he forgets we're individuals capable of making our own decisions—those are the moments that remind me to be grateful for the life he's given us and the solid foundation of family my mother and he have bestowed to us.

Every family has its issues and faults, and lord knows ours in no exception. But there are a lot of children in this world that don't have two loving parents, monetary freedom, and a support system, even when at times it feels more forced than not. I love my family, I do, which is why I battle so hard between wanting to make them happy and finally standing up for myself in all aspects of my life.

We leave the campus and drive about fifteen minutes away to a restaurant my father used to frequent upon his inheritance when he lived in College Station, Texas, before he moved to Dallas and met my mother. The Republic Steakhouse screams affluence and money as soon as you walk through the wrought iron doors and are greeted with the aroma of garlic and meat. The hostess greets my father by name and finds a table for us right away as soon as our family steps through the door. Apparently he still has some pull here, even though it's been years since he's been back.

The dark wooden walls with golden framed mirrors bounce the light coming from the chandeliers as our hostess leads us to our table. My father pulls out a chair next to him for my mother and then another on the other side of him for me. I smile as I take my seat and unwrap my silverware from the cream-colored cloth napkin, placing it gently in my lap.

I can't remember the last time all five of us were together, I think, as my brothers take the other two seats across from us at the round table we've occupied. Wine and beer menus are passed around as we all decide on a beverage to celebrate the occasion with.

Once our drinks are delivered and our entrees have been order, my father proposes a toast.

"To Beckett and Bentley, two more Matthews men who are ready to offer something to society, as well as uphold the Matthews name. I am proud of you boys, and so is your mother and sister. I can't wait to see what you both

accomplish.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Beckett replies as we all clink our glasses together and take a sip of our respective drinks. The red wine hits my tongue and sends a rush to my head almost instantly. Good thing I’m not driving home because I already have a head change.

“So boys, any job offers yet?” My father reaches for a roll from the bread basket and then proceeds to pass it around the table.

“There’s a technology company starting up here with a few guys from our fraternity. The main focus is to develop software for apps in the healthcare industry. With my degree in web design and Bentley’s knowledge with marketing, we think it might be rewarding to be involved with a company from the ground up,” Beckett answers, but the look on my father’s face in anything but enthusiastic.

“Sounds risky.”

“Anything worthwhile is, Dad,” Bentley adds.

“Surely there are other options for you. I could always call up one of my contacts, get your feet in the door with an established corporation ...” He continues to ramble on while I silently enjoy the fact that I’m not the only one whose decisions get dissected. Seems my brothers are on the receiving end of my father’s need for control as well.

“We haven’t agreed to anything solidly yet, Dad. But we appreciate the offer.” Beckett declares as our salads arrive and everyone digs in.

“So you’re planning on staying here in College Station then?” I ask after chewing my bite of lettuce completely.

“Yeah. Our friends are here and now we know the area so well that it would be hard to go back to Newberry. Besides, any company that we’d be able to work for would be in Dallas, which means we’d be commuting. Might as well stay in a bustling city instead of heading back to small town life. No offense, Sis,” Bentley teases.

“None taken. I think that decision makes sense. I knew I could practice law back home, so that’s why I went back.” I also attended Texas A & M for my undergraduate degree and law school, but chose to return to Newberry to work for Byron upon finishing law school.

“Still, it would be nice to have you boys closer to home,” my mother chimes in. “I miss my boys. Sydney gets all of the attention now,” she says with a wink, as if her statement is humorous. And although I know it’s not malicious, I resent my parents in that moment just a tad because I know their

attention isn't always welcome. On second thought, it would be nice to have my brothers closer to home to take some of the heat off of me.

"I'm sure she's used to it by now, being the only girl and the oldest. Isn't that right, Sis?" Beckett says.

"Oh yeah. It's wonderful." My words come out in a satirical tone, which neither of my brothers miss, evident by their chuckling.

"Yes. Your sister has been up to all kinds of extracurricular activities lately," my father interjects, forcing my head to turn in his direction. His eyes shoot me a look that dictates he knows more than he's revealing with his declaration.

Shit. How could I have been so stupid? Of course my father probably knows what I've been doing, or *who*, for that matter. His security team is always lurking nearby, a detail that has completely slipped my mind as I've become distracted by my Latin lover.

Which makes me wonder ... where does Javier's family descend from? Is he Puerto Rican? Cuban? I think I need to ask him the next time I see him.

Bentley grins at me over the rim of his glass. "Is that so? What have you been up to, Syd?"

I clear my throat and then dab at the corners of my mouth with my napkin before answering. "Well, I recently took a self-defense class at a gym in town. After the incident in the spring, I wanted to feel better about being able to protect myself. I actually made some new friends while I was there, so that was a pleasant bonus."

"You have other friends besides Ally?" Beckett teases.

I glare at him before fighting back my smile. "Yes, little brother."

"How is crazy Ally these days?"

"Reaping karma's retribution with how insane her children are."

That comment causes the entire table to laugh. My family knows Ally's free-spirited ways from our years of friendship, so it is rather comical that her children inherited that from her.

Conversation flows easily between the five of us as the rest of our meal progresses, but my father's comments stays in the back of my mind. My parents catch my brothers up on town gossip among our social circle, even providing details about their ex-girlfriends. My brothers dated quite a bit in high school, but each had one serious girlfriend they left behind to go to college.

By the time the meal is finished, we're all groaning from stuffing our faces with the best steak I've ever eaten, hands down. Everyone decides to use the restroom before my parents drive us back to campus to drop off my brothers and then the three of us will head back to Newberry.

Somehow my father and I finish our business before everyone else, so I'm left alone with him outside as we wait for my mother and brothers.

"Sydney. I hope you realize what you're doing ..."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I take in his warning, accompanying the nerves running through my veins. "What do you mean, Dad?"

"I mean who you choose to spend your time with, sweetheart. I wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea about the company you keep."

Anger flashes through my chest at his insinuation. "Excuse me?"

"Remember that I know everything, sweetheart. I just want what's best for you. Andrew has been asking about you again. Why won't you just give him a chance?"

I sigh in frustration, rolling my eyes as my hands find my hips. "Dad. Why don't you trust me to know that there is nothing between Andrew and me? He's not the man I want. I'm not attracted to him and quite frankly, I think a relationship between him and me would be boring. I would feel stifled by him. I don't want that in a partner."

"I think he compliments you. You understand each other. You're from the same world, Sydney. Not everyone understands the reputation you need to uphold."

"Well, not to sound rude, Dad, but maybe I don't give a rat's ass about my reputation anymore. Maybe what people think of me doesn't matter."

"It should matter, Sydney. Your reputation is everything, especially in your line of work. I don't want to see you make a mistake, get hurt, or jeopardize your career because you choose to spend time with the wrong people."

I huff out a laugh. "Maybe you need to remember that it's my choice who I decide to spend my time with, and our little social circle has become a toxic group that quite frankly, I'm over."

Just as he moves closer to speak, the door behind us opens and my mother and brothers exit, sharing a laugh about something they must have been discussing inside.

"Everything okay, you two?" my mother asks, moving her hair behind

her shoulders and hiking her purse up further on her arm as she senses the tension between us.

“Yup. Just fine, Mom.” I force out a smile as I look at my Dad, shaking my head, hoping he senses my disappointment and frustration with him as we shuffle into the car and drive home.

After I leave the car with a chaste goodbye to my parents, I walk into my condo, ruminating still on the conversation with my dad. He has to know about Javi, or at least Andre and Selena if his security team has been following me around. The house where Javi lives is under their names, so they may not realize there’s someone living in the guesthouse on the back of the property, although with their level of expertise, I’m sure they know the entire story. Then add on the fact that we had lunch together last week at Russo’s, and there’s no telling what pair of eyes saw us together and ran to my father almost instantly.

I’m no stranger to the fact that my father believes that our family’s status in the community is some prized possession we must refrain from being tarnished. But I’m tired of his opinions on the company I keep.

With my frustration high and an itch to see him, I shoot off a text to Javi, even though he knew I wouldn’t be able to meet up this weekend because of my brother’s graduation.

Me: What are you up to?

Javi: Just relaxing at home. What’s up? How’d the graduation go?

Me: Are you down to fuck?

The brazenness of my words catch me off guard, but with the anger I’m feeling right now, all I want is to ride Javi for hours in revenge. However, I find myself actually wanting his company too. Whenever I’m with him, I feel calm and in control, even if I’m relinquishing it to him.

Javi: Come on over.

I change into a dark gray, cotton sundress, but put on a burgundy bra and thong set underneath. Releasing my hair from the clip I had it in, I weave my fingers through the strands to loosen it and spritz myself with my perfume.

In record time, I’m in my car and racing across town, the ache between my legs building knowing that soon Javi will be filling me up and making me forget about my day, smothering the reminders from my father that he just won’t listen to me and insists he knows what’s best.

I slam the car door shut and lock it as I make my way to the door of his house, knocking harshly two times before the door opens and Javier stands

before me, shirtless with gray sweat shorts on. The outline of his half-hardened dick is evident through the fabric, and as my eyes settle on his crotch, I visibly see his dick grow harder in his shorts.

“Are you just going to stand there, Princess?”

I shake my head, find his eyes, and then step inside as I hear the door shut behind me. I set my purse on the portion of the kitchen counter right by the door and then turn around to see heat-filled eyes staring back at me.

“I need you to fuck me, Javi. Break me. Make me scream so I don’t have a voice tomorrow.”

He squints at me just as his hand comes up to cup my cheek, stroking my skin in a way that is the total opposite of what I need right now. “Did something happen today, Sydney?”

I nod, but don’t elaborate, not wanting to stifle the fire crackling between our bodies right now. We’re so close to each other that I can feel the warmth coming off of his skin as his scent infiltrates my senses. Suddenly everything fades away and the only thing remaining in focus is him—his tanned and rippled abs, the lines of muscle in his arms, the dark scruff on his chin, and the golden hue of his eyes that are melting away the stress from earlier. But I know a few orgasms from his hands and cock will help it completely go away—at least for the time being.

“Just fuck me. Please.” I reach for the bottom of my dress, pull it up and over my head and toss it across the room, revealing my lingerie to him. “You know you want me.”

He pauses, taking a moment to peruse my body before his eyes land back on mine and he says, “Guilty as charged, Princess.”

His hands reach out and stroke up and down my arms as goosebumps rise from the contrast of the cold air in his house and fire beneath his touch.

“Turn around,” he demands as I face the kitchen counter behind me and place my hands against the cool marble.

Javi doesn’t speak as his hands move up and down my curves, unclasping my bra and letting it fall forward until I lift my arms from the counter and let it drop off my body completely, planting my palms on the marble once more. I feel his lips and tongue graze the cheeks of my ass as his fingers play with the strings of my thong—small nibbles, long drags of his tongue, purses of his lips on my sensitive flesh. With a smooth movement, he drags the thong down my legs and helps me step out of it so I’m completely naked in front of him, giving him the perfect view of my backside.

I look behind to catch his eyes as I see Javi's hand move from his pocket, retrieving a condom and then placing it on the counter beside me. He keeps his eyes focused on mine as his fingers push the waistband of his shorts down and reveal his hardened cock in all of its glory saluting me, ready to take on the mission I've bestowed upon him. I feel my mouth water at the sight as my eyes dip down to appreciate the appendage I've grown remarkably fond of over the past month.

But then Javi drops to the floor, pushes my legs open wide and buries his face between my thighs, lapping up my wetness that has been building since I texted him at my place.

I moan in ecstasy as I attempt to track the movements of his tongue. But as usual, there is no pattern to the pleasure he gives my body. Javi does what feels right, and somehow, that's exactly what I need—the unexpected, a moment to just savor the ride and pleasure he's giving me instead of trying to anticipate what's coming next.

“Block out whatever has you pissed off, Princess. Focus on my tongue,” he says and then swipes it across my slit. “Focus on my lips,” he whispers and then kisses my pussy and my clit. “Focus on my fingers and hands,” he commands as he pushes two fingers inside of me and then slaps my ass with his other free hand.

“Fuck!” I shout, loving how he can be commanding, rough, and caring all at the same time. He knows what I need without me having to speak—and that connection that we share is slowly transferring outside of sex.

“God, yes. More,” I moan, dropping my face to the counter, resting my cheek on the cold surface as I close my eyes and try to keep my knees from giving out beneath me. Javi continues to work me over with his fingers in my core, his tongue on my clit, his hand spanking me every few moments, building the inferno between my legs.

And then I burst, the flame of my pleasure growing exponentially from the gasoline he just poured on the fire, the waves of my orgasm rippling through my body out to the very tips of my toes and fingers.

“Fuck, I love hearing you come.” Javi stands up from the floor and reaches for the condom as my torso rests on the counter, gathering my breath from my orgasm. Then he bends over my back, resting his chest between my shoulder blades, and lines his mouth up to my ear, whispering in that deep rasp that sparks more need for him between my legs. “You ready for more, Princess?”

“Yes, please ...” I respond breathlessly, but he gives me no time to prepare as he jackets himself and plunges his cock deep inside of me, causing me to shriek from the invasion.

“God, I could fuck you all night,” he growls as he smacks my ass again and thrusts deep inside of me, hitting the very end of my pussy, forcing me to slide across the marble from each smack of his hips against my ass, eliciting a moan from me with each thrust.

“Is this what you needed, Sydney?” He asks, pulling my hair in his hand and forcing my head back so I’m standing up straighter as his tongue drags along the flesh of my neck.

“God, yes ...”

Javi keeps me like that—bowed back against him, smacking my ass between thrusts, letting my hair go to grab both of my breasts and squeezing them to use them for leverage as he continues to fuck me with such force, my orgasm builds again.

One of his hands stays on my breast and the other travels down my stomach, past my navel, and slowly between my folds where he finds my clit and begins to circle the nub with precision over and over again, building my release in record time.

“I’m gonna come, Javi,” I warn just as the tremors of my orgasm begin and then detonate. I hear him grunt behind me as he chases his own release and we both shout into the open space, stilling once our respective orgasms subside.

“Oh my God,” I exhale, reaching behind me to wrap my arm around his neck, needing to feel him close to me for just a second longer, dragging my fingernails across his skin as I crave the feel of his lips on mine. All I want to do in this moment is kiss him, but the fact that he hasn’t done that yet makes me weary to initiate it.

“I need to clean up.” He releases my hold on him and his own on me before traipsing down the hall to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. I begin putting my clothes back on as he returns and finds his shorts as well.

“So had a bad day, huh?” He seems so normal right now, like he usually does after we have sex, but something about him feels cold too, like maybe he didn’t really want me here. Although it didn’t seem like it when he was just fucking me within an inch of my life. I watch him fill two glasses with water as he hands one to me and takes a drink of his own.

I shake my head and sigh, glaring down at the floor before I speak. “Just

my dad. Today was my brothers' graduation, as you know, and let's just say it wasn't without a good dose of 'I know what's best for you' to round out the perfect family affair."

Javi huffs and then sets his glass down on the counter. "And what did you do this time that makes him think you don't know how to live your life?"

"He alluded to the fact that I haven't been spending my time with people I should." I flick my eyes up to his, waiting to see if he catches my drift. And the moment it hits, his eyebrows raise and then his gaze softens.

"Is that so?"

I nod. "Seems he thinks I'm not considering my reputation or career ..."

"Does that worry you?"

The inkling about Javier going to prison travels right to the front of my brain the instant he says it. Could our relationship cause issues with my job? I mean, I am a lawyer, even though I don't dabble in criminal law. If I dated someone with a record, that could look bad—although I also think it depends on what he did time for, and if that rumor is even true.

I stare across the counter at him, wondering if now would be the time to ask. I can't help the fact that it's been bugging me since that night in the salon, and now with discussing my issue with my dad today, maybe this is the perfect opportunity to clear that confusion up for me.

"Can I ask you something?"

Javi stands still, staring at me before he shrugs one shoulder and folds his arms across his chest. "Depends. There are certain things I don't like to talk about ..."

"Well, I kind of need clarity on this topic ..."

He takes a deep breath and then exhales loudly. "Okay ..."

"I heard something the other day, but I don't know if it's true, so I thought it would be best to ask you in person." I focus down on my fingers, tearing at my cuticles as nerves wrack my body. Why am I so afraid to ask the question? Is it because I'm afraid of the answer? Or am I afraid of how he'll react?

Do I really care if Javi has done time? Or is my fear that he'll end our arrangement because of me prying?

"Just say what you need to say, Sydney." There's an annoyance in his tone, which makes me muster up the courage to just put the words out there, consequences be damned. I have a right to know who I'm sleeping with. I have a right to be concerned that he may have a past or penchant for

violence. My father could be right, which I think is the scariest notion of them all.

So I take the plunge, throw the words out in the open knowing I can never retract them, hoping that they won't ruin everything we've shared so far.

“Have you been to prison, Javi?”

Chapter 22

Javier

“Have you been to prison, Javi?”

The moment the words leave her lips, my heart tries to break out of my ribcage. I had a feeling that’s what was coming, especially after she alluded to her dad’s concerns. I’m surprised it’s taken this long for her to sense that I’m hiding something, or even for her to hear from people around town something that would allude to the two years I was locked away.

It’s not public knowledge that we’ve been sleeping together, obviously—but gossip is a dangerous thing, especially with how many women from Sydney’s community frequent my sister’s salon, and after our impromptu lunch last week, I’m sure people saw us. We’re not strangers in this town, and people know I’m the older brother of the owner of Rejuvenation, so it was only a matter of time before breadcrumbs made a trail linking Sydney to information about myself.

“Where did you hear that?” I grate out the question, unsure of how angry I’m allowed to feel at this moment.

This is why I didn’t want to share personal information and have these types of conversations with her where we talked about our feelings and divulged our pasts because I knew it would lead to this moment. But I guess I only have myself to blame for that one anyway. I’m mentally kicking myself in the mouth right now for even crossing the line I was so hell bent on drawing when we started sleeping together anyway.

“Well, there were some women talking at the salon last week,” she replies, as her eyes veer to the side of the room for a moment. “And then the parole officer that came into the gym ...”

I fucking knew it. I knew Sydney wasn’t stupid enough to let that detail go. I hoped and prayed that she wouldn’t put two and two together, but fuck—she’s a lawyer and smart as a whip. Of course she sensed that Gerald was there to talk to me.

I stand there, seething beneath the surface as I contemplate how to handle

this. I wasn't prepared for this conversation tonight. When I got her text, my dick instantly grew hard knowing I would get to claim her body again. It seemed that was all she was looking for too. Now I'm wondering how we ever got on this subject matter.

"Are you going to answer me?" She spats, lifting a brow and placing her hands on her hips now, clearly frustrated with my avoidance and silence.

There's no use in hiding the truth now. Sydney has the means to verify my record anyway. The words written in black ink that plague my life can't be erased.

"Guilty as charged, Princess."

Sydney's eyes grow wide with surprise, and a flash of fear—the exact reaction I wanted to avoid and never get from her. That look right there sliced through my heart, penetrating the barricade I've constructed around it. I shouldn't care that she seems taken aback and nervous about that scrap of information, but since I've grown to actually give a shit about her, I feel like less of a man now that she knows about the black cloud of my past.

"Um ... when? Why?"

I shove off the counter, fury running through me now, a siren going off in my brain to abort this conversation and put a stop to the festering guilt building in my gut. "It's none of your business, Sydney. Remember, we agreed this was just sex, so it shouldn't matter, right?" I glare at her over my shoulder as I move into the living room.

I can hear her footsteps stagger behind me as she follows my movements. "Um, it does matter, Javi. I have a right to know who I'm sleeping with."

"Didn't seem that important to you when you were begging me to fuck you ..."

"Well, that was then. Things are ..." She trails off and as I twist to face her, I see the same confusion on her face that I've been feeling in my body for a few weeks now.

Things are different now, aren't they, Sydney?

Because I sure as fuck feel it too.

But now the fog that's been obstructing my vision is starting to burn off and I'm smacked in the face with reality once again. Sydney and I could never work. We come from two different worlds, two different lives with sets of expectations that could never match up. Her dad would never approve of me, so what's the point in trying?

“Lines seem to have been blurred, Princess, so maybe we just stop this right now since my past has seemed to derail you this evening.”

“What?” she whispers, clutching her hand over her heart as if I shot an arrow to that point in her chest. I’m hurting her, which is the last thing I wanted to do, but ultimately, I think I knew it was inevitable.

If she only knew that it’s killing me to push her away right now too.

I don’t want this to end, but now that the cat’s out of the bag, I can’t see how this is supposed to go any further. I’m a monster, a man that made a mistake when he snapped. How could she ever feel safe with me?

“I think we’ve ran our course. I don’t do personal, Sydney, and obviously that little tidbit of information has made you think of me differently. I can see it all over your face.” I turn away from her again, burying my hands in my hair as I sink into my couch.

“Is that what you think? That because you’ve been to prison, I don’t want to sleep with you anymore? That’s ...”

My head pops up and meets her eyes brimming with tears. Fuck, I hate seeing her cry. Why does it feel like someone’s stabbing me in the chest right now?

“I thought maybe you thought more of me than that, Javi.” She shakes her head at me as one tear slides down her cheek, her hand reaching up to brush it away.

I can’t watch her cry anymore. The itch to punch a hole in my wall comes on so strong that I know she needs to leave before I explode and ruin the work I’ve done on this house. I need her out of here, so I say something final and harsh that will cement the situation we’re in.

“I think you were a good fuck and we had fun. But let’s just call this what it is, Princess. Done.”

I watch her clench her jaw and her fists, glaring at me through her moisture filled eyes, before storming away from me, grabbing her purse, and moving for my door.

“You won’t even give me a chance to tell you how I feel, will you?” She says softly with her back turned to me, but I can sense the hesitation in her voice.

“What’s the point?” I mutter back, keeping my head buried in my hands.

“That things aren’t always what you think, Javi. I thought I had more respect from you than this.”

“Just go, Sydney. Please.” My voice is cracking as I hear her turn the knob and open the door, closing it harshly behind her.

As soon as I hear her car start and see the headlights pull out of my yard, I push up off the couch in a fit of rage.

“Fuck!” I reach for the closest thing to me and chuck it across the room. Unluckily for me I found my remote and watch as the black plastic shatters and ricochets off the drywall, leaving a dent and scratch in the navy blue paint.

But it’s not nearly as bad as the gaping hole in my chest right now.

Why does it feel like someone is squeezing my heart in their fist as my blood pressure soars and a lump lodges itself in my throat? Why is my head pounding as I retrieve the broom from the hall closet and proceed to clean up my mess?

Because she meant more to you, idiot.

Apparently my subconscious is a lot smarter than me, or at least not as stubborn, as reality sets in.

I didn’t want her to know because I care.

I didn’t want to see her reaction because I knew how she thinks about me would affect me.

When we were having sex, it didn’t matter that I was an ex-con, a man from the other side of town, a boy who never felt worthy because of the looks others gave me due to the color of my skin and where I lived.

She was all that mattered.

The way she trusted me to please her.

Her cries of pleasure and touch that told me I made her feel safe in my hands.

The way she kept coming back for more, even beyond a few orgasms.

Our small conversations, the little details that we shared with each other. Those moments all allowed her to bury herself in my chest, and I didn’t even see it coming.

But I’m no good for her. And I think she knows it now. Which is why this is for the best.

My sister was right. Someone was bound to get hurt in our arrangement.

I just never thought it’d be me.

Chapter 23

Sydney

“So on a scale from one to ten, how is your anger today?” Ally’s sassiness comes through my Bluetooth speaker as I drive to work, her daily check-in since Saturday helping me process my fall out with Javi.

“Well, I thought the extra mile I ran this morning would have knocked me down a notch, but sadly I’d say I’m still hovering around an eight.”

Softening her voice, she flips a switch on me that I’m not emotionally prepared for. “Is it just anger you’re feeling, Syd, or is there a little sadness there too?” The sting of tears builds as I continue to drive, blurring my vision.

“I think that’s a fair assessment,” I reply on a whisper, afraid to keep talking otherwise the damn might break and I’ll ruin my makeup before I ever get to work.

I don’t want to cry or allow myself to feel sad because then I’m just going to feel sorry for myself when I have no one to blame but me. I knew what I was getting into when this all started, what I agreed to when Javier told me that this could only just be about sex and feelings were to be left out. But true to my womanly ways, I went and caught feelings and more importantly, Javi never gave me the opportunity to actually tell him how I felt about his confession. Then again, he was the one who initiated text conversations and communication that wasn’t just about hooking up, so maybe the bad boy forgot about his own damn rules and he *is* partially to blame for how I’m feeling right now.

Hearing him confirm my suspicions opened up a can of worms in my mind, but all I really wanted him to know was that I *didn’t* think of him differently because of it. In fact, learning that morsel of information about him made me feel like I understood him better.

It explained some of the comments he had made, his need to start fresh, his decline of alcohol anywhere in public. It made his hard exterior easier to recognize as a defense mechanism and not just who he really is as a person. I never would have suspected that detail about his past if I hadn’t seen his

parole officer with my own two eyes or heard that gossip in the salon. He doesn't look like a criminal or even act like one. Hell, he's a man holding down two very physically grueling jobs and seems responsible and loyal, which leads me to believe that perhaps his time behind bars was a result of an unfortunate circumstance or moment of regret.

But you can certainly tell he has a story that's jaded him and caused him to push people away, even though I was starting to see the playful and endearing sides of Javi in our short time of knowing each other. And yet as soon as I chiseled away at his armor, he was eager for a fight, ready to chain the gates up again.

"This is what I was afraid of. You've been so focused on being pissed for the past four days, I'm just waiting for the breakdown to come."

"Well, as much as I'd like to give you that satisfaction that I feel it coming on, I can't melt down on the way to work right now. I love you, Ally, but I can't talk anymore about this."

"Okay, okay," she relents as I pull into the parking lot of the law firm and shut off my car. "Let's get together Friday night for wine and trolling Jared around the neighborhood. He's probably only got a few more weeks of ice cream man duties before he has to return to school."

Her diversion makes me laugh and succeeds in helping me keep it together. "He's got at least a month and a half, Ally. It's only the end of June."

"Well, every moment counts my friend. Maybe you should consider giving him a test drive to help you get over Javi."

I scoff. "Ha. Yeah, no. I don't think anyone could make my toes curl like he did."

"You really were into him, weren't you? It wasn't just about the sex ..."

A long sigh leaves my lips as I reach for my purse, preparing to exit my car. "I wanted it to be, but the things he did to my body, Ally ... I don't know how you start to imagine never having to live without that again. He gave me exactly what I was craving and before I knew it, I grew attached."

"Yeah, unfortunately that can be a side effect of mind-blowing orgasms."

I chuckle and then stand from my car, disconnecting our conversation from the Bluetooth as I hold my phone between my shoulder and face while I walk into the office.

"It will be alright. Sounds like the boy has baggage he needs to deal with anyway."

“Don’t we all though, Ally? Does someone’s past mistakes dictate who they are now as a person? Shouldn’t we be inclined to believe that people can learn from their poor choices? I sure have my own baggage to deal with too, but his didn’t make me want to stop seeing him. I just wish he knew that.”

As I place my purse on my desk and fire up my computer, Tessa walks through the door and greets me with a wave.

“Listen, Ally. I gotta go. I love you and I’ll see you Friday night.”

“Sure thing, Syd. Hang in there. Everything will work itself out. And if not, I have plenty of book boyfriends to keep you warm at night and help you fulfill those fantasies that Javi never got to.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I end the call and then Tessa comes back into my office, holding a piping hot mug of coffee.

“Do you need another cup this morning?” she asks, while blowing the steam off hers.

“Yes, please. It’s going to be a long day.”

She offers me a soft smile and then spins on her heel to fetch me a cup of coffee while I start to settle into my chair and check my emails.

“Here you go.” Setting down a navy blue mug, she winces and bites her thumbnail.

“What’s up, Tessa?”

“Well, I know you said you have a long day, but I forgot to tell you that your father scheduled a lunch with you for today...”

“Crap.” I fall back in my chair, exasperated.

“Yeah. But at least he called to make an appointment this time instead of surprising you.” She beams, as if that makes everything better, although she does have a point. I’m sure there’s an imperative reason for this lunch if he took the initiative to call my assistant to put it on the schedule.

“Guess that means I’d better get to work then since who knows how long this lunch will take.”

Tessa throws me a wink as she exits my office. “Good luck, boss.”

I bury my mind in this contract negotiation sitting on my desk, which helps block out the misery plaguing my mind thanks to Javi and the impending lunch with my father. The morning flies by after one appointment with a client and a few interruptions from my paralegal, Yerelin, leading me into scurrying across town to make lunch with my dad.

Amity Bistro is nestled in a shopping center near Main Street, offering outdoor dining on their terrace with ivy climbing up the wrought iron fencing

that encloses the space. Misters hang from overhead to ward off the humid Texas air so that an outdoor dining experience can still be enjoyable, but my father has always insisted that we sit inside near a window when we dine here.

I arrive five minutes late, which isn't the end of the world to me, especially if it cuts into time I have to listen to him offer more disapproval of my life. I haven't spoken to him for the same length of time as Javi, since the night of my brothers' graduation, when he alluded to knowing just exactly what I'd been up to in the evenings. So who knows what this lunch will entail. He'll either act like nothing is wrong, or he'll continue to press the matter, which will most likely result in me storming out again.

As I'm greeted by the hostess, I see him waving at me from the back, so I head over without bothering for an escort. By the beaming smile on his face, I'm guessing we're going to pretend that nothing happened four days ago during this meal.

"Hi, Dad." I press up on my toes and kiss his cheek after he stands to greet me.

"Sydney. You look beautiful today. That color brings out your eyes, sweetheart." My father's compliment on my teal dress helps me feel slightly more confident about my appearance and this lunch today. I think most girls will agree that when something goes wrong in our love lives, we start to question every detail about our appearance, letting insecurities far and wide rear their ugly heads.

"Thank you."

"And did you lighten your hair?" He takes his seat again, reaching for the glass of water above his place setting.

My hand reaches up to stroke my strands as I take my seat across from him. "Oh, yeah I did. Last week actually. It was like this at the boys' graduation, but I did have it up that day, so I guess you couldn't tell."

"Well, it looks lovely. Are you hungry?" He hands me a menu, bright-eyed and grinning like a fool, instantly making me suspicious. I've seen this look on him before. He's complimenting me, making me feel at ease so when he strikes, I don't expect it.

Reaching out to intercept the menu, I reply, "Yes, thank you."

"Good afternoon. Can I get you two something to drink besides water?" Our waiter stops by, greeting us now that we've both sat down.

"I'll take an iced tea, please," I say.

“Same here. Actually, make that three. We have another person joining us,” my father adds, spiking my curiosity even further.

“Who is coming?”

“So how’s work?” he responds, avoiding my question entirely.

“Work is work, Dad. Who is coming to lunch?”

“There you are George,” a voice calls from behind, eerily familiar and raising my awareness in a flash. As I turn to seek its owner, I’m greeted with a smarmy Andrew Benton striding toward us as a match of fury strikes against my sternum.

“Andrew. Great to see you, son. Please ... come sit. We just order iced teas, but haven’t chosen an entrée yet.”

I stare down at the menu, avoiding making eye contact with Andrew as I clench my jaw tight and seek deep, calming breaths through my nose.

“Hello, Sydney. You look radiant as always today.” The fervor of Andrew’s voice makes my stomach twist, knowing he’s putting on a show in front of my father. He’s been open about his attraction toward me before, but he likes to lay it on thick while other people are around.

“Andrew,” I grate against my teeth, still pretending to read the menu while determining how I’m going to escape this hellhole I’ve found myself in. Of course there was an ulterior motive to this lunch. I don’t know why I wanted to believe that the opposite could be a possibility.

“So, you two ... let’s decide on what to eat and then I can tell you why we’re all here today for lunch.” The salt and peppered hair of my father sways as he adjusts himself in his seat, continuing to smile as we determine our orders. But I’m seething beneath the surface, sure that I’m about to be backed into a corner I can’t get out of.

Once we place our selections with the waiter, my father slips into his manipulative mode.

“Isn’t it nice to be sharing a meal together?” He stabs the lettuce of his salad with a fork before placing the bite in his mouth.

“Pretty sure we just did on Saturday, Dad.”

“Well, Andrew wasn’t there. It would have been nice if he were though, wouldn’t it, Sydney? Couldn’t you see Andrew being a part of our family?” he asks with a lift of his brow and a dart of his eyes between Andrew and me.

“I would love nothing more than to be part of the Matthews clan, Judge Matthews,” Andrew agrees with an abundance of enthusiasm.

“Andrew, I think you have something ... right ... here,” I say, motioning

to the tip of my nose with my own fingers.

“Oh. Really?” He swipes at his face while I try to hide the smile forming on my lips. He’s such a freaking brownnoser. I’m beginning to wonder if his nose actually does see the crack of my father’s ass on occasion.

“You’re fine, son.” My father shoots me an irritated glare as I smirk and reach for my glass of iced tea. A moment later, his phone rings as he glances at it on the table to see who’s calling. “Excuse me you two. I need to take this. Feel free to make the most of your time together.” He winks before swiping across the screen and addressing the person on the other end of the line.

With a heated tone and a clench of my jaw, I turn to Andrew and give him a piece of my mind. “You just can’t take a hint, can you?”

“This wasn’t my idea. It was your father’s. Like I said a few weeks ago, Sydney ... I don’t understand why you keep trying to fight this.” He moves his hand from his lap to rest on top of mine on the table, stroking his thumb across my skin. I watch the movement, nausea building in my gut as a shadow comes over us through the window. The hairs on the back of my neck salute with awareness as I turn to see the source that blocked out the light.

But when I see Javier’s face staring right back at me—more accurately at Andrew’s hand placed on top of mine—my stomach threatens to revolt before guilt rests at the bottom of my heart, right beside a longing for the man that won’t ease up.

His eyes lift from our hands to my eyes as his narrow and then he slowly shakes his head at me, as if the disappointment he seems to feel is warranted at all.

He’s the one that said we were done. He’s the one that pushed me away. So why does he have the right to feel angry at seeing me with another man? Not that anything is going to happen with Andrew anyway, but still—it’s the principle of the matter.

Just as my bottom lip falls and a sharp intake of oxygen hits my lungs, he turns and walks away with his fists clenched at his sides. His construction uniform was on, which makes me wonder if he is working nearby or maybe he just came into town for lunch. Either way, the last thing I expected was to see him today and get a reaction like that out of him.

“Was that a friend of yours?” Andrew questions, pulling my attention back to him as he releases my hand and takes a drink of his iced tea.

“What? Oh ... uh ...”

“Is he why you won’t give me a chance?”

My neck snaps back at his bold assessment. “What makes you think there’s anything going on between that man and me? All you saw was him looking through a window. He could have been looking in here at anyone.”

Andrew scoffs. “Please. I’m not stupid, Sydney. And neither is your father. He knows you’ve been seeing someone, at least that’s what he’s disclosed to me. But he also believes that you and I together would benefit us both greatly and hopes that you’ll finally pull your head out of the sand and realize that yourself.”

I tilt my head to the side, studying him as he looks across the restaurant smugly. “Let me ask you something, Andrew ...”

He shrugs and then loosens another button on his navy blue blazer as he gets comfortable in his chair. “Sure.”

“Do you honestly care so much about your reputation and career that you are willing to marry someone you don’t love?”

He stares at me with a slight upturn of his lips, either hiding a smile or covering up his indecisiveness. “I think we could both benefit greatly from our union...”

“That’s not what I asked. I asked you if you are willing to marry someone you don’t love as a sacrifice to your career and reputation.”

I can sense the hesitation on his face, but he quickly hides it through a squint and a slimy smile. “Yes, I think I am ...”

I shake my head and then sigh, moving to grab my purse from the floor beneath the table. “Well, I’m not. Please give my father that same message since I no longer have time to waste on this lunch.”

“He’s not going to take your dismissal kindly, Sydney. I’ll be fine. I have other women I can choose to fill your role. But your father is worried about you.” Suddenly his face softens and there’s a hint of concern in his features. “He’s afraid you’re going to make a mistake with who you give your heart to. Sometimes it’s better to leave emotions out of things.”

As I stand, my eyes bounce all around the restaurant as I process Andrew’s words before they land back on him. “Well, that’s my mistake to make. And I’m a big girl and can deal with the consequences. I hope you find what you’re looking for Andrew. I’m just not her.”

“Good luck, Sydney,” he says with a mock salute as I turn and head straight for the exit of the restaurant. As soon as my feet hit the pavement

outside, my head spins as I search for any sign of Javier.

Is he still nearby? Did he translate what he saw as me moving on with someone else already? If the man weren't so stubborn, he'd know that he was the one I wanted, in every possible way. Somewhere along the line, my need for him became beyond physical. I looked forward to every interaction, every moment when I got to see his face. I anxiously awaited his random texts because they meant that he was thinking about me.

And after seeing the look on his face, the betrayal reflected in his golden eyes as he stared at me through the window, I know we need to talk. I don't want him to think that he is replaceable or that Andrew is the man I want.

All I want is him.

I glance down at my phone to check the time, cursing the hour when I realize I don't have time to chase him down. I'm due in court in an hour and a half and still need to prepare. I rush back to the office and try to block out the lunch while also waiting for the phone call from my father reprimanding me for leaving yet another meal with him.

But I just can't be concerned anymore. If he won't listen, then I no longer feel the need to give him an explanation.

When the clock strikes five, I run from the office out to my car, heading straight for Javier's house, but then remember that it's Thursday, which means he will be at the gym until nine. Deflated and irritated, I turn around and drive home, allowing me to take pause and at least change before I head over later.

I will not let this carry on any longer. We need to talk and if he won't listen, then I will make him listen. I am not about to sacrifice the comfort and pleasure I feel with him, especially after my conversation with Andrew today. I don't want to end up with someone who is 'just fine' or doesn't make my cheeks burn from smiling so hard at the thought of them or my heart ache when we're apart. And every time I thought of Javi or heard his voice, that's what happened—and I can't let that go.

Knowing I'll probably be ambushing him just as he pulls into his driveway, I get back in my car and race to his place, pulling into the gravel driveway while searching for his truck. Sadly, he's not home yet, so I decide to park and wait for him.

As I sit in my car and scroll through my phone, my nerves jump around in my body, reminding me that facing him tonight is risky and the unknown of how he's going to react could make this situation worse.

Headlights flash in the rearview mirror, alerting me to his arrival as the sound of the rock being crushed by the rubber tires gets louder as he pulls up next to me. Feigning courage, I rise from my car and close my door just as Javi does the same on his truck. He walks around the front of it and we arrive in the same spot, just a few feet from each other.

“What are you doing here, Sydney?”

“I think we need to talk,” I say on a shaky breath.

“About what? I thought we did all of the talking we needed to the other night,” he spits over his shoulder as he walks to his door and unlocks it. I follow closely behind so he can’t slam it in my face, but surprisingly he holds it open for me. *Huh, for someone who doesn’t think we need to talk, why is he letting me inside?*

I place my keys on the counter and then my hands on my hips. “No. *You* did all the talking the other night. You never let me tell you how *I* felt or what *I* want ... you just made that decision for me, just like my father does.”

That catches his attention, the words that remind him exactly of the issues I’m facing in my life. He narrows his eyes at me, glaring while my skin itches with heat. Then he stands tall, crosses his arms over his chest, and widens his stance, his aura claiming possession of the room and reminding me of the presence he keeps, both in and out of the bedroom.

“So what is it that you feel, Princess? What is it that you want?”

Without hesitation, I cross the room to where he’s standing by the arm of the couch, inching closer as if someone is pulling a string between us as painfully slow as possible. When I arrive merely inches from his chest, the warmth of his body radiating off him in waves, I lock my eyes on his and raise my right hand to cup his face, caressing his stubble-lined jaw while running my thumb across his cheek. He relaxes under my touch, but his eyes don’t give me anything. They’re still cold, angry, full of a hesitancy to believe anything I say next.

“Learning about your past doesn’t change how I feel about you, Javi. I don’t care that you’ve been to prison, as long as you didn’t murder someone. Although, by how old you are and the fact that you’re not currently in prison, I’m guessing that wasn’t the case anyway. We’re all allowed to have a past, and believe it or not, I’m not the type to judge people on theirs because I’ve been on the receiving end of that judgment far too many times.” I hope his mind veers back to his previous assessments of me with that statement. “But more importantly than that, and the fact that your record doesn’t define you

as a person, the only thing that I really wanted you to know that night was that all I want ... is you.”

His nostrils flare as a new wave of reluctancy passes over him. I can see the denial in his eyes, the disbelief in the slack of his lips, the tension leaving his arms as his fists unclench and he stands before me, searching my eyes for the truth.

And I give it to him—the unwavering notion that no matter how or why this started, I’m not done with him yet. I don’t want this to be over too soon when we’re just getting started. We’ve established a physical connection, but there’s an emotional one here too—and I want to explore that with every thump of my heart.

“What do you have to say, Javi?” I press, stroking his cheek with my thumb. “Do you want me too?”

“I ...” He starts, but then cuts himself off. “I don’t know what I want.”

I’m taken aback by his response because judging by the way he glared at me earlier today, I was sure he was jealous. Did I read him wrong? Was coming here a big mistake?

“Who was that guy earlier?” he says, his voice filled with stark demand.

I let out a laugh and then drop my hand from his face. “Is that what matters to you? Is this just about you not wanting me, but not wanting me to be with anyone else either?”

“Answer the question, Sydney.”

“That was Andrew Benton. He went to school with us too. My father has been trying to set us up for months, but I keep pushing him away and declining his advances, especially after things started happening between us,” I say, motioning with a wave of my hand.

“Then why was he touching you? What I saw looked awfully friendly.”

“*He* put his hand on *me*, Javi. I didn’t ask for that.”

“Seems like that’s the type of guy you want.”

“Ha!” I mock, stepping away from him now, growing angrier with each accusation. “I just told you that *you* are the one I want, and you accuse me of wanting someone else?” I throw my hands up in the air in frustration. “I don’t know how I could make that any more clear.”

“I won’t be made a fool, Sydney ...”

“And I have no intention of doing so. Just tell me, Javi. Tell me what *you* want. Because if you and I have been sharing the same interactions, I’d say you know the answer. You know what you feel. You know that this isn’t just

one-sided. Tell me ... do you want me as much as I want you?"

He stalks toward me now, punishing footsteps hitting the hardwood as I back up against the wall behind me, waiting for his next move. With inches between us, he bends his knees so our eyes are on the same level, his hot breath whispering across my lips as he breathes harshly while our chests heave between us. His eyes are focused on my lips, his gaze so intense my core starts to throb just from watching him decide—waiting for him to take what he wants.

"Admit that you want me, Javi. Just give in. Admit it and we can figure everything else out later," I whisper just as his eyes lift and find mine, reeling with confusion—but also, possibilities.

And then his restraint snaps and he barrels forward.

"I want you so fucking much, Princess, it kills me. I can't stop thinking about you, no matter how hard I try. I thought that pushing you away was the right thing to do. But seeing you with that guy today, it rattled me. I thought I was going to lose my shit. I don't want any other man touching you. No one gets to touch what's mine," he growls, pushing his body into mine, pressing his hips against my own.

"Then kiss me, Javi. Claim me. Make me yours ..."

I barely get the words out before his lips are on mine, searing our need for one another in a touch so powerful, I never knew a kiss could feel like this. It's ironic, really, how we've been sleeping together for this long now and have never done this. But now that we have, that we are, I'm overtaken by the rush of sensations climbing all over my body and the fireworks booming behind my eyelids.

Javi's lips are soft yet firm, just as I suspected. And his kiss is demanding, just like every other touch he's given my body. I have no choice but to give in to each pulse of his lips, each swirl of his tongue, each groan of pleasure that he elicits as our arms wrap around each other and we dive head first into this kiss.

It's cementing our need together, intertwining our desires as one, altering the entire connection between us with such a simple yet intimate act.

And yet, there is nothing simple about this kiss whatsoever.

Javi works my mouth with his own, pulling away just when things get too heated, only to take a breath and dive back in for more. Our tongues tangle and bend with each swipe and Javi directs my head around so he can change the angle and control the kiss.

I'm intoxicated by him, wondering how his kiss is changing me more than the life-altering sex I've experienced with him. And now that the realization hits me, I know I need him in that way too.

I break free from his command just long enough to declare, "I need you, Javi." I reach down between us and stroke his cock through his shorts, warming my entire body to the level of an inferno.

"Fuck yes, Princess. I fucking missed this body," he growls against my neck as his hands find the waistband of my leggings and he pushes them down along with my underwear to the floor. "I missed you," he whispers in my ear when he returns from the ground just as my hands untie the string on the waistband of his shorts and I help him remove them as well, joining my bottoms on the floor.

"Fuck, I need a condom. Hold on." He presses a chaste kiss to my lips and then saunters down the hallway, giving me the perfect view of his bare ass as he walks away from me. He returns quickly, covering himself as he stalks back toward me. And when he takes his position in front of me again, his hands palm my ass cheeks and lift me up in his arms so my legs can wrap around his waist.

"Hold on to me," he instructs as I wrap my arms around his neck and feel my back hit the wall, along with Javi's dick pressing against my entrance. And with one lift and pull, he slides me down his cock in a precise movement that has me crying out in pleasure and surprise.

Javi's hips start to move as his arms help lift me up and down while the weight of his body holds me up against the wall.

"God, yes," I moan, searching for his lips again so I can taste him. Now that he's finally let me, I don't want to stop. We continue to fuck as our lips move over one another and an intense euphoria radiates from my chest.

This is right. This is what I wanted. The ache I felt for the past four days can go to hell because no matter how stubborn this man can be, I know he needs me, he needs this—and I feel the same way.

Just after our lips part, his declaration lights up my skin like a livewire. "You're mine, Sydney."

"Yes, Javi. I'm yours," I whisper in his ear, dragging my tongue around the shell as he continues to thrust inside of me.

Hard, punishing, and yet somehow, with a tenderness that blends two forms of fucking together, Javi brings us closer to release while keeping me secure in his arms.

As I feel my orgasm come on, I want nothing more than to kiss him when the waves hit me, for his mouth to swallow my cries of pleasure. So I do—I find his lips once more just as the first tremors hits and we swallow each other's groans when his release hits as well, searing our connection even stronger than ever before.

When we part—breaths heavy and bodies sweaty—he looks into my eyes and says so much without saying any words at all.

I need you. I don't want to. But I do.

Chapter 24

Javier

“Are you ready to talk?” Sydney drags her fingernails across my bare chest as we lie next to each other in my bed. Once we cleaned up from the sex up against the wall, I dragged her back to my room so we could lie down. With only the lamp on my nightstand on, the soft glow of light in the room makes the woman beside me look more beautiful than ever.

It’s the first time I’m holding her in my arms after fucking her and kissing her. I never allowed myself to do that before because I didn’t trust myself enough to break the rules, even though I broke about ten others.

Well, fuck those rules. I don’t think we were ever meant to follow them anyway.

God, I knew her lips would hold me captive—it’s part of the reason why I refrained from kissing her for so long until tonight. When she stood there in front of me, pleading with me to let go and finally admit what I feel, the only thought on my mind was tasting her mouth. And now that we’ve solidified that we’ve both been kidding ourselves about the extent of our relationship, I know we need to figure out what happens now.

“I guess. Or, we could just fuck again.” I roll over on top of her, hovering above her face as her dark hair fans out behind her on my pillow, wanting to stay in this tender and playful moment for just a little while longer. The slight upturn of her lips has me growing hard again in an instant.

Damn, she looks good in my bed like this—freshly fucked and completely surrendered to me in a way that isn’t just physical. Sydney voiced her feelings earlier, but I’m still having a hard time wrapping my brain around the fact that she’s not entirely bothered by my record. She doesn’t even know what landed me in prison, but she’s willing to accept me despite that. I’m instantly aware of how wrong I was about who she is as a person all of these years. This woman is exceptional in every facet of the word—and she wants *me*.

“Javi,” she warns, forcing me to accept that this conversation needs to happen sooner rather than later.

“Yeah, okay, Princess.” I roll onto my back again, but pull her in closer to my body. We’re both naked still, but the warmth of her skin soothes me in a way I never knew I needed. I press a kiss against her temple, pull the covers up over our torsos, and then take a deep breath. “What do you want to know?”

“Well ... I guess I kind of want to know where your head is at right now? Out in the living room was pretty intense and I just want to make sure we’re on the same page.” Well, that wasn’t the question I was anticipating. I was sure she was going to ask me what landed me in jail.

“And what page is that?”

Sydney sits up and rests her chin on my chest, her aqua eyes gleaming up at me. “Where do we go from here? I think we can both admit now that there’s feelings involved between us, so what is it that you want?”

My hand reaches out to brush the hair from her face, her strands wild from my comforter. “I want you.”

“So are we ... dating? Like, exclusively?” Despite how stern I know she can be and even how much she was with me earlier, her timid questioning right now has me fighting off a grin.

“Like boyfriend and girlfriend?”

She shrugs. “I mean, I guess if you wanna put a label on it.” Her eyes focus on any other place but me until I direct her face back to mine.

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to pressure you for anything. This is ... this is all new, Javi.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Princess. I don’t do relationships, haven’t for a long time. I’ve had one serious relationship in my life, but that was when I was like nineteen.”

“Okay ...” she drags out, and suddenly I feel the energy between us shift.

“But with you,” I add, making sure she understands what I’m saying, “the way you cloud my mind, the way I crave not only your body but your conversation, the way seeing you smile makes my day better ... that’s something I’ve never felt before, Sydney.”

The smile that stretches across her lips makes my chest fill with purpose. “I feel the same, Javi.”

“I never thought in a million years and I’d be lying in a bed naked with Sydney Matthews.” She chuckles and I follow suit. “But here we are, and there’s no place I’d rather be.”

Her smile fades slowly now, alerting me to the fact that maybe I said something wrong. “Then why did you push me away, Javi? On Saturday ... why wouldn’t you just let me talk?”

I huff out a harsh breath and then move to sit up in the bed, pulling her onto my lap so she’s straddling me. My hands encircle her waist as I take a moment to gather myself enough to explain something to her. I’m not good at expressing my feelings, but for her, I want to try.

“Sydney ... seeing the look on your face when I confirmed the rumor you heard ... that’s exactly what I *didn’t* want to happen. I saw it in your eyes—the surprise, the twinge of fear, the unknown that lit a bonfire of questions in your mind. Being near you this past month made me realize that I would never be able to handle you looking at me like that ...”

“Like what?”

“Like a villain.” I pause for a moment, trying to find the courage to keep talking. “I’ve made some choices in my life I’m not proud of, Sydney. Our pasts are very different. Hell, our lives are too. It makes this thing between us complicated, and I’m not going to lie—it scares the shit out of me. And then seeing you process the truth about me—it all was too much, so I thought the best thing to do was just end this.” I stare down at our hands as I intertwine them. I can feel Sydney’s eyes on me, but I’m avoiding them.

“Can I ask what you did, Javi? What landed you in prison?” Her eyes pull mine to hers, but I still can’t find it in me to share the entire story. No matter how you look at it, I beat a man within an inch of his life. I was murderous and angry, and I want to hold off on exposing that side of myself for as long as possible to her.

“I’ll tell you one day, Sydney. I promise. But not tonight.”

“But ...”

“Please, sweetheart. Let’s just enjoy being together tonight. There will be a time to open up about that stuff later ...” *I can’t stand to see your face change with more details about that part of my life—not tonight when I finally have you back in my bed, and better yet, now in my arms.*

“Okay,” she relents, but then sits up straighter. “But just know, Javi—God, you made me so mad the other night,” she grates with a shake of her head. “You made that decision to end things between us without listening to what I had to say.”

“I know. And when you acknowledged that earlier, I regretted my reaction even more than I have for the past four days. This time without you

has been torture, baby.”

“It hasn’t been pleasant for me either, not knowing if I’d ever hear from you again.”

“And then when I saw you with that guy today, I thought I was gonna snap ...”

Her fingers grip my chin, forcing me to look at her. “I told you, he’s not who I want. I was very clear with him about that, and if Andrew knows what’s good for him, he’ll relay that message to my dad too since he doesn’t want to listen to me.”

Another red flag goes off in my mind. Her dad. Surely Judge Matthews would have an issue with his daughter dating an ex-con. “What do you think daddy-dearest is going to think when he finds out we’re seeing each other?”

“I don’t give a shit about that right now, Javi. My father can kiss my ass as far as I’m concerned.” Her bold statement makes me throw my head against my headboard in laughter, even though there’s still an uneasiness in my chest.

“Okay ...”

She cups my face in her hands, resting her forehead on mine as we breathe each other in for a moment. “Let’s just focus on us for right now, alright? Let’s figure out what this is before involving outside influences.”

“Hate to break it to you, but my sister and Andre aren’t going to stay away.”

She perks up with that detail, excitement registering in her eyes. “That I don’t mind, actually. I really like your sister, Javi.”

Rubbing my hands up and down her arms, I process the way she lit up at that moment and how it made me feel—like Sydney could possibly fit into my world. I’m just not so sure I’d fit into hers. “I know. And since she’s nosy as all hell, she was already hounding me on why you hadn’t been around all week.”

“Well, maybe she needed to knock some sense into you so you’d open up to me.”

“I think the only person that could have accomplished that was you, sweetheart.” I grip her face in my palms and pull her toward me, pressing our lips together in a kiss that melts away the underlying tension still reeling in my body. With Sydney’s lips on mine and her back in my arms, my world feels right again.

I don’t know when it happened, or why, but somehow Sydney Matthews

and I were meant to cross paths again, and I never imagined it would lead us down the road we're headed. But now knowing that it's time to put our stubbornness aside, I'm optimistic to see how this connection of ours could only grow from here.

Chapter 25

Sydney

“Okay, your smile is beginning to creep me out.”

“What? Why?” I look up from my desk to see Tessa studying me from the open door of my office.

“Because it just stays there. It doesn’t even fall when you’re reading or typing something on the computer.”

“Have you been watching me?”

“For about the last five minutes. What’s gotten into you?”

I fight my smile from growing once more, but it’s a lost cause. It’s been less than twenty-four hours since Javier and I reconciled, but I can’t fight the elation running through my body. Months ago I never would have believed I’d be in a relationship that both terrifies me, but also wakes up every nerve ending in my brain—but that’s exactly where I’m at. And the man responsible for my giddiness is the biggest surprise of them all.

“I’m just happy it’s almost Friday.” I shrug and then focus back on the contract in front of me.

“Oh, okay. Well then, I’d better hold off on bringing in these flowers that were just sent for you.”

“What?” I perk up in my chair before deciding to stand, needing to stretch my legs anyway.

Tessa chuckles and then leaves to gather the delivery. But when she returns, more than flowers cross the threshold of my office.

“Hey there, Princess.”

Javier stands before me holding a gorgeous bouquet of red roses in his strong arms covered by his construction uniform. His skin is slickened with sweat and his signature bandana is wrapped around his forehead.

“Hey, you. This is a pleasant surprise.” I squeak out the words as my heart beats wildly against my ribs. Javier is in my office with flowers for me—cue the melting of my heart and the slipping of my underwear. If we were any other place, I’d be stripping for him right now. Apparently flowers make me want to get naked.

No, scratch that. Flowers from Javi make me want to get naked.

“I’m glad I surprised you. That was the goal.” He steps in a few more feet and then hands me the flowers while planting a kiss on my cheek. “These are for you.”

“How did you know that red roses were my favorite?” I ask as I inhale their scent and then move to the corner of my office where I have a vase that’s empty and ready to be filled with this arrangement.

“I didn’t, but now I do,” he answers through a chuckle. “I had no idea what to get when I went into the flower shop, but for some reason red roses were calling out to me. They reminded me of you. No matter how classic they may be, they are bold and make a statement—like you do.”

I turn around to face him as he stares at me intently. His gaze almost looks pained, but then he moves to close my door quietly, breaking our eye contact. In a few swift strides, he’s back in front of me, holding my face in my hands and kissing me breathlessly. I part my lips for him, allowing him to dive his tongue into my mouth. He tastes of salt and soda, and smells of sweat mixed with his signature scent I discovered is his deodorant after rummaging through his bathroom last night before I left. I was curious what that smell was and when I didn’t see any cologne on his counter, I popped the cap from his deodorant and inhaled deeply, bathing myself in his smell that I’ve come to crave.

When he breaks the kiss, he wraps his arms around my waist and rests his forehead on mine.

“God, I needed that.”

“I just saw you last night.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I know. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I needed to remind myself that you were real, that last night really happened.”

Concern fills my mind as I pull away from him slightly, but stay within his arms. “Is everything okay? Are you having second thoughts about this?” My heartbeat ricochets in my chest as I wait for his answer. Doubt floods my veins as I watch him furrow his brow and struggle to answer. My biggest concern in all of this is him changing his mind or freaking out because of what someone else might think. I’ve come to grips with the fact that opinions are going to fly, but I’m also running on fumes of hatred for those people and that facet of my life they are involved in.

This new life, the one that’s opening up because Javier is in it—that’s what I’m choosing to focus on. But I know he’s going to be bothered by

things that I might not register, and I don't want him to bail due to fear.

"No, not changing my mind. Just trying to remind myself that this is an adjustment for me."

"Hey," I whisper, stroking his cheek with my thumb. "It's okay. I'm a little scared too if that makes you feel any better."

"Uh, not really," he huffs.

"I mean that in the best way though. It's an anticipatory fear, the kind that makes your stomach churn with nerves of excitement."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I just ..." He sighs, and then releases me from his grip. "I don't want to fuck this up."

"I think you're better at this than you think. These flowers were a great start." I flash him a wink which makes him smile warmly.

"Okay. Well, how about you come over tomorrow night and I cook you dinner and you stay the night with me?" He lifts one brow as he pulls my body close to his again, encircling my waist completely this time.

"See. You're a top notch boyfriend, Javi," I murmur before finding his lips again and losing myself in his kiss. I struggle with breaking away from him because tasting his lips is my new favorite addiction.

"Fuck." He groans as we part and I feel how hard he is between us. "If I had less respect for your job, I'd bend you over your desk right now and fuck you senseless."

I giggle, feeling my cheeks turn pink with his declaration. "As much as I'd love that, it's probably not a good idea. If I had money on it, I'd bet Tessa's ears are pressed up against my door right now."

"Yeah, okay. I'll just save my stamina for tomorrow night then. Pack a bag, but don't bother with too many clothes, Princess. You won't be needing them." He nibbles on my earlobe, sending a bolt of arousal through my body straight for my core.

"Sounds like a plan," I reply breathlessly as we part, and then bite my bottom lip. "Have a good rest of your day, Javi." I walk him to the door and hold it open for him, surprised that Tessa isn't milling around in the hallway.

"You too, Princess." He flashes me a smirk that doesn't quell the ache between my legs at all, and then saunters off as I watch his long legs retreat from the building. As I stare down the hallway and watch him exit, Tessa scares the shit out of me as she jumps from her doorway right in front of my face.

"Shit, Tessa!"

“Sorry, sorry,” she rambles and then widens her eyes at me. “Um, care to explain the fine hunk of man meat that just came in here with flowers for you?”

I turn on my heel and then head back into my office as she trails me. “That is Javier.”

“Oh, *Javier*,” she says his name with a roll of her tongue. “Have you taken a Latin lover, Sydney?”

I bite my lip to fight my smile again. “Something like that.”

“And is he the reason you can’t stop smiling.”

“Yes ... but it’s new, okay? Don’t jinx it.” I point a finger at her as if she has any control over what happens with Javi and me.

“So apparently we’re allowed to accept flowers from Javi then?”

I chuckle. “Yes. Definitely.”

“I’m happy for you, Sydney.” She smiles adoringly and then walks away, leaving me staring at the flowers in the corner of my office, loving how different this flower delivery felt compared to the last.

When I leave the office later that evening, a strange feeling comes over me in the parking lot, almost like I’m being watched. I don’t see anyone and the traffic sailing beside the building blocks out any weird noise, so I shake it off and slip into my car, locking my doors once I buckle in and check my phone. A text message from Ally pops up, asking me if we’re still on for hanging out tomorrow night.

“Shit,” I say out loud in my car as I pull away from my workplace and hit her name once my phone connects to the Bluetooth speaker.

“Hey, girl. Did you get my text?”

“Uh, yeah I did. Listen, some stuff came up yesterday ...”

“Are you cancelling on me, Sydney?” By the stark tone of her voice, I’m sensing that she’s mad.

“Well ...”

“You’d better have a damn good reason to cancel on your best friend ...”

“Javier asked me over.”

“Wait! What?”

“God, Ally! So much happened yesterday and I was running late this morning so I didn’t get a chance to call you. Javi and I are ... dating.” I’m practically squealing at this point because I know she’s going to be as excited as I am.

“Shut the front door! What the hell happened, Sydney? You’d better fill me in now!”

I laugh at her excitement and demands, and then proceed to inform her of how last night went, adding on the detail of the impromptu flower delivery today.

“Holy smokes! Okay, I guess I can accept your cancellation this once so you can spend time with your man. But if you start blowing me off consistently, we will fight, Sydney.”

“I don’t doubt it. It’s just new and exciting, even though it’s not really new, I guess ...”

“No, this is huge. You got what you wanted, girl, and the man feels it too. You owe it to yourself to see this through ...”

“You know when my dad catches wind, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Well, that’s something you can’t control, but you *can* control what happens between the two of you until then, so focus on that. From the things you’ve told me about him, I think this could be it, Sydney.”

“Most of what I’ve told you has been about our sex,” I declare, partially taken aback by her bold statement. I know what I feel for Javi is real too, but I’m not naïve about the obstacles we face, particularly with my father. Then add on the fact there’s still so much I don’t know about him.

“Um, good sex is key to a long lasting relationship, Syd. Collin and I fucked like bunnies before we had kids. And when things get heated between us now, a good bout of hate sex helps even everything out.”

“You are strange, my friend.”

“No. I’m honest.”

“Okay. Well, you promise you aren’t mad at me for bailing on you?”

She sighs dramatically. “No, I guess not. Jared will be though. I guess no more pining after him, huh?”

“Um, I was never pining after him, Ally. I think that was you ...” I fight a chuckle as I close in on my condo.

“He’s just nice to look at, Syd. I still love my husband.”

“Good to know. I’ll just have to get my ice cream elsewhere now.”

“I’m sure Javier will be more than happy to deliver on that need for you.”

“How did you make that dirty?”

“It’s easy.”

“Okay, well, I just got home. I have to go through some files before tomorrow, so I have a long night ahead of me ...”

I can hear screaming in the background of Ally's phone, so I know our conversation was about to end anyway. "Okay, girl. And hey, I'm happy for you. I'd love to officially meet him soon. Maybe you two come over for dinner or something ..."

"Maybe a Dallas game once the season starts! Javi's a Cowboy's fan too!"

"Okay, I like him even more now. Have a good night, girl."

"You too, Al. Love you!"

The call ends as I park my car and hustle inside, forcing myself to focus on this case so I can leave work behind this weekend and enjoy my time with Javi.

By the time the clock strikes five on Friday evening the next day, I'm so unfocused that I leave work practically panting as I sit behind the wheel of my car.

"Calm down, Sydney. It's not like you've never been to his place before." I practice some deep breathing before I check the back seat for my bag and head for Javi's house. He assured me he'd be home by five thirty and told me to just head over straight from work.

When I pull in his driveway and see his truck there, the anticipation I've been feeling combusts and I feel like I can't move. I know this night is different and means more than any other time I've come here, and I guess that expectation is playing with my head. I want him to open up to me, but I also don't want to push him away. If anything, I feel like I'm walking on eggshells right now.

But when he opens the door looking freshly showered with a black t-shirt on, gray shorts, and a kitchen towel slung over his shoulder, part of my anxiety melts away. No matter what happens tonight, this man wants me here and by the way his eyes are lit up at the sight of me, I know that this evening will be great just because the two of us are together under the same level of expectations.

"Hi, beautiful." Javier steps forward and brings me into his chest, planting a kiss on my lips. "I can't stop kissing you," he mumbles against my lips as he spins me inside of his house and keeps his mouth on mine.

"I don't want you to stop." I meet him with every nip and swipe of his tongue as we maul each other for a few minutes, forcing me to drop my bag on the tile floor beneath us.

Borderline panting, Javier forces us apart. "Fuck. Okay, we need to stop

otherwise I'm gonna burn dinner and I'm sure you're hungry."

"Well, I am starving."

"Okay. Let's eat and then we can pick that back up later." He presses a kiss to my nose and the move makes me want to cry. This broody man I met two months ago is putting moves on me like that one, and part of me wonders if this is the same person standing in front of me?

As Javier walks back to the stove, I pick up my bag and place it near the couch.

"You can put your stuff in my room if you want," he calls over his shoulder, so I follow through with his suggestion. As I walk back down the hallway, I glance in the rooms I pass and notice the living room and kitchen are now complete as well, including all of the tile.

"Javi, did you finish the house?"

He turns to face me again, with a prideful smile. "Yeah, last week."

"Oh. I guess ... I guess I didn't notice the other night."

"Yeah, well, there were other things to be focused on. Are you thirsty? I have beer and I bought some wine. I wasn't sure what you liked."

"Wine would be great."

"White or red?"

"Well, what are we having?"

Javi grins and then takes the lid off of a sauté pan. "Pan seared scallops, mushroom risotto, and grilled asparagus."

"Uh, holy shit! You can cook?"

His laugh travels through the kitchen and hits me right in the chest. I never knew he had such a deep but vibrant laugh that could light me up on the inside.

"Yeah. I spent a lot of time watching The Food Network in prison. It was one of the only channels we got on the little television in the community room. I took a lot of notes and when I got out, I decided to try a few recipes. This is one I've perfected, so I wanted to make it for you."

So much of what he said swirls around in my brain—particularly him mentioning his time in prison. "Oh. Well, I can't wait to try it."

He clears his throat as if he realized what he said so casually and then changes the topic instantly. "So red or white?"

"What?" I shake my head, firing my brain to concentrate back on him and not the bomb he just dropped. "Oh, white please. Goes better with seafood."

“I agree.” He moves around the kitchen flawlessly and then presents me with a glass. “Here.”

“Thank you.” I take a sip and savor the flavor once it hits the back of my tongue. I take a seat at the counter and watch Javi finish up the meal.

“So, how was your day?”

“Ugh, long. I couldn’t wait to come over here.”

“Me too, Princess.” He turns with two plates in hand and directs me to the table with a flick of his head.

As we settle in and I take the first bite, I’m blown away at the flavor. “This is incredible, Javi. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, babe. I was nervous. I’ve ... never cooked for anyone before...” He stares down at his plate, the hard exterior I’ve grown to recognize sliding over his entire demeanor.

“Not even Andre and Selena?”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “Selena is a boss in the kitchen. She wouldn’t let me in even if I tried.” He’s joking which lightens his mood a bit, but then he slips back down.

“Javi, is something wrong?”

He huffs and then leans back in his chair, setting down his fork and wiping his mouth. “I don’t know how to do this, Sydney.”

“Do what? Have dinner?”

“No. Date. Talk to you. I feel like I don’t know what to say. I’m so fucking happy you’re here, but then in the back of my mind, I feel like there’s a stick of dynamite that’s waiting to be ignited, threatening to explode and ruin the evening.”

“We’ve talked before, Javi. This is no different. What are you afraid is going to ruin everything?” I reach for my wine, trying to drown my nerves with alcohol. I knew Javier was uneasy, but I didn’t realize he was this stressed and tense.

“Like the past.” His eyes lift and find mine, and I sense his concern.

“Okay. Well, how about we just start small. Tell me about your childhood. What you were like back in school since I didn’t really know you existed then?” I offer him a sweet and comforting smile, but I can tell he’s still hesitant.

Running his hand through his hair, he picks up his fork again and dives back into his food. “Okay. I can do that, I guess. Well, my mom is from Texas. She’s white actually. And my dad came here from Puerto Rico.”

“Ah. Okay, I was gonna ask where your family is from because I wasn’t sure how Latin you were.” I wink at him across the table.

“Yeah. I got the dark skin to a certain extent from my dad, but my mom’s whiteness likes to shine through too.”

“Can I just say that your ethnicity is part of what draws me to you, Javi.”

His lips tip up. “I’m pretty sure you’re white as can be, Princess, but I’m drawn to you too.”

I smile and continue eating. “Okay, so what about in school? What was Javier Montes doing while I was busy doing ... well, everything.”

He scoffs and then answers. “Well, after my dad died, I went through a hard time, which I guess isn’t surprising. I got into smoking pot, drinking... you name it, I tried it. My group of friends were from this side of town, a little rough around the edges, down to see what kind of trouble we could get into. When I was sixteen, I got caught shoplifting alcohol from a liquor store. I escaped juvi since it was my first offense, but I had to do community service. My mom was pissed. She told me to get my act together and graduate, otherwise my father would be rolling around in his grave. So I did, for the most part. I still partied and shit, but I tried to stay out of trouble.”

“Wow. So while you were partying and getting arrested, I was leading pep rallies and cheering at the football games on Friday nights.”

“Yeah, I remember.” He smirks in my direction.

“Really? You actually went to a game?”

He shrugs, taking a sip of his beer. “A few. My crew kinda hung out under the bleachers and smoked while everyone else actually focused on the game.”

“Oh my gosh! That was you and your friends? Everyone always wondered why the stands reeked of pot.”

Javi laughs. “Yeah, we took strange pride in that accomplishment.”

“I take it you never took honors or AP classes either since we didn’t have class together at all.”

“Nope. I barely passed and graduated, even though I could have easily. I just didn’t like to do homework.”

“I don’t think anyone likes homework, Javi. Have you ... have you ever thought about going back to school?”

He nods. “I did, especially when I was serving my sentence. But I got the job with Gibson Construction when I got out and knew I could make a decent living, so I decided against it. Loans and homework didn’t sound appealing.”

“Yeah. I understand. So, uh ... how long were you in for?”

He pauses, staring at me across the table as my heart beats nervously.
“Two years.”

“Wow. And was this ... recent?”

He nods. “I got out about seven months ago.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say. I didn’t think his sentence was something so fresh. No wonder he’s apprehensive to talk about it.

“Yeah. Um, are you done?” He stands and grabs his plate, reaching for mine as well. I look down and realize I actually ate during that conversation, but don’t think I could eat any more.

“Yes. Thank you. It was amazing.”

“You’re welcome, Princess.”

“Are you still insisting on calling me that now that we’re dating?”

Javier chuckles as he rinses the dishes and starts putting things away. “I think it just suits you, babe. I always thought you gave off that princess vibe.”

“I thought you called me that because you hated me.”

The water runs in the sink as he scrubs at the plates and loads them into the dishwasher. “At first, yeah. But now, I think it has more meaning.” He shoots me a sideways glance with a small smile on his lips.

“Oh. Okay then.”

While Javier finishes cleaning the kitchen, I go to his room to change into more comfortable clothing. I was still in a navy shift dress from work while we were eating.

My head spins a bit from knowing more about Javier now. It’s no wonder we never crossed paths in school. We certainly didn’t have the same priorities or run in the same circles. Hell, I didn’t even have my first taste of alcohol until the summer after graduation at a lake party when Ally shoved it in my mouth, stating she was tired of my bitching. I was a nervous wreck thinking my father would disown me if he ever found out. Funny how much I think of his opinion now.

As I walk back into the living room, Javier is sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone while he waits for me. I take a moment to appreciate the specimen of a man that has invited me into his home tonight—not as a hookup, but as someone he genuinely cares for. He may be nervous and uneasy about progressing our relationship, but there’s a resounding firmness in my gut that tells me this is right—he and I together feels inevitable.

Sometimes two people find each other at the right time, and that might mean living lives prior to their connection that don't necessarily add up. But now, with the way he's staring at me as I walk to him in my gray tank top and black leggings, it reminds me that beyond this physical pull I feel for him, there's an emotional one too.

I see a man that just wants to be accepted, reassured that he's making up for his mistakes and the wrong decisions he's made in his life. And I want to be that woman for him with every bone in my body. I am falling so incredibly hard for him, especially now that I have permission to, that I'm afraid what the ground will feel like this time if he lets me fall again.

"Hey. You more comfortable now?"

I nod, reaching him at the couch and sinking down on the cushions next to him. "Yes. Very."

"Good. I refilled your wine and brought you a blanket in case you get cold. I have the air down low to fight the humidity."

I gaze around the room where a few candles have been lit and admire the work Javi has done in this house. My hand finds his face as I cup his jaw and lightly press my lips to his. "Thank you for having me here tonight ... as your girlfriend, Javi. I want you to know how impressed I am with what you've done with this place and with that meal you made me. Even though I've been here several times before, tonight feels different in the best way. I'm in awe of you. You are hardworking and respectful. You're loyal. You are an amazing man and I still can't believe you're letting me in."

His eyes soften as they drop to my lips and then back up to my eyes. "I'm glad you're here too. Even though I tried to fight it, I feel like you and I were inescapable in some crazy way. I'm still shocked we're here, but thank you for not giving up on me."

"I don't think I could if I tried. Just like you never gave up on me during the self-defense class."

Javi laughs as he pulls me into his lap so I'm straddling him. "Oh, I wanted to, Princess. There's no mistaking that. But you were just too damn feisty to let me."

"Don't forget it."

"I couldn't even if I tried."

I kiss him softly before we part again. "Ally wants to meet you."

"Your friend from The Jameson?"

"Yeah. We've been friends for most of our lives and was always near me

in high school. She's my best friend and I told her about us. She needs to give her seal of approval."

He takes a deep breath of courage. "I thought she looked familiar. Okay. I can do that."

"Don't worry. She's nothing like my dad. Hell, just a few weeks ago she was trying to set me up with her ice cream man."

"What?" Javi laughs.

"Yeah. There's this young ice cream man that drives around her neighborhood. She was convinced I needed to get laid and kept trying to get us together. She's exasperating sometimes," I say with a roll of my eyes.

"Are you into ice cream men, Sydney?" Javi grates as he begins to press kisses to my neck, my head tilting over instinctually to give him better access.

"No. Just men who give me ice cream," I tease breathlessly.

"Hmmm. I might be able to do that." He presses a kiss to my lips again and then moves me off him and walks toward the kitchen. I hear noise but then Javi returns quickly with a small pint of ice cream and two spoons.

"Oh, you're spoiling me," I sing as he sits down and pops the lid off the top. It's a simple vanilla ice cream with fudge swirls, but it sounds utterly perfect right now. I stab it with my spoon to take a bite, popping the creamy treat in my mouth and moaning before I sense Javier tensing up beside me.

"Take your shirt off, Princess."

"What?" I look at him, stunned at how quickly his demeanor changed. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to show you what a real man can do to you with some ice cream." He drags his spoon from his lips and then licks his mouth, making me throb for him immediately.

I set my spoon on the coffee table and then proceed to lift my shirt from my torso, baring my body to him.

"Now the bra."

I snap the clasp in the back of my black bra and drag it away from my body slowly, itching with need for what he's going to do to me. The last time we were together it was frantic and rushed because we were so desperate for each other. Tonight I feel like he's going to ravish me, cherish me, take his time because we have it. Tomorrow is Saturday, I already know I'm spending the night, and now we're together—this is going to be different.

"Lift your hips." His hands find the band of my leggings and he pulls

them and my underwear down my legs and helps me free of them, leaving me completely naked next to him on the couch. Then he reaches behind his head and extracts his shirt from his body, giving me that view of his chiseled stomach and arms—the muscles that make me dizzy every time I touch them.

“Lie on your back.”

“Yes, sir,” I mock, reclining my body and trying to relax, even though I can’t wait for him to touch me.

Javi’s eyes bounce all over my skin—from my face, to my breasts, to my freshly bare pussy. I watch him soak me up before he groans and then reaches for the ice cream, scooping out a bite and then bringing the spoon to my nipples. The freezing metal hits my nipples and instantly makes them hard as I cry out from the contact.

“That’s cold ...”

“Don’t worry. I’m about to warm you up, babe. But first, I’m going to lick this ice cream off every part of your body I love.” His lips find mine and then he pulls back and rubs the ice cream over my nipple and down to my navel.

“You love my body?” I ask on an exasperated sigh as I watch his tongue dart out and lick my nipples clean.

“Fuck yeah, I do. And now it’s all mine.”

“It always was.”

His head pops up and we lock eyes, speaking words between our gazes. *I’m his and he’s mine, no matter how hard we tried to fight it.*

Javi scoops up more ice cream and drags it across my lips, down my neck, over my nipples again before he licks up the trail, leaving me panting and desperate for him to relieve the ache between my thighs. But the next scoop he takes he rubs on my inner thighs before it starts to melt and he rushes to prevent it from dipping down on the couch.

“Fuck.” He laughs as he dives between my legs and laps at my skin, making me chuckle as well.

“This was your idea, genius. I could have told you this was going to get messy.”

His head pops up, his eyes narrow intensely as I feel his fingers toy with my entrance, and then he plunges two fingers inside of me, making me gasp from the intrusion.

“You were saying?” His fingers slide in and out of me with ease before his tongue finds my clit and he’s working me toward an orgasm with skill—

the skill I already knew this man possessed.

“Oh, God ... Javi.” I groan as my hands find his hair and pull at the strands while his mouth does asinine things between my legs.

“I want you to come in my mouth, Princess.”

“I’m almost there,” I pant. And then I feel Javier push against my other hole, pressing in just enough to make my orgasm come to fruition. “Yes!” I shout into the room, moaning over and over as my release rides out in my body.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy when you come, babe.” Javier withdraws his fingers from me and then stands, shoving his shorts down as he grabs a condom from his pocket. He tears the foil and then covers himself before hovering over me on the couch. His hand caresses my face as he dips down to kiss me and thrusts inside of me, barely giving me a moment to recover. “And you feel so fucking good.”

“You feel amazing, Javi. Sex with you is ...”

“I know, Princess. I feel it too.” He slows down just enough to change the pace of the desperation we just felt before. Now he’s savoring me, dragging in and out slowly while his lips nip and hover over mine.

“Javi ...”

“Sydney ...”

Those are the only two other words spoken as the slow, methodical moves of his hips hypnotize me and shift my entire world. Even though he’s not saying it, I can feel Javier making love to me. This isn’t hardcore, desperate fucking like we’ve experienced every time before. This is languid, exquisite, borderline painful with how amazing it feels.

It builds a foundation of a new beginning between us, and I relish in every minute of it.

Javi’s hand travels down my arm and to my hip where he caresses his palm against my body, before slipping between us to find my clit. As his fingers rub against me in the space between us, I lift my head up just enough to see where we’re joined, watching him slide in and out of me, driving me wild with abandon as I feel my orgasm start to build. He’s watching our union too, and like a match to gasoline, we strike at the same time, chasing our release together and moaning into the room.

As we come down from the high, Javi nuzzles my neck and kisses my skin as I run my fingers up and down his back. That was the best sex I’ve ever had. It was the perfect combination of daring and bold, mixed with

passion that I've never experienced before.

And as Javier holds me in bed later after we showered together, his arms pulling me flush against him, his legs intertwining with mine as we drift off to sleep, I've have never felt so content in my life. And it's all because of this man beside me.

Chapter 26

Javier

“Are you sure I look alright?” Sydney smooths down her hair for the hundredth time as we stand in front of the door to Selena and Andre’s house.

Reaching out to pull her hands away from her head, I stroke the top of them with my thumbs before bending down in front of her just slightly so we’re at eye level with each other. “You look gorgeous and you will be fine. Hell, I think my mom would be happy if I brought *any* woman to meet her.”

Her brow arches slowly and that streak of anger I’ve grown to recognize flashes through her eyes. “Is that so?”

“Shit. That’s ... that’s not what I meant. She’s going to be thrilled to meet you because you’re you, and you make me happy. I’ve only introduced one other woman to her, Sydney, and that was almost ten years ago. She’s going to love you and probably declare that you’re too good for me, in all honesty.”

Her face softens and then she rests her head on my chest. Wrapping my arms around her, I breathe her in, trying to calm my own nerves. “I want her to like me, Javi. It will make things so much easier if we don’t have issues with your family and only have to worry about mine.”

It’s been almost two weeks since we officially started dating and this week my mother and her husband are in town. They will be staying with my sister in the guest house where I live, which means I’m spending the night at Sydney’s place tonight. When I told her I just planned on sleeping in Selena’s guestroom, she scoffed at the idea. I haven’t been to her place yet, except when I dropped her off a few times, so tonight will be the first time I’m completely in her space. That thought has me twisted up a bit too.

Selena and Andre are making dinner tonight for all of us, and of course I asked Sydney to accompany me. This is the first time I’m introducing a woman that I truly care about to my mother, and I’d be lying if I said my body wasn’t humming with nerves. The idea of Sydney meeting my mom isn’t what’s got my stomach tied up in knots, though. It’s the fact that between my sister and mother, I know many details of my life will be

shared tonight and I'm not sure how far they're going to push it.

I've attempted to open up to Sydney as much as I can when she asks for details, and vice versa. The woman has confided in me about her issues with her family and how stifled she feels by them. Sometimes I get irritated with the degree of pushiness I get from my sister, but after hearing what Sydney deals with, I consider myself lucky. Hearing how her father tries to manipulate her makes my blood boil. If my father were still alive, I know he would never do that to me. There was a certain level of expectation from him that I had to adhere to, of course. But he never pushed me to live my life a certain way or make decisions that I didn't agree with. When the day comes that I have to meet her dad, it's going to be very difficult for me to hold my tongue.

"I don't see how she wouldn't like you, babe. Come on. It will be fine." I press my lips to her reassuringly, and then grab her hand while I reach for the doorknob with my other.

"About time you two show up," my sister calls from the kitchen just as I see my mother come around the corner.

"Javi!" She exclaims, running over to me and pulling me in for a hug. I squeeze her tightly to my chest, realizing it's been far too long since I've seen her. She was here for a few weeks after I got out of prison, but then her and Emilio were back to Florida and continued living their lives. I haven't seen her since.

"You look so handsome, son. Taking care of yourself, I see." She pinches my cheek and then turns her focus to Sydney beside me. It's in this moment that I realize that Sydney looks a lot like my mom—dark hair, light eyes, similar build. Huh, weird.

"You must be Sydney. My word, you are beautiful. Javi," she says, facing me again. "What is this beautiful young woman doing with you?"

Sydney chuckles beside me as I roll my eyes. "I ask myself that question every day, Mom. This is Sydney Matthews. Sydney, this is my mother, Linda."

"Nice to meet you." Sydney extends her hand in greeting. They shake hands as my mother casts me a quizzical look.

"Likewise, Sydney. Come in you two. Selena has been slaving away in this kitchen for hours now and Andre is firing up the grill. I'm sure you'll have to roll me back to the guesthouse later, but it will be worth it." She winks and then grabs Sydney by the elbow, leading us further into the house.

“You want something to drink, babe?” I call out to Sydney as I watch my mother claw her nails into her.

“Just water will be fine.”

Selena chimes in. “No, no, girl. No water today. You need a beer or a White Claw.”

“Oh! Did you get the watermelon ones?” Sydney beelines straight for my sister as I find myself smiling at them. Last weekend we had dinner with her and Andre and the two of them solidified their friendship. They bonded over White Claws and their love of *Friends* as we played a rather entertaining game of Cards Against Humanity. They also formed a bond through giving me shit. As much as it irritated me to be ganged up on, knowing my sister accepted Sydney and I together made me feel more at ease about our relationship. Selena even pulled me aside that night before we went to bed and told me how much she loves Sydney for me. Her stamp of approval, even though she’s younger than me, gives me hope that maybe this could all work out after all.

“Yup. Here you go.”

The sound of the can popping means the evening is under way as my mother drags Sydney outside to meet Emilio.

Emilio is taller than my dad was, and since I inherited my height from my mother’s side of the family, he actually looks like he could be my real father. He shoots me an approving look with a raise of his eyebrows when he sees Sydney, making one more admiration of the woman I’m seeing ticked off for the evening.

Once the food is finished and our plates are full, we all settle in around the table and the inquisition starts.

“Alright, Sydney. So how did you meet my Javier?” My mother takes a bite of her pasta salad as everyone’s eyes dart across the table to the woman sitting right beside me. I reach for her hand under the table and give her a comforting squeeze before she finishes chewing and answers.

“Well, Javi and I actually went to school together.”

“Oh? Were you two friends?”

Selena and I both chuckle before I reply. “Not really.”

“Let’s just say we didn’t exactly run in the same circles,” Sydney adds.

“Okay. So how did you get here?”

“We ran into each other at The Jameson.”

“The honky tonk down in Fort Worth? Javi, what on earth were you

doing in a place like that?”

Selena pipes in. “That was my doing, Mom. I dragged him out so he didn’t become a hermit.”

“Ah, I see.”

“And Sydney actually ran into me,” I correct her.

“You just can’t seem to let that detail slide, can you?” She chastises.

“Nope. Until you start telling the story correctly, that will forever be my tag line.”

Sydney rolls her eyes and then takes a sip of her drink. “Fine. I ran into him and spilt his drink in his lap. I was ... a little drunk.”

Selena snorts. “More than a little if I remember the story correctly.”

“Okay. Okay ...” Sydney laughs as her cheeks turn pink. I kiss her temple and then urge her to continue. “A few days after that night at The Jameson, I showed up at Andre’s gym for the self-defense class they offer and ran into Javi again. Seems my annoyance was only a momentary defense until we gave in to the attraction we felt for each other.” Sydney’s eyes find mine, sparkling in the lights cast under the eaves on the patio. The woman definitely wore me down, but I certainly can’t complain now.

“Ah, I love that. My Javi can be a tough nut to crack. So, why did you sign up for the class?” My mother adds, and in that moment I realize I never asked her that question. Selena clears her throat next to me as her eyes bounce over to Sydney, and my girl tenses in her seat. Is there something I’m missing?

“Um. Well, about two months before signing up for the class, I was attacked outside of my office while getting into my car. The man held a gun to my head as he pushed me into my car from behind.”

“What the fuck?” I bark out, rage running through me like lightening.

“Javi,” my mom warns.

I shoot my gaze at Sydney, whose nerves are apparent all over her body. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Because you never asked,” she answers meekly. “I’m fine, obviously. It was a friend of a defendant who was on trial at the time for murder and my father was the judge on the case. He was trying to scare my dad by scaring me. But all it did was give me crippling anxiety and a loss of sleep.”

My teeth grind together as I watch Sydney try to act unphased by her circumstances. Flashes of the night I beat the shit out of Jesus come barreling forward, and the same desire to kill someone I felt in that moment comes

alive inside of me again.

“So, I signed up for the class so I would feel more confident in case something like that happened again.” She shrugs and then Selena chimes in.

“That’s exactly why I asked Andre to offer a class like that. There are a lot of women who need to know how to protect themselves or at least how to escape in that type of situation.”

Sydney nods. “I’m eternally grateful for what I learned with you, Javi.”

“Glad to hear that,” Andre adds as the energy shifts around the table. But my mind is still reeling with the fact that Sydney faced a situation similar to my sister’s and I wasn’t able to protect her. I know it happened before she and I ever crossed paths, but knowing that detail now instills that protective need in me again to provide that for her as well.

“I’m sorry you experienced that, Princess.” I lean over and rest my head on her shoulder as I pull her into my arms. I can feel everyone staring at us, but I seriously could not give a fuck. My need to hold her right now outweighs the questions I’ll have to answer later.

“I’m fine, Javi. I have my concealed carrier’s permit now too, so at least I’m packing heat in case it happens again.” I lift my head in surprise as she winks at me and snickers from the rest of the table hover between us.

“Damn. I’m at a loss for words right now.” I keep my eyes trained on hers as we bounce our eyes back and forth between each other’s. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” She presses her lips to mine and then focuses back on her plate, as if her revelation didn’t just crack the last brick of the wall I built around my heart. This woman is the exact opposite of who I thought she was, and I’m a fucking fool if I ever thought I had a chance at resisting her.

I think I just fell in love with her today.

“Your father would be proud that you’re helping women in that way, Javi. And you too, Andre. You’ve created something profound in that gym.”

I scoff and then direct my attention back to my food, which suddenly doesn’t seem so appealing. “I don’t know about that, Mom. I haven’t exactly lived an exemplary life.” This was what I was afraid of—my mom divulging too much, giving out too many details. I know I’m going to have to confess everything to Sydney eventually, but I want to lay it all out there when it feels right.

“It’s not about being perfect, Javi. It’s about owning our mistakes and learning from them. You have done that, and no matter what you might think,

I'm proud of you. And I know your father would be too."

Flicking my eyes over to her, I see hers glossed over with unshed tears. "Thanks, Mom."

"Alright, before everyone starts crying and ruining the evening, how about we tell embarrassing stories about Javi so Sydney feels like part of the family!" Selena exclaims, clapping her hands together.

"Uh, I veto that idea," I interrupt while holding one finger up.

My sister continues, ignoring my request completely. "Remember when you made Javi carry a light bulb around the house all day because he kept leaving his light on in his bedroom? Then that night while he was finishing his dinner, he carved 'I hate my Mom' into the kitchen table..."

Sydney practically chokes on her food. "Oh my God! Javi!"

I throw daggered eyes across the table at my sister while she beams at me with a pleased grin. Turning to face Sydney again, I simply shrug. "I was pissed."

"You know," my mother breaks into the conversation with a grin on her face, "that lightbulb idea was your father's. I just enforced it because he was working that day and we agreed that would be your punishment if we had to ask you again to turn your light off again."

Everyone chuckles, including me. "Well, it worked."

As Selena and Sydney proceed to clean the kitchen, my mother corners me in the back of the house as I make my way down the hallway to use the restroom.

"Javi," she whispers.

"Yeah?" I answer, turning to face her head on.

"I like her, son." Her genuine smile allows pride to radiate through my chest.

"Me too, Mom."

"Does she know about ..."

I let out a frustrated sigh while running my hand through my hair that's in need of a haircut again. "Yes, and no. She knows that I did time, but she doesn't know why."

"And why haven't you told her?" Chastising me with only a look, I feel as if I'm a teenage boy again.

"Because I don't want to change her perception of me. Regardless of why I did it, the truth of the matter is that I beat a man within an inch of his life and caused permanent damage to his hearing. I went fucking crazy, Mom,

and I don't want that to scare her off."

"I see. But I also know that Jesus deserved what happened to him. I think any open-minded human could see your reasoning for what you did."

"Yeah, well, when it's the girl you're falling for ... I guess I don't want to take my chances."

"You're going to have to tell her eventually, Javi. Secrets are like ghosts in a relationship. You don't know they're there until they make themselves known, and then you're suddenly confronting a presence that commands your attention. You can't avoid it forever."

Pulling my mom into my chest, I hug her tightly. "I know, Mom. It's going to change everything though. Especially with her dad ..."

"Are you worried about her father? What does he have to do with this?" We separate again as she anticipates my answer.

"He's a judge."

"I see. Well, not everyone ends up with in-laws who like them, Javi. That might just have to be something you navigate throughout your relationship."

Her little indication of our future doesn't escape me. "In-laws, huh? You think Sydney and I are going to get married one day?"

She pinches my cheek in that annoying, motherly way. "Yeah, I do."

After the kitchen is clean and everyone has a fresh drink in their hands, we sit down at the kitchen table and play a game of Cards Against Humanity with my mom and Emilio, in which I learn my mother has a far dirtier mind than I needed to know. I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard, reminding me that even though I may not know much about my future, at least I have family and a woman beside me that provide me with memories to cherish in my life. Tonight was one of those nights that I'll never forget.

Just a little after ten thirty, Sydney and I head over to her condo for the night. As we roll through the gate and Sydney greets the guard while we pass, I don't miss the suspicious look he gives me, as if I don't belong in a place like this. My reservations from before spark nerves again in my stomach, flaring up the insecurity of our relationship that is always simmering beneath the surface.

Sydney parks her car in her assigned parking space and leads me up a walkway that is lined with solar lights and planters full of various hedges and flowers, while light posts gleam in the night, providing even more light. Her complex is pristine and almost regal looking with large walnut stained doors at each entrance to the condos we pass as we make our way to hers, flaunting

the difference in the worlds we live in even though I haven't set foot inside yet.

With a twist of the key in the lock, Sydney pushes the door open as an alarm beeps in the background.

"Let me disarm that real quick." She rushes inside a few feet and then enters her passcode to make the incessant noise halt.

My eyes travel through the entry way and past where Sydney stands to a living room full of dark wood and teal and gray accents throughout the space. A dark gray couch faces a modest television positioned in one corner and a small fireplace serves as the focal point of the room. Her kitchen with an oversized island sits just to the right, creating an open concept feel. Dark mahogany cabinets and light granite counter tops shine in the light of the fixture above the island and the ceiling fan in the living room once Sydney flicks them on.

"So this is my place," she says with a wave of her hand. "I can't believe you haven't been here yet."

Suddenly parched and feeling way out of my comfort zone, I reply on a shaky breath. "Uh, yeah. Me neither." I mean, my place turned out nice, but this condo is something you would see on HGTV.

"You thirsty?" I watch her move into the kitchen, fetching a glass of water for herself and then filling one for me as well, even though I didn't answer her.

As I take the glass from her and drain it completely, I finally reply, "Thanks."

"Of course. Here, let me show you the rest of the place." She reaches for my hand and pulls me behind her to a flight of stairs that leads to the second floor. A guestroom, a home office, and her master bedroom round out the tour, where we stop in front of her bed and she turns to face me.

"I'm glad you're here," she murmurs against my lips before circling her arms around my neck and pulling us together. The moment we kiss, a part of my anxiety melts away. I don't know why I'm letting these little differences in our lives derail me from what I feel for her. After spending the night with my family, the doubt about how she fits seamlessly into my world left my body.

But this is the first time I've slipped into a part of hers and the notion shakes my resolve.

"Me too, babe."

“Wanna get ready for bed? I don’t know about you, but I’m beat.” A small laugh escapes her lips as she reaches for the bottom of her dress and lifts it up, throwing it toward the corner where a laundry basket sits.

“If you think you’re gonna strip in front of me like that and then go to sleep, you’ve got another thing coming.” I reach for her waist and lift her into my arms as her legs wrap around my waist. Our lips meet as I walk us to the bed and gently place her on it, never detaching ourselves from one another.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” We break apart just long enough to discard the rest of our clothes and then crawl up her bed.

“Do you have any toys, Sydney?” I growl in her ear, nibbling on the lobe as she squirms beneath me. My eyes veer to her nightstand beside the bed as I reach over and slide the drawer open, hitting the jackpot on the first try.

She bites her lip, enticing me with her innocence as I extract a hot pink vibrator from her drawer and start playing with the settings. “How many times did you use this on yourself while thinking of me?”

“Too many to count,” she replies breathlessly as I find a pulse setting I feel will do the job of teasing her and drag the vibrator down her chest and stomach to her pussy.

“Well, now whenever you use it, you’ll have no choice but to recall what I did to you with it.” A gasp leaves her mouth as I carefully place the wand against her clit and watch her buck up beneath me. Her body shakes as the vibrations travel through her sensitive nub and her hands fist her sheets.

“Javi,” she mewls, drawing in short breaths as the pulsations bring her closer to the peak. I hold the vibrator steady while opening a condom with my teeth and covering myself one-handed. And just as I sense her getting closer, I widen her legs and sink deep inside of her, firing her off like a bottle rocket.

“Oh God!” She screams as I thrust inside of her frantically, drawing out every tremor of her orgasm before shutting off the vibrator and throwing it to the side of the bed. Bending down to kiss her, I continue to move as I feel the aftershocks of her release twitch through her body.

“Javi, I’m so sensitive. I can’t take any more ...”

“Yes, you can,” I say as I slant my lips over hers and continue to move. I fuck her slowly and methodically, wanting to wind her up like a yo-yo before I cast her down the rabbit hole of pleasure again.

Just when I can sense she's close, I pull out and flip her over, pulling her onto her knees before sinking inside of her again.

"Holy shit!" She screams, burying her head in her pillow.

Leaning over her back, cupping her breasts while placing kisses on her neck I groan. "That's it, baby. Come for me again."

"I'm coming." Her muffled voice calls out as she screams through her release and I pump my hips furiously to join her.

Once we relax and settle into bed for the night, I take a moment to savor the feel of her in my arms.

"My mom really likes you," I say softly as her eyes peel open to look up at me.

"Yeah?" Optimism fills her voice.

Planting a kiss on her nose, I answer, "Yeah."

"I liked her too."

"How come you never told me about why you signed up for the self-defense class?" I don't know why I felt the need to bring this up right now, but after hearing her reason earlier, I've had a difficult time shoving it out of my mind.

She lifts up slightly on her elbow, resting her head in her palm. I turn on my side to face her and then eagerly await her words.

"You never asked. And it's not something I'm proud of. I felt helpless in that moment, Javi. That's part of the reason why I took the class."

"I hate that you had to go through that." I can feel my jaw tightening again, but Sydney reaches out to cup my face.

"I know. But now at least I'm prepared in case something ever happens like that again. It's part of the territory with being a judge's daughter."

"Have you dealt with things like that before?"

She nods. "They weren't blatantly directed at me, but we've had our house egged and cars vandalized."

"Jesus Christ."

"It's part of the risk when working in the court system or in law enforcement. Someone is always pissed off no matter how well you think you've done your job."

"I'm sorry. Just know that now that you're with me, I promise I'll do everything in my power to protect you." I plant a promising kiss on her lips and when she pulls away, I sense a shift in her demeanor.

"Can I ask you a question now?"

“Okay ...”

“Can you tell me more about your dad? Your mom brought him quite a bit tonight, and it made me realize I don’t know anything about him except that he died.”

I blow out a heavy breath, preparing to divulge yet another piece of myself to her. I’ve reminded myself steadily over the past few weeks that this is what I signed up for, but it doesn’t make it that much easier.

“My dad was a rancher. He worked for the Wilson Ranch about forty-five minutes from Newberry. He left at dawn most days and didn’t return until sunset, but he enjoyed his work. It’s what he grew up doing in Puerto Rico and then made a living from it out here. One morning, he left later than usual, I don’t remember why. But that morning he said something to me that I’ll never forget. It was almost as if he knew he was going to die that day.” I pause in my story as Sydney reassuringly soothes my arm with her fingers, waiting for me to continue.

“Since he left later for work that day, he stayed later in the evening to make sure he got all of his hours. On his way home, he was hit by a drunk driver and killed on impact.”

“Oh my God, Javi. I’m so sorry.”

I nod in recognition. “My mother crumbled at the doorstep when the sheriff came to the house to tell us. I’ll never forget her screams, the tears that flooded her eyes. She loved him fiercely. And then I turned to Selena in the hallway and we just held each other for almost an hour before my mother came to find us, but realized we heard the entire conversation between her and the sheriff.”

“Javi ...” She scoots closer to me and I pull her into my chest, breathing her in while I relive that day like a movie playing in my mind. There are moments in your life you’ll never forget and that was one for me.

“Is that why you don’t drink out in public?”

“A big part of it, yes.”

“What’s the other part?”

I take a deep breath and answer after a long pause. “Because I was shit-faced drunk the night I made the choice that landed me in prison.”

She reels back and searches my eyes for answers that I’m not ready to give her yet. “What did you do?”

I shake my head, closing my eyes while willing my pulse to slow down. “Not tonight, Sydney.”

“But ...”

“Please,” I beg, hoping she senses that I’ve already divulged a huge part of me to her this evening, and I don’t think I can handle any more.

She nods reluctantly and then turns over to switch off the lamp on her nightstand. “Okay.”

“Thank you.” I kiss her lips once more as we settle into each other and fall to sleep easily, even though somewhere deep in my chest is a reminder that the contrast between mine and Sydney’s lives is anything but easy.

Chapter 27

Javier

“Damn, *güey*. Check out that woman walking over here.” Trilch catches my attention as I finish hammering a nail into the wood in front of me and look over my shoulder to where his gaze is focused.

Sydney is striding toward us in a bright red skirt, a black top that flares at her hips, and white high heels. She looks fucking amazing and my heart stutters for a moment at the sight of her. The faint breeze in the air catches her long, chocolate curls and blows her hair around her as her smile stretches wide across her lips. She looks like Sandra Bullock in *Miss Congeniality* when she emerges from the airplane hangar after her beauty transformation—except Sydney would never need an intervention like that. She’s too fucking perfect as she is.

“Keep your eyes to yourself, Trilch,” I grate as I place my hammer back in the holder on my tool belt and my legs carry me over to her.

“Is that the girl from Russo’s?”

I nod. “Yeah. Except now she’s my girlfriend, so fucking behave.” I take pleasure in verifying our relationship to him as the two of us close in on each other.

“Damn,” he claims as he tries to catch up to me. “How the fuck did you land a woman like that?”

Shaking my head back and forth, I reply, “I have no fucking clue.”

“Hey, Javi.” Sydney stops in front of me, bright and beautiful as always. “I brought you lunch.”

My hand grips her hip as I pull her in closer to me, planting a kiss on her cheek. “Thank you, Princess.”

“What about me?” Trilch interjects as Sydney and I part slightly.

“Sorry, Trilch. This delivery was for my boyfriend only. Perks of the title.”

“Damn. I knew I should have hit on you first.”

The glare of warning I shoot at him causes him to back up slightly. “You’d better get back to work before you don’t have a job any more,

fucker.”

Throwing his hands up in the air, he relents. “Fine, fine! Don’t maul each other for too long, boss. We have work to do.”

Sydney chuckles as I watch him walk away and then fixate back on her. “Thank you for this. You didn’t have to.”

She smooths my hair from my face while studying my eyes. “I know. I just wanted to see you.”

“You know I was going to see you in a few hours though, right?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. But it had been a few days and I missed you.” She juts out her bottom lip as a low growl crawls up my throat. It has been a few days since we’ve seen each other. I’ve been working late finishing up a house to stay on our deadline, and Sydney has been battling a custody case that has been taking up a lot of her free time. Over the past few weeks we’ve made the most of the time we could get together, but it’s been crazy with our jobs, which is part of the reason we’re going out tonight to let loose and have some fun.

Well, I wouldn’t call going to The Jameson fun, but that’s what my girl wanted to do, and I wanted to see that sparkle in her eye that develops when she’s truly happy. Ally and her husband and Selena and Andre are joining us too. It should be a good time, regardless of where we’re going.

Last weekend I met Ally and Collin at Sydney’s request and am pleased to say I actually felt comfortable as hell with them. Of course, Sydney’s friends know her better than anyone and I could tell how secure she was in their presence, which in turn, made me more comfortable.

The evening didn’t come without the best friend inquisition from Ally though, which I think I passed with flying colors once she mentioned how appreciative she is of me for fucking her best friend the way she deserves. Not sure of how to respond to that, I told her it was no problem, and that was the end of the conversation.

“I missed you too, baby. Just a few more hours and then we’ll have the entire weekend to spend next to each other.” I encircle her waist with my palms and press our bodies together, showing her how hard she makes me just by standing there but being careful not to dirty up her outfit with mine. “I say we spend all day tomorrow wrapped up in each other in my bed.”

“Hmmm,” she moans and then lines her lips up to my ear, making my dick twitch. “I think that sounds perfect.”

“Then you’d better get out of here before I find a spot in that vacant

house behind me to fuck you senseless instead of saving all of my pent up aggression for tonight.”

She giggles and then kisses me, lingering on my lips for just long enough for me to want to keep her here for the rest of the day. “I can’t wait.”

“Me neither, Princess.”

“Okay. I have to get back to the courthouse. Hopefully, this will be the last meeting with the judge on this custody case.” She holds up her crossed fingers in the air as she begins to back away from me.

“Good luck. You got this, baby.”

She winks at me over her shoulder as she turns to trek back to her Mustang. “Thanks, Javi. See you tonight.”

My eyes trail her as she leaves and takes a sliver of my heart along with her. It happened so unexpectedly, but this woman has changed me, weaseled her way into my life and wrapped herself around the black organ in my chest I thought would forever stay that way.

I wasn’t looking for love. I had no intention of letting a woman derail me from getting my life back on track—but Sydney Matthews broke every well-thought-out plan I concocted. The only thing holding me back is being completely honest about my past, even though after all this time now, I’m not sure why I keep waiting to tell her.

Obviously, she cares for me if she’s with me and has been thus far. She hasn’t pushed me to divulge everything, even after the moments that I shut her down when she did inquire. Is it perhaps a subconscious effort on my part to protect myself from getting hurt? Or do I still believe she’ll leave me even after she knows, although she’s remained steady in our relationship this entire time?

Maybe it’s time to just tell her, get it over with. Perhaps this weekend while we’re shutting out the world and immersing ourselves in each other I can rip the band aid off and give her all the darkest parts of me, the details I’ve tried desperately to keep hidden from her, but I know can’t stay buried forever.

Later that night all six of us Uber to The Jameson, and just seeing Sydney again after hours of intense thought has me convinced.

It’s time. I need to get it all out. If she truly cares for me the way she says and the way I’ve come to realize, then surely she can understand why I did what I did. I’m not that man anymore either, and I hope she can sense that too.

“To letting loose after a long week!” Selena exclaims as we all bump our glasses together once we made it inside the honky tonk. I don’t fail to realize how differently I felt the last time I was here. Now with Sydney snuggled up next to me, I’m not hating being in this place nearly as much.

“Amen to that!” Sydney declares as she slings back a shot of vodka and winces afterwards.

“Why do girls always make that face after taking a shot? I don’t understand why you do it if it’s so awful?” Collin argues as Ally sucks on a lemon beside him.

“Because it gets you drunk faster. Duh!” she shouts. “Besides, you don’t seem to mind when I do that after you cum in my mouth, so why the sudden strong feelings on my facial expressions?” She pops her hip out as the rest of us grow slightly uncomfortable.

“O-kay,” Sydney drags out. “Let’s not take the conversation in that direction, please. It’s time to have fun. There are no children to worry about and plenty of booze to be absorbed. A good time is in order, everyone!”

“Here, here!” Selena adds as the girls shout and the boys wince this time at the sound.

With her hands placed on my chest, Sydney bats her eyelashes up at me as if the gesture is necessary at all. With the way I feel about her, there’s no need for her to pull those kind of moves. Doesn’t mean I don’t like watching her lay it on thick though. “Are you gonna dance with me, Javi?”

“I’m not much of a dancer, Princess.”

“Please,” she drawls as her bottom lip juts out.

“Only because you asked nicely.” I groan in her ear as her face lights up and she whisks me toward the dance floor.

The last time I was here, I was watching Andre spin my sister around on the light wooden floor, burying my head down low next to my glass of Coke. Now I’m spinning my girlfriend around on the dance floor, grinning like a damn fool at the way she looks as I twirl her around. I even dressed more appropriately for the part in dark jeans, brown work boots, and a plain white tee. I still have on my ball cap backwards though, that won’t ever change.

“You *can* dance,” Sydney cries out in elation as we step along while the other two couples join us.

“I know a thing or two. My mom used to make me dance with her in the kitchen sometimes, especially to songs that reminded her of my dad.”

Sydney’s face softens just as the music starts to slow down too. “Aw, I

love that, Javi.”

“Now the only woman besides her that I would dance with is you, baby.” I swear I see her eyes glisten with moisture under the lights spinning above us.

“I’m crazy about you, Javier Montes ... just in case you didn’t know that.”

I chuckle softly as I hold her close to my body while we teeter back and forth on our feet. But there’s nothing funny about the way I feel about this girl.

“I’m crazy about you too, Sydney.”

Her scent holds me captive, but it’s really her eyes that do the trick—they hold my attention, making me blissfully unaware just long enough not to process what’s going on to my right.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” Andre’s voice booms over the music, causing many heads to turn in his direction.

My ears perk up at the sound of his voice and the commotion coming over off the dance floor. Seems while I was engrossed in Sydney’s eyes and voice, my sister and her husband left the area, only to be greeted by a parasite with the intent to leach out all of the fun.

The minute my eyes see his face, red clouds my vision, and a rage I’ve only ever felt once before in my life rushes back through my veins in vengeance. My blood pressure skyrockets and I clench Sydney’s waist in my hands. My heart pounds in my ears and the intense need to kill him scorches my skin.

“Ow! Javi, you’re pinching me,” she cries out as I snap back to her and release her on a jerky movement. “What’s going on?” Her face turns back to where my attention is directed, blinking a few times just to make sure I’m not seeing things.

“You’d better get the fuck away from us if you know what’s good for you.” Andre steps up into Jesus’s face, seething with rage that I could only compare to my own. But I still bet mine is worse.

“Hey, Selena. Lookin’ good babe.” He juts his chin my sister’s direction while licking his lips.

“Motherfucker!” I yell as I race toward them, leaving Sydney behind on the dance floor. At the sound of my voice, Jesus’s head spins in my direction as his eyes go wide. He steps back a few paces as I cross over the boundary of the dance floor, but Selena gets right in my way just as the slimy grin on

his face reappears.

“Javi, don’t!” she pleads, her eyes brimming with tears.

The joints of my jaw grind together as I warn Jesus with my voice before my fists do the job. “Get the fuck away from her, you piece of shit!”

“Hey, look who’s out of prison?”

“You’d better step off now before I finish the job this time.”

“Javi!” Sydney screams from behind me while Selena’s hands push against my chest, desperately trying to pin me in place with her small stature.

“Javi! Don’t! You can’t go back, Javi. He’s not worth it.”

“I should have killed you, motherfucker,” I grind out as Sydney gasps beside me. But I don’t dare break my focus on the bastard in front of me that should have been behind bars—not me.

“Well, looks like you found a little piece of ass to replace your bitch behind bars, huh?” His eyes dance all over Sydney’s frame and the fire within me ignites.

“Excuse me, is there a problem?” A security guard intervenes just as Jesus and his friends start to back away. With both hands in the air, he throws an air of innocence around, even though we all know he’s anything but.

“Nope. Just saying hello to some old friends and a few new ones.” He winks in Sydney’s direction as I feel Andre grip my arm, keeping me in place.

“I think you’d better leave, all of you.” The guard directs Jesus and his friends to the nearest exit as my sister relaxes her hand from my chest and then gasps.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she mumbles before darting to the closest restroom as the rest of our group remains frozen in place.

“Javi,” Sydney starts but I throw my hand up in the air, cutting her off.

“I need some fucking air.” Without giving her a glance, I spin around and head for the front door, sensing Andre trailing behind me.

Patrons in The Jameson are completely oblivious to drama that unfolded, although it could have been far worse if that guard hadn’t stepped in. As soon as Jesus’ eyes landed on my girl I was seconds away from snapping. Seems while I was counting down the days behind bars, Jesus was busy growing a pair of balls. Not sure where his newfound confidence came from since he was too chicken shit to appear in court the day I was sentenced, I’m left puzzled as to why he was even here tonight in the first place, let alone

that he would have the audacity to approach my sister after what he did. The only logical explanation I can fathom is that he honestly thinks she doesn't remember everything that happened that night.

When the metal doors are inches away, I shove them open with all the strength I felt building in my arms in preparation to pummel Jesus. The humid night air is not welcoming at all, but all I needed was space from the turmoil inside—too bad the rage in my bones is something I can't escape from as well.

"Javi," Andre calls to me once he joins me outside. "What the fuck man?"

"What the fuck? What do you mean? I damn well better know you're not pissed at me right now!"

"No, no, man. I mean, what the fuck was he doing here?"

"Is Selena okay? Fuck, I should have stayed in there and made sure she was alright. And I left Sydney alone ..."

Andre shakes his head, letting out a deep sigh. "Ally and Sydney followed her to the bathroom. Sydney just sent me a text letting me know she's okay. I can't go in there obviously, but I also wanted to make sure you didn't come out here to chase Jesus down."

Seething still, my hands continuing to clench open and closed, I shake my entire body to try to expel the nerves from my veins. "I almost fucking hit him again, Andre. I was seconds away from snapping when you grabbed my arm."

"I know, man. And as much as I wanted to do the same, I couldn't let you do that. That's exactly what that fucker was counting on. If you assault him again Javi, especially while you're on parole, you're going back to prison and for a lot longer this time."

"I can't stop shaking, man. He fucking walked in here like his life was normal, like he wasn't a fucking rapist. And then to have the nerve to say something to Selena and look at Sydney like that..."

"I know. I know, Javi. It's not fucking right. But there's not much we can do."

"What about a restraining order?"

Andre shakes his head. "Without just cause, it won't hold up. We looked into it after everything went down the first time. If anything, Jesus has more of a case getting one against you."

"This is so fucked up."

“I agree, but it’s part of the consequences of your sister never pressing charges.”

I fold my hands behind my head and look up at the sky, counting stars while I desperately try to get my heart rate under control.

“We still have one more problem, Javi,” Andre speaks as a slow warning, pulling my attention back to him.

“What’s that?”

“You know you have to tell Sydney now.” As my best friend, Andre knows that I haven’t divulged the circumstances that landed me in prison to her. But after tonight, he’s right. There’s no holding back the truth now. Time to let everything out.

Chapter 28

Sydney

“Selena, you’re shaking, girl. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Ally, Selena, and myself are huddled in the corner of the bathroom at The Jameson after a man I’ve never seen before obviously caused havoc with his presence.

“Yeah. I’ll be okay. I just need another minute.” With a pale face and sweat beading on her forehead, I’m inclined not to believe her, but I guess I’ll have to take her word for it.

“Who was that guy?” Ally interjects. “I mean, I’m not stupid. There’s obviously a story there for Javi to act like a man on a murder mission.”

Selena swallows and then reaches for a paper towel, wetting it under the water running in the sink and dabbing it across her forehead. “Yeah, there’s a story alright. That was Jesus, my ex.”

I furrow my brows while hoping that she’ll continue. I mean, it’s not unheard of for an older brother not to like the ex-boyfriend of his younger sister. But Javi’s reaction was far beyond dislike. It was borderline murderous.

“Sydney ... has Javi told you about Jesus?”

With a soft shake of my head, I answer her. This has to be it. This has to be related to why Javier went to prison. I heard what Selena said. She warned him not to do anything so he wouldn’t go back. What the hell did Javi do?

Ally and I huddle closer to Selena as she fiddles with the damp paper towel in her hands.

“There was a party at our friend’s house over three years ago now. Everyone was drinking, smoking, having a good time. I was extremely buzzed and went inside to use the bathroom. When I finished and opened the door, Jesus was standing there, waiting for me. We’d been broken up for months, but he never could seem to leave me alone.” She takes a deep breath and then continues. “He asked if we could talk, and since I wanted to remain friendly and wasn’t exactly thinking straight, I agreed and followed him into

one of the spare rooms. As soon as he shut the door, he kissed me, but I fought to push him off. He didn't like my denial and then started getting rough with me as I fought back. The last thing I remembered was him punching me in the face. I blacked out. But when I came to, Jesus was lying on the floor and Javier was being pulled off him by Andre, both of them covered in blood. Javi looked like a demon had possessed him. I'd never seen my brother so enraged."

"Oh my God ..."

"It gets worse. I guess while I was unconscious, Jesus raped me. I barely remember my body shaking at one point while he was inside of me, but my mind is so fuzzy still from the details. I guess that's what Javi walked in on and that's why he snapped and beat the shit out of Jesus."

With my hand covering my mouth, I feel my body vibrate from the intense pounding of my heart. "Selena, I'm so sorry." I can't imagine what that must have been like, living through that but not even truly remembering it either.

"Javi and Andre took me to the hospital to get checked out, and I did. It was processed as rape. They took my clothes and samples of DNA off my sweater and from between my legs. I was mortified, and then I chickened out with pressing charges. I didn't think anyone would believe me because I had been drinking and barely remembered it myself. Plus, I was weeks away from opening my salon and I didn't want the rumor mill to inhibit the success of my business before it even started."

"Selena," Ally speaks, reaching out and rubbing her arm.

"A few weeks later, Javi got served with assault charges. Jesus was pressing charges against him since he apparently damaged his left eardrum permanently. I was the one who was raped, but my brother did time in prison for aggravated assault when the fucker deserved exactly what was coming to him."

And there it is, the truth about why Javi did time. It's resting in the space between us, and my body isn't sure how to react. On the one hand, I'm glad that Javi did what he did because lord knows that Jesus deserved it. But on the other, irritation runs through me knowing that Javier couldn't just tell me this himself. I'm his girlfriend, and he's been so forthcoming with other information. I kept telling myself not to push him, to let him come to me when he was ready to talk. I fought my inclination to force him to tell me numerous times, especially over the past few weeks as I felt us grow closer.

I just wanted to know, and I wanted to hear it from him. Instead, I'm hearing it from his sister in a bathroom at a honky tonk.

"Selena, thank you for sharing that with us. I know it's your story and I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to tell us about it. I am so sorry that ever happened to you."

Wiping a tear from her cheek, she gives me a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you."

"Where are the boys?" Ally pops up as we all realize we've been in here for a quite a while now.

I reach into my pocket and check my phone, seeing a text from Andre that he, Collin, and Javi are all out front.

"They're at the entrance. Come on." I reach for Selena's hand and lock elbows with Ally as we head for the front of the establishment, my mind still spinning with all of the details and events that dispersed this evening.

Have you ever been in a car for over an hour with six other people and not one person is speaking? No? Well, I don't recommend it, especially if the air in the cab of the SUV is laced with tension and unspoken words.

By the time we arrive back at Selena and Andre's, it's well after one in the morning. Ally and Collin head home after a quick goodbye, and Andre pulls Selena into the house, leaving Javi and I alone outside of his front door.

"Are you going home?" He finally asks as he unlocks his door and pushes it open, the air conditioning smacking us in the face with reprieve from the Texas humidity.

"No. I think we need to talk."

His heads hangs between his shoulders instantly. "It's after one in the morning, Sydney," he grates as I follow him inside and shut the door.

Throwing my purse on the counter, a bolt of anger flashes through me and I let it all out. "I don't give a fuck what time it is, Javi. We're talking about what happened tonight."

"I'm not a fucking child. Don't talk to me like you're my goddamn mother," he bellows back at me, turning to face me while his face grows fierce in the shadows of the light above the stove in the kitchen. It's the only light on right now, casting an ominous glow over everything in the main part of the house.

"I know, but you're acting like a child and I'm sick of it. I've been patient, compassionate, and earnestly waiting for you to tell me why you

went to prison. I've desperately been trying to convince myself that it wasn't a big deal, that I'm not dating a man that is capable of God knows what. But tonight, I got the story from your sister and now I have some questions."

Javi's eyes widen right before they squint into narrow slits. "Selena fucking told you?"

"Yeah, she did. And you know what, I'm glad!" My hands travel out far and wide as I emphasize my point. "It's about time I knew, and part of it was her story to tell too!"

Javi's shoulders fall now as he chest rises and falls. "Is that all?"

His response has me taken aback. "What do you mean is that all?"

He swallows hard, gaining his footing while he studies me. "You're ... you're not leaving? You're not scared of me?"

Those words, his questions—*that's* the reason he's been keeping this to himself. "Did you think that once I knew I'd leave?"

Javi doesn't respond, he just continues to stand there, filling the room with his presence and the desperation radiating off of him.

My feet carry me toward him.

My mind has me searching his eyes.

But my heart has my lips moving to his, catching him off guard until he melts into my touch.

As our lips touch and I slide my tongue across his mouth, begging for entrance, our arms encircle one another simultaneously and we melt into each other.

This man has some of the roughest edges I've ever brushed up against. The scrape against him has stung from time to time, but it doesn't take away from the beauty he holds inside, the robust stone his soul is carved from.

When we part, I grip his face in my hands and force him to look at me. "I'm not going to lie to you. I was scared earlier when I saw your reaction to that guy. But I didn't know the whole story. Once Selena told me, it all made sense. I would never be afraid of you, Javier Montes. And no, I'm not leaving you. Knowing what you did for your sister, in retribution for what Jesus did to her, if anything, it makes me fall for you even more."

His eyes close and in seconds he wraps me tightly to his chest, breathing me in deeply before blowing out a hot rush of air. "I was so fucking scared that you would see me as a monster, as a man who can't control his temper. I didn't want you to think of me that way."

Staring intently into his eyes again, I reassure him once more. "I would

never. What you did was instinctual, serving justice where it needed to be served.”

“I almost killed him, Princess.”

“I don’t blame you. Although, I’m glad you didn’t because then you wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re honestly okay with this? With my past?” Our eyes bounce back and forth as I brush the errant hairs from his forehead.

“I am. In some strange way, it makes me feel like you’d defend my honor too. And that’s all I’ve ever wanted from a man. Someone who would stand up for me in my time of need, someone that I feel I could depend on no matter what.”

“Fucking Christ, I don’t deserve you.” He presses his lips against mine with more intensity than before and then I’m flying in the air as my legs wrap around his waist and I settle into his arms. Javi walks us back to his room where he makes love to me before we lie there breathlessly in the dark, with no more secrets between us.

Chapter 29

Javier

To say I'm nervous right now would be an understatement. I'm more like, borderline about to pass the fuck out.

Last week at The Jameson forced me to admit my past to Sydney completely and she didn't run for the fucking hills. Instead, she showed me love. She didn't say the words, but goddamn, I felt them in the way she touched me, in the way her gaze never wavered from mine as I moved inside of her. This girl I thought I knew all those years ago has shown me the power of compassion, understanding, and second chances.

She is my second chance—a woman I never thought could be the one to heal me from the shadows I feel follow me around every corner. But with her near, rays of light break through and are exposing the brighter parts of life to me every day.

The one thing left for me to do is show her father that I am a man deserving of her, yet I'm not sure he'll ever believe it—and truthfully, there are days where I don't as well.

Sydney has been in minimal communication with her parents since her brothers' graduation over a month ago. She's blown off family dinners, cancelled lunch plans that her father tried to set up, and has ignored her parents' calls as well. It's sad that at her age she literally has to push them away to get them to listen to her, but my woman is damn determined when she wants to be, and her message has apparently been heard.

Her father showed up at her condo two nights ago, demanding to speak with her. Since the guard at the gate knows he's usually an accepted visitor, he let him through. The phone call full of emotion I got from her after he left was like a beacon, signaling the end of the blissful bubble we'd been living in. Even though Sydney is still furious with him for trying to force her to live her life a certain way, he's still her dad and she wants to have him in her life. She assured me that he seemed eager to meet me, since he's obviously been having her followed this entire time and knows about our relationship.

So now I'm standing on the front steps of a colonial-style home on the

other side of town, neck craned back as I stare at the deep, mahogany door closed in front of me—the metaphorical obstacle standing between me and acceptance. I'm not sure whose acceptance I'm fighting for though—her parents' or Sydney's herself.

Even though she's promised me that I'm the man she wants, that little boy inside that's never felt good enough, the one who fights demons daily that undermine what I think I'm worthy of—he's eager to share his thoughts, especially right now.

“Hey,” she says, attempting to soothe me with her voice. I stare down at our intertwined fingers as I gather my wits. “He really wants to meet you. And I told him that if he's an ass in any way, I won't step foot back in this house.”

I huff out a laugh. “You said that?”

“Yeah, I did,” she replies on a sincere smile. “I'm not going to let him disrespect you and our relationship. No matter what he thinks, I'm leaving here with you and we're going back to one of our homes and spending the night together, alright?”

I lean over and press my lips to hers softly, holding our touch for just a moment too long as the door opens and a man larger than life peers down at us.

George Matthews has a commanding presence about him that increases the intimidation factor ten-fold the moment our eyes meet. He's at least four inches taller than my six foot, with dark brown hair streaked with grays. Black-framed glasses perch on his nose and the smell of his expensive cologne smacks me in the face once I remember to breathe again.

“Sydney,” he voices on a smile, reaching for her to pull her in for a hug, effectively breaking the hold I had on her. As her face is buried in his chest, his eyes peer over the top of her head in a heated stare that starts to eviscerate any confidence I had from the inside out.

“Hi, Dad.” She smiles up at him with a reluctant lift of her lips, and then turns around to face me, holding her hand out in introduction. “I'd like you to meet Javier Montes.”

My hand lurches forward awkwardly while I try to gain my footing, reaching to shake his hand as he meets me halfway. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Matthews.”

“Judge Matthews,” he corrects in a tone reminding me of his power. Surely the man has gone through my background with a fine-tooth comb

once he realized I was seeing his daughter, so he knows about my past and is subtly reminding me of it.

“Judge,” I reply as Sydney rolls her eyes.

“Come on in, Javi.” She reaches for my hand, locking our fingers together once more as I cross the threshold into the Matthews’ home.

If I thought Sydney’s place was nice, this house borderlines as a mansion. Cream-colored marble floors shine in recessed lighting. Beige colored walls accent deep brown furniture in the main living room. As I follow Sydney’s lead past a hallway and staircase, we step foot into a kitchen that belongs in a magazine. Black cabinets accompany white marble countertops and the same tile that’s in the rest of the house. Stainless steel pots rest on the stove as a woman that looks identical to Sydney turns around to acknowledge us.

“Hi, sweetie.” She pulls Sydney in for a hug as her eyes assess me quickly. When they part, she puts on the biggest smile I’ve ever seen, which leads me to believe it must be fake.

“You must be Javier ...”

Stepping forward to shake her hand, I meet her soft palm with my own. “Yes. Nice to meet you Mrs. Matthews.”

“Likewise. And please, call me Heather. It’s about time we meet the man Sydney has been spending so much time with.”

“Well, ask Dad why I’ve been M.I.A. and you’ll have your answer.” Sydney steps in close to me and rubs my back supportively as she puts her mother in her place. The moment her hand touches me, I wonder if she can feel the sweat dripping down my back. It’s the main reason why I wore a black shirt tonight.

“Dinner is almost ready,” her mother speaks, bypassing Sydney’s comment completely as her father arrives in the kitchen holding two glasses of scotch. “Why don’t you open a bottle of wine for us, dear?”

“I guess I can do that,” Sydney murmurs as she leaves me alone once again and her father steps directly in front of me, holding out a tumbler full of amber liquid.

“Here you go, Javier,” he says as his arms stretch toward me.

“Oh, um ... thank you, but I don’t drink and drive.” If I were a teenager, I’d pass that test with flying fucking colors right now. Instead, the man in front of me looks like I’ve got a screw loose.

Taunting me with a lift of his brow, his voice rises a few levels. “Oh? Is

that so? And why would that be?”

“I have my reasons,” I grate out. No matter what this man tries to do this evening to prove a point, I don’t owe him an explanation about how I choose to live my life.

“I’m sure you do.” He lifts one glass to his lips to take a sip, never moving his eyes from mine. When he drops the glass down, he marries the two glasses into one and then sets the empty one on the counter beside him.

“Time to eat, everyone,” Sydney’s mother calls out, breaking through some of the tension as we all move to the formal dining room and take our seats.

Sydney’s parents sit on one side of the table and Sydney and I sit across from them. Everyone digs into their food as a lingering silence accompanies the scraping of forks on glass plates.

“So, Javier. What is it that you do?” Sydney’s mom addresses me right as I take a bite of pork roast. I make sure to finish chewing before answering her.

“I work for Gibson Construction, ma’am.”

“Wait. I thought you worked at the gym?” she adds.

I nod. “I work there as well.”

“Two jobs, huh? That seems quite demanding,” George interjects.

“It is. But it’s hard work and I enjoy it. I’ve been able to do quite well for myself.”

“I couldn’t imagine working two jobs. You must be exhausted all of the time,” Heather adds.

I feel like telling her that keeping up with her daughter in the bedroom at night is really what depletes me of my energy, but I figured that wouldn’t be appropriate.

“I don’t know any different, ma’am. I was raised to work. Plus, my job at the gym is more to help out my best friend who owns it.”

“Yes. Andre is Javi’s best friend, who’s also married to his sister,” Sydney adds, smiling over at me.

“So is that who you’ve been spending time with as well?”

“Mom, please don’t act like you don’t already know the answers to these questions,” Sydney chastises as her mother sits back in her seat.

“Don’t talk to your mother like that, Sydney,” George commands, stirring up animosity once more.

“Well, don’t sit here and berate Javi because he’s a hardworking man. I

admire his work ethic. He certainly hasn't had anything handed to him in his life." Her eyes find her father's as she delivers that jab.

"Well, I guess I can attest that a good work ethic is admirable." George takes another sip of his scotch as his eyes bounce back and forth between Sydney's and myself.

"Sydney, I forgot to tell you, but the next Chamber of Commerce mixer is in two weeks. Were you planning on coming to this one?" Her mother must be the queen of changing the topic because this is the third time she's done this now once tension rises between Sydney and her dad.

My girl shrugs beside me. "Probably not. Javi and I are probably busy."

I cast my vision in her direction, wondering if she has a death sentence tonight. I know my girl can be feisty, but it seems she's intent on making a point to her parents, but we're both in the cross fire now.

"Well, perhaps he can come with you."

My tongue lodges itself in my throat the minute the suggestion is made. I don't belong at a function like that, where hundreds of people can pass judgment on our relationship. The little reminder of how different our worlds are starts to creep its way up my spine and wreak havoc in my brain as we continue to eat.

"Maybe. We'll see." Sydney flashes her mom a tight-lipped smile as the conversation dies and I move to stuff my mouth, even though my hunger is virtually nonexistent.

After dinner, Sydney helps her mother clean up in the kitchen and George invites me back to his study to talk. I knew a moment like this would happen tonight, but I didn't think it would happen this soon.

Reminding myself that Sydney is worth the unsettled feeling I have in my stomach right now, I follow George down a long hallway to an office that might as well be a bedroom. Shiny wooden walls encase burgundy carpet and a large, regal desk is centered against the back wall. A mini bar rests to the left of his desk and two couches create a sitting area in the back of the room.

George moves to refill his scotch before motioning for me to take a seat with him on the couches. I try to get comfortable, but it's hard when you feel like you need to be prepared for anything. I'm not above hitting the man, but I also know it won't make things any better in this situation.

"Javi, I'm going to level with you here," he says as he settles into the leather cushions and I lean back slightly against mine.

“Okay ...”

“I know about your past son. I know everything about you really. How you grew up, the fact that your dad died when you were thirteen, and that you went to prison not that long ago for aggravated assault.” He eyes me over the rim of his glass, waiting for my reaction.

As my heart races, I reply, “I figured as much.”

“So, you can imagine how a man like *me*, a man from *my* background, feels about a man like *you* dating my daughter.”

Drawing in a deep breath of air and courage, I prepare my argument. “Well, with all due respect, Judge Matthews, I think that’s Sydney’s decision to make.”

“Ah, yes. I figured you’d say something like that. Well, let me be clear with you,” he voices while leaning forward now and bracing his forearms on his elbows, so I do the same. Our heads are mere inches from each other, so close that I can smell the scotch coming off his tongue. “She might think that she knows what she wants, but she will realize soon that the two of you are far too different to work. You are the bad boy that she’s using to get back at me, trying to prove her independence by dating a man that is everything I *don’t* want for her. I love my daughter, but I don’t think she knows what *she* wants yet. There will come a moment when everything will click and she’ll come running back to me, telling me I was right. I know what’s best for my daughter, and I know you’re not it.”

Intensity bounces back and forth between us as I contemplate my response. Do I unleash the fury running through my veins and give him the satisfaction of voicing every doubt I feel myself? Or do I remain stoic, preserve my dignity, and hope to God he’s not right.

Ultimately, I decide on a blend of the two. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Judge Matthews. Yes, I have a past. I was in prison for two years for aggravated assault. I beat a man within an inch of his life and I’d do it again.” He retracts slightly at my admission. “But rest assured, I am a good man who’s just trying to pick up the pieces of his life and be better, do better. Your daughter has helped me become the man I knew I always could be. It’s a shame that you don’t believe in her enough to make decisions for herself.”

“It’s not my daughter’s job to repair you, young man.” He stands up now from the couch, towering over my head, enforcing his superiority over me. “My daughter is too pure for someone like you.”

Pushing myself up from the couch, I look into his eyes and reply, “I know

she is. Thank you for the dinner, sir. But I think it's best if we leave now."

"I do too."

By the time we make it back to the kitchen where Sydney and Heather were sitting at the island having glasses of wine, my pulse is firing so fast it's all I can do to wait for her to say goodbye to her parents.

When we settle into my truck and I head for my place, Sydney finally breaks the silence.

"Okay, how bad was it?"

"How bad was what?"

I hear her sigh in annoyance beside me as we cruise closer to my side of town. "Don't play stupid with me, Javi. What did my dad say to you?"

"What makes you think he said something?"

She turns slightly in her seat, facing me in my peripheral vision. "Because you came from his study more tense than when we arrived. And you haven't said a word since we left." She huffs out a harsh breath and then turns back to face the windshield. "I knew we never should have gone over there."

"Don't worry about it. It needed to happen."

"Is that what you think?"

I nod, avoiding her eyes so she won't see the doubt swimming in mine. All I keep hearing in my mind is George Matthews telling me that it's not his daughter's job to repair me, that she'll realize I'm not good enough for her and never will be. He didn't even have to say those words exactly, but I knew what he meant, what he was implying.

The one obstacle in our relationship I was dreading to face ended up being as bad as I thought it would be. Every moment of bliss we've experienced in the last two months seems all for nothing after one conversation with her father. No matter what I do, he will never accept me, or us as a couple. And even though Sydney says she can handle it, she shouldn't have to choose between her family and me. I would never ask her to do that, and I never want her to resent me for a broken relationship with her parents down the road. I barely live with the guilt I harbor inside as it is—I don't need any more.

By the time we reach my driveway, I can feel Sydney stewing beside me.

"So are we going to talk about what happened tonight? Or are you just going to blow me off?" She slams her purse on the counter once we go inside my place.

Running my hand through my hair, I debate how to say what I need to say. Her aqua eyes glare at me, casting irritation in my direction, even though in a moment she's probably going to be spewing hatred instead.

"I don't know what you want me to say? I think you probably know what your father said to me."

"No, I don't because you won't tell me."

"Well, in a nutshell, he basically told me I'm not good enough for you and never will be."

"You don't believe him, do you?" Her face conforms with worry and my heart bleeds a little at the sight.

"It's hard not to."

She brings her palms to her face and lets her head fall into her hands. "God, I knew I never should have agreed to taking you over there."

"So, what? You were going to keep me from him forever because you were afraid that his words would get to me?"

"Can you blame me?" she shouts, throwing her hands out wide. "You're clearly freaking out from what he said. This reaction from you was exactly what I was afraid of."

"I'm not freaking out. I'm accepting what I've always known deep down. I'll never be what you need, Sydney. What you deserve. It's better that we realize this now."

Her bottom lips trembles. "Is that what you think?"

"I'm pretty sure your father made that perfectly clear earlier."

"What about what I want, Javi? Doesn't that count for anything?"

I shake my head. "I can't give you what you want, Sydney. This was a mistake. We never should have crossed that line." I turn my back to her as I step further into the living room, but then twist around to see her moving toward me.

She stares at me with moisture building in her eyes, swaying her head back in forth, a pure look of disappointment crossing her features. "You're a coward, Javier Montes. And stupid me wanted to believe that you were capable of more."

"I told you I couldn't give that to you."

"Yeah, you did. But now, I think it's just an excuse. Because I know you're capable of it. You've shown me that for the past two months."

"This is all I have to offer you, Sydney," I say with my arms outstretched, gesturing to the guest house I'm living in on my sister's

property. “I don’t have money and lavish things. I work two jobs just to keep myself comfortable. I spent years in a prison cell for letting my anger get the best of me. I’m not what you need!”

“I don’t want you for your money, Javi! I don’t need a man for that, haven’t you been listening? You make me feel safe, cared for, cherished. You showed me how powerful sex can be with the right person. You made me feel alive when I’ve been living in a shell of a body, fighting to break free for years. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. That’s what you gave me.”

I shake my head. “I’m not good enough for you. How do you think it looks to people for a lawyer to be dating an ex-con?”

“I don’t give a shit about what people think anymore! That’s the entire point! I don’t care about them. All I care about is you.”

“I know what you need, and I’m not it. I can’t fucking give you everything you deserve, not with my mistake living and breathing in black ink on paper.”

“What you did? Protecting your sister like that? That’s not a mistake. That’s the most fierce form of loyalty I’ve ever heard from someone in my life.”

“But that’s just it! I didn’t protect her! He got to her, ruined her before I had a chance to rip him to shreds. I failed her and prison was my punishment, the consequence I fucking deserved for letting her down. And the more I realize it, the more I’m accepting that I’m just going to let you down too.”

“That’s not true ...”

With my arms out wide again, I cut her off. “I feel like I’m fucking drowning right now, Sydney, swimming upstream against a current that’s about to take me under and I’m not that good of a swimmer to begin with.”

With a soft shake of her head, she gives me a pointed look, but it’s the words she speaks next that gut me. “Don’t worry, Javi. I hear cowards float.”

She turns away from me and heads for the door, her hand landing on the knob as she pauses with her back still toward me. “When you realize your mistake, it might be too late. I don’t know how else I can convince you that you make me happy. I’m so flipping in love with you that you pushing me away right now feels like the worst betrayal I’ve ever felt, especially since I know you feel it too. You’re just as bad as my father for letting him win, for letting him tear us apart when I honestly believed we were stronger together. Let me know when you’ve grown the fuck up, Javi.”

And with those words, she walks out of my door, leaving me heaving

with anger as I hear her car start and see her lights pull out of my driveway. I punch my couch and then fall back into the cushions, vibrating with so many emotions, it's hard to name just one.

Fear. Disappointment. Self-loathing. Rage.

And a pain so fierce, my chest feels like I've been ripped open and my heart has been purged from the cavity within.

I let her walk away from me. And she told me she loves me.

And I know I have no one to blame but myself.

Chapter 30

Sydney

The sun peeks through the crack in my curtains, causing me to flinch from the light. With one eye popped open, I groan and roll over, seeking more sleep even though it's pretty much useless. I barely fell asleep around four this morning after I left Javi's house and came home and cried in my pillow. And as I lift my head and glance at the clock, the stroke of nine has just passed. I guess five hours is all I'm going to get right now. Perhaps there will be a nap in my future.

Unfettered regret fills my gut as I lie there and look at the ceiling. A part of me knew that taking Javier to my parents' house for dinner was a risky move, but the other part of me knew that we couldn't avoid my parents forever. If I wanted a chance at a real future with him, we had to cross the bridge eventually. I wouldn't be the first girl who's dating a man that her parents didn't approve of. But I also didn't want to be the girl who let her parents influence that choice either.

Javi may have a past and has made poor choices in the past few years, but the man I know today is not a man to fear. He's dependable, passionate, and incredibly hardworking. He cares for me in the way I need—a blend of soft and hard that makes me yearn for his touch and companionship at the end of the day. He's a man I could see myself marrying, building a life with full of laughter and obstacles that we would face together.

But now that vision is blurry and I'm afraid it might never clear up.

I wasn't naïve to the fact that my father was going to say something to Javi to stir up his doubts, but I thought the faith I had in him to believe in our relationship was stronger than it was apparently. I can't blame Javier for questioning the differences in our lives, our families, and our upbringing, but I also know that a person's past doesn't dictate their future. And the future I wanted with him has now gone to shit after one evening with my parents.

As I roll out of bed and make my way to the bathroom, sullen and bloodshot eyes stare back at me. I cried so hard last night that I knew I'd face the repercussions today. I throw my hair up in a messy ponytail and

splash water on my face, hoping that the cool liquid will help the swelling in my face go down. Once I brush my teeth, I walk to my kitchen to start a pot of coffee.

Even though the last thing I want to do is step foot back in my parents' house, a conversation needs to happen with my father today. I want to give him a piece of mind and reprimand him for ruining the relationship I've built with Javi for the past four months, even if it started as sex.

After I sink into my couch and sip my coffee in peace, I begrudgingly dress in cotton shorts and a tank top and hop in my car, headed for my parents' house. On Sundays they usually have breakfast at the country club, so I made sure to wait until I knew they'd be home.

I don't even bother knocking on the giant wooden door when I arrive because at this point they don't deserve that courtesy. I set my purse on the table by the door and then stomp through the house, searching frantically for my father. As my intuition would have it, I find him in his study, staring down at his computer, checking his emails. This is normal behavior for him on a Sunday. And now that football is back, he'll be turning on the television in the main living room in no time.

I slam his door shut behind me, alerting him to my presence as he visibly jumps in his chair.

"Sydney!"

"How could you?" I promised myself I wouldn't cry, but as soon as I saw him, I lost all control of my emotions.

He stares at me with concern in his eyes, even though I know he's probably celebrating his victory inside. "How could I what?"

"How could you say those things to Javi? You promised you weren't going to be an ass, and you went ahead and acted like one anyway!"

"Lower your voice, young lady," he warns, growing tense in his chair.

"No!" I shout, making my anger known. "I am twenty-eight years old, damn it! I am a grown ass woman! And I have the right to live my life the way I see fit! And last night you cast a stone that detonated the first glimpse of true happiness I've felt with another person! Don't you understand that you're pushing me away? I haven't seen you in over a month because I was so furious with how you've been acting!"

He stands harshly from his chair, towering over me from across the room. "Forgive me for wanting what's best for my daughter. But since you think you know everything, tell me this. You want to be with an ex-con? A

man who went to jail for aggravated assault? How am I supposed to feel safe knowing you're alone with a man like that who could snap at any moment?"

My head shakes rapidly back and forth. "You don't know the entire story, Dad!"

"I know that a man who can use his fists to almost kill someone is not the man I feel comfortable being around my daughter. Am I just supposed to sit around and wait for himself to unleash his fury on you next?"

"He would never do that!"

"You don't know that, Sydney. People that have a penchant for violence can't always control themselves. You don't know what he's capable of. And you haven't known him long enough to say otherwise."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've never felt more safe than I do when I'm in his arms. He is gentle with me and makes me feel adored and treasured. He's shown me compassion and acceptance. He supports me and makes me feel alive. When he's holding me, nothing else matters." I take a deep breath before another bout of anger runs through me. "Javi is a good man, the most noble and real man I've ever met, and you ran him off!"

"Well, if he couldn't handle the concern of your father, then that speaks volumes about how much of a man he truly is. People don't change, Sydney. That angry streak will always be inside of him, and I'll be damned if I sit back and wait for him to unleash it on you."

I stare at this man that I've spent my entire life trying to appease as a result of guilt, a debt I felt I owed to him for giving my mother and I a life we wouldn't have had otherwise. But now as I stand here and feel my identity mold into something new, I realize I sacrificed who I was to be who he wanted me to be.

"He was protecting his sister, Dad! The man he beat was her ex-boyfriend. It wasn't some random man on the street. It wasn't because the guy cut him off while driving or looked at him wrong. He was seeking justice for his sister."

I see his mind shift as he stares at me, which I can only hope that he's willing to hear more.

Trying a different approach, hoping to steer the conversation in another direction, I lower my voice now. "As a judge, a man that upholds the law and enforces punishment with the hopes of turning peoples' lives around, how can you honestly say you don't believe that people change?"

“I’ve seen enough people in my career that spiral down a vicious cycle and keep making the same mistakes, Sydney. I can’t deny the fact that it happens more than not. And a man like Javi ...”

“What do you mean when you say that? Are you focusing on the color of his skin? Or how much money that he makes? Is it just about his record, or is it because he’s not Andrew and that’s what you wanted for me?”

I watch his throat move as he swallows hard. “It’s a little bit of all of that, Sydney. He’s not from our background. He doesn’t understand our life ...”

“Dad ...” I take two steps forward. “Why does any of that matter?”

He closes his eyes and drops his head down. I watch him contemplate his next words carefully before he moves his hand to point at the couches in the corner of his study. We both walk over and sit down as I wait for him to continue.

“When I first met your mom, she mesmerized me with her beauty. I had never seen a woman who moved like she did, held me captive with just her voice. And when she finally introduced me to you, I didn’t realize that a child could do the same to me. I fell in love with both of you, and vowed to provide for you for the rest of my life. You may not be biologically mine, but you are *my* daughter, no matter what DNA says, Sydney.”

“Dad ...” Tears stream down my cheeks as he continues.

“But watching you grow up has been hard, wondering if you’d ever meet a man who would want to take care of you the way I wanted to take care of your mom. Being the man in your lives was a purpose I needed to fulfill ... and I guess a part of me fears that you’ll never find someone who feels that way too.”

I reach for his hand and stroke my thumb over the top of it. “That’s the thing, Dad. I did. I have. Javier is that type of man and I do feel that way with him. He knows all about protecting those close to him. That’s why he went to prison.”

His head pops up at my admission. “What do you mean? Do you know what happened exactly?”

I take a deep breath, nod, and relay the story of how Javier ended up serving two years behind bars. By the time I’ve finished, my father’s shoulders have relaxed and he looks pained in confusion.

“Do you understand now how I could fall in love with him?”

He tilts his head at me. “You’re in love with him?”

“I am,” I reply through enormous tears.

I’m so hopelessly in love with the man but I don’t know how to get him to see that that’s all that matters.

“But he’s convinced that we don’t belong together after what you said to him. I’ve assured him that I don’t care what others will think, but it’s hard for him to look past that. He’s always been judged by the color of his skin, the choices that he’s made, the side of town that he grew up on. I don’t know how to help him move past that.”

“I’m still bewildered that he was willing to go to jail to protect his sister ...”

“I know. And believe me, his sister is extremely grateful for that. But now that record follows him around like a black cloud. He gets looks of disdain cast his way out in public, whispers follow him around wherever he goes. He’s dealt with far more grief than just sitting in a prison cell for two years, although I can’t imagine that was a vacation at all. And now you laying into him last night was like the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Sydney. I’m sorry. I’ve only wanted what’s best for you. I guess I haven’t gone about that the right way ...”

“I know that, Dad. I do. And I’ve only ever tried to live up to your expectations because I didn’t want to let you down. Seeing you be disappointed in me is like a knife to the gut. But it also kills me when you don’t trust me to make decisions about my own life. I know what I feel for Javi, and yes, I could be wrong one day down the road. But isn’t that the risk you take anytime you fall in love? People change, circumstances change ... but finding someone to face it all together with and grow together with is the goal. And he is a man I could see doing all of that with.”

My father takes a deep breath and then blows it out, biting his lip in contemplation. “I’m not sure when you grew up, but somehow it happened right before my eyes. I’m sorry, Sydney, truly. I just want you to be with someone that cherishes you the way I do, that sees how truly remarkable you are. You are still that little girl in my eyes that stole my heart twenty-plus years ago. I guess I need to accept the fact that you are strong enough on your own.”

I stand up and join him on his couch, pulling him in for a hug. As his arms encircle mine, the warmth of his embrace brings on another round of tears. My relationship with this man has always been complicated, but I think that’s true of any parent and child dynamic.

There comes a point when we realize that our parents are people too, not these humans we've placed on a pedestal that can do no wrong and make no mistakes. On the other hand, there must also come a point where our parents realize their children have become adults and are responsible for their own decisions and happiness. Finding the balance between those two truths has proven difficult for me and my dad, but I think we're finally getting there.

I leave my parent's house later that afternoon, contemplating reaching out to Javi to let him know I spoke with my dad. But a part of me thinks that telling him my father has started to accept us, especially so soon after last night, might not be the best decision. I can hear Javi chastising me for trying to fix this all, when ultimately it's him that needs to accept us and want it enough to fight for it. That little slice of pride deep within urges me to wait for him to approach me, especially after what I said to him last night.

No matter how much I love the man, he is acting like a coward. I understand his reservations, but I also know what we feel for each other, and I don't want to navigate a relationship where I'm constantly worried he's going to bail the second things get hard.

I've said what I needed to say. I've told him how I feel. Now the rest is up to him.

Chapter 31

Sydney

“How are you holding up?”

Ally and I are walking around her neighborhood sipping wine from our tumblers. This has become the new normal in the past few weeks.

Yes, that’s right. It’s been almost two weeks of agonizing pain wondering when my phone will ring and I’ll hear Javi’s voice on the other end, or if the doorbell sounding off will be him on my doorstep realizing he’s a stubborn ass.

Sadly, neither has happened and the more time that passes, the more I’m beginning to lose hope. My sadness alternates with anger multiple times a day, convincing me to approach him at one moment, and then just accept the circumstances in the other.

“Well, I feel like I could cry at any moment. I miss him so damn much, but my pride is telling me to keep riding this out. And yet, deep down, I wonder if he’ll ever come around. Is this really the end?” My eyes fill with moisture as we continue to walk while Ally pushes Taryn and Tanner in the double stroller.

“I’m so sorry, Sydney. I wish there were something I could say to convince you that he’ll come to his senses, but I don’t know him well enough to say that. What I do know is how that man looked at you, how his entire face softened when you were near. I know how you felt about him, but you are right to stand your ground. If he’s the man you say he is, he won’t let you slip through his fingers.”

I wipe an errant tear from my cheek and then take a sip of my wine. “Maybe it was all a lie. Maybe I was stupid to think that he would ever get past the fact that our lives are so different. It’s crazy that this man I never knew all those years ago is suddenly someone I can’t imagine ever not knowing again. He gave me everything, Ally,” I mumble as the tears come on stronger. “He gave me confidence through that self-defense class. He gave me the passion I was so desperately seeking in sex. He gave me the comfort that I didn’t know existed with a man. And he gave me hope that I had found

the man I am meant to be with. And now ...”

Suddenly the tune of Pop Goes the Weasel interrupts my wallowing, causing Taryn to scream and Tanner to kick his legs in his seat.

“Mommy! Mommy! Can we get ice cream, please!” Taryn’s delight brings a smile to my face as I try to get myself back together.

“Yes, we can. Auntie Sydney could probably use some right now anyway.”

“Ice cream will make you feel better, Auntie!” Taryn declares as we stroll over to where Jared’s van has been stopped. Like clockwork, a few of the other moms emerge from their houses with kids in tow, eager to catch a glance at the barely legal man driving the ice cream van.

“Hey, Ally. Hey, Taryn.” Jared greets them at the window as I stay back with Tanner in the stroller.

“Hey, Jared. This is your last week, huh?”

“Yup. Back to school I go.”

“Well, we’ll miss you around here,” Ally says and then turns around to bounce her eyebrows at all of the moms. Collective giggles and groans filter into the air.

“I’ll miss all of my favorite customers.” He smiles down at Taryn. “Are we having Tweety today, little Miss?”

Taryn nods and then adds, “And we need something for my auntie to make her feel better.” She points over at me as I casually wave in Jared’s direction.

“No problem. She does look like she needs cheering up. I hear chocolate does wonders with that.” He flashes me a wink and then hands out the ice cream to Taryn as Ally pays.

Once we all have our frozen treats back in hand, we start heading back toward Ally’s house.

“You know you always have me, right?” She declares in between bites of her Big Stick.

“I know. Thank you. I just want the ache in my chest to go away.”

“Well, I’m not sure how long that’s going to last, but I heard wine helps dull it a bit.”

I chuckle and then reach for my tumbler, dragging out a long sip on a smack of my lips. “How long before it starts to kick in?”

I spend the rest of the evening hanging out with Ally and her family, relishing in the laughs her children bring me and the tiny sliver of relief from

stewing on this road block with Javi.

The next day at work, Tessa comes into my office when five o'clock hits.

"I'm on my way out. Do you need anything before I go?"

I cast a small smile up at her. "No, I think I'm good."

"Staying late again?"

I've been working longer hours the past few weeks since being at home just makes me depressed and lonely. Tessa hasn't failed to notice and I told her what happened when she asked why. As Javi and I got deeper into our relationship, I was running out of my office door at five o'clock when I could. Now, I actually crave the silence when everyone else leaves.

"Yeah. Thought I might try to actually get ahead on some contract negotiations."

"Don't overwork yourself, Sydney. And don't give up hope. I'm sure he'll come to his senses."

I hate her optimism because mine is dwindling with each passing day. But I reply with a smile again as she turns around and leaves.

I work another two hours before I finally convince myself to go home. It's after seven and the sun is beginning to set. Just a few more hours and I can go to sleep, where Javi visits me in my dreams and makes me feel whole again.

As I drive home, I pass by Gibson Brewery. The sounds that drew me in the first time convince me to stop and have a drink. I've obviously been drowning my sorrows in wine, but maybe beer will help.

When I make my way inside, I see the place is hopping with people for a Thursday night. Apparently Thursday has become the new Friday.

As soon as I take a seat at the bar, I see Kelsea again walk over to greet me.

"Hey, welcome back!"

I shrug. "Hi. Yeah, I haven't been in here in a while."

"Well, what can I get you?"

"Uh ..." My eyes bounce across the menu trying to find the sour beer I liked so much last time. "Oh, the huckleberry sour, please."

"Just a pint?"

"Yes, please."

"Be right back." She walks over to fill my glass and returns in record time. "Anything else right now?"

"No, this is fine. Thanks."

She nods and then walks away to help another customer as I take my first sip and then spin on my stool to survey the warehouse turned craft brewery tasting room.

My eyes find a couple on the other side, snuggling in close to one another. He whispers something in her ear and her cheeks turn pink. A sting of jealousy strikes in my gut and then my eyes start to burn, threatening to spill over with tears, so I turn back around so I can't see them anymore.

Why does it seem like everyone else is in love when your heart is broken? God, this is the most agonizing feeling I've ever felt in my life.

As I sit there feeling sorry for myself, a sense of urgency hits me in the face. I've given Javi time, and I can't wait in limbo any longer. I need to know what the future holds for us, or even if there isn't one so I can move on with my life and stop pining over a man that I fear will never grow the balls to admit that he wants me despite all of the obstacles we face.

I down my beer and then wave goodbye to Kelsea, eager to get in my car and race across town to Javi's house. He should be home soon from the gym. I can wait, especially if it means I'll finally get to speak with him.

As my heels click on the gravel while I make my way to my car, I hear footsteps trailing me. With one glance over my shoulder, a dark shadow of a man comes into view and I stop in my movements as I watch him come closer. And as soon as his face comes into focus, my eyes widen and my pulse sky rockets.

"Well, hello there," he says, and his voice coats my ears with the same slimy feeling I got that night at The Jameson.

"What are you doing here?" I clutch my purse closer to my body and finagle my keys between my fingers, recalling all of the details I learned in my self-defense class. I don't know what this guy is capable of or his intentions in approaching me, but I will be prepared this time no matter what happens.

"Well, I saw you inside and wanted to say hello. I could never forget a face like yours." His tongue peeks out to lick his lips and my stomach coils at the sight.

"Likewise, *Jesus*." My hackles are raised, especially as I remember what this man did to Selena.

He takes a few steps closer as I start to step backwards. "Where are you headed?"

"Home," I answer as my back hits my car.

“Want some company?” He growls as I swallow hard and try to remember what to do if he comes at me head on.

“Ha. From you? No thank you.”

He chuckles and then cages me in with his arms to my car. “Where’s Javi? Shouldn’t he be taking you home?” The mention of Javi brings back so many emotions while I contemplate what to do next.

I don’t answer him though as I wait to see what his next move is. I don’t want to strike too soon. I need to make sure I have the upper hand in this situation.

“Aw, is he not your man anymore, Sydney? Did that man forget what a fine piece of ass he had with you by his side?” He brings one of his fingers to my cheek, trailing it down my skin as I inhale sharply. “Well, I guess one man’s loss is another man’s treasure, isn’t that right?”

“Get off me,” I warn as he presses his body up against mine, letting me feel the hardness between his legs. And all it makes me want to do is throw up.

He leans in closer, lining up his lips to my ear. “No can do, baby. I saw something I want, and I have every intention of taking it.”

“Over my dead body,” I declare as I strike his face with my hand holding my keys between my fingers.

“Motherfucker!” He yells as he reaches up to his face and sees blood there. But then I turn around as fast as possible, trying to get in my car, but I’m not fast enough.

He wraps his arms around my torso, causing me to drop my purse that has my gun inside and trapping my arms against my sides. I struggle against his grip as he tightens it and pulls me back against him and away from my car.

“You little bitch. You’re going to pay for that.”

“Try and make me.”

He huffs as I try to dig my heels into the gravel, but still move from his force. “Oh, I will.”

The second he stops moving us, my training comes back to me. With his hands around my arms, I shift my weight to the side just far enough to strike his groin by moving my hand back. And the groan he lets out gives me a rush of adrenaline to keep going.

“Fuck!”

I spin in his arms and duck underneath, kneeing him between the legs this time, making sure to hit the spot dead on, making him cry out in pain. And

as he falls to the ground, I bring my leg up to kick him in the face, the crack of his nose echoing out as he yells and falls face first to the ground.

“Fucking bitch!”

I don't wait to see if he gets up. I just run, back to my car where my purse is still lying on the ground. I nearly slip and fall on the gravel beneath my heels as I run as fast as my legs will carry me.

As I reach down to grab the handle of my purse, a hand rests on my shoulder, startling me so I stand up flinging my fists at the person.

“Woah! Hey, calm down,” the man says with his hands in the air. “I'm just trying to help. I heard screaming out here. Was that you?”

I nod, feeling tears forming now in my eyes. “Yes. I was attacked. He's over there.” I point at the area where I left Jesus, seeing him still clutching his stomach on the ground and my body continues to tremble.

“Shit. Stay here.” The man races in that direction and pins Jesus to the rocks beneath him, holding his hands behind his back with a knee between his shoulder blades. “Call 9-1-1!” He yells over at me as I nod and dig through my purse, locating my phone. I press the buttons with shaky fingers and wait for a voice to pick up on the other side of the line.

Within five minutes, two police cruisers and an ambulance are in the parking lot of the brewery, as well as most of the patrons that were inside. I'm sitting in the ambulance being assessed by a paramedic and asked questions by a police officer when the man that held down Jesus for the cops comes back over to check on me.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. I'm just shaken up a bit.”

“With good reason. I'm Wyatt Gibson, by the way. I own this place.” He reaches out to shake my hand and I reciprocate.

“Sydney Matthews.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Judge Matthews' daughter?”

I roll my eyes. “Yup, that's me.”

“So that explains why he's here.” My eyes shift to where his gaze trailed and sure enough my father is searching the parking lot with desperation all over his face.

“Jesus Christ!” He runs over to me once our eyes lock and pulls me into his arms. “Sydney, are you alright? My God, what happened?” I watch him survey my entire body as I huddle under the blanket the paramedic gave me.

“I'm okay. I was ... I was attacked again.”

“Shit,” he mumbles. “Did you use your gun?”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head. “I actually kned him in the crotch and kicked him in the face. I’m pretty sure I broke his nose.”

He huffs out a relieved breath and then tilts his head at me. “You learned that in that self-defense class, didn’t you?”

My head bobs up and down as tears fall once more. He pulls me into his arms again and I cry, letting out every ounce of anguish running through my body while finally feeling safe after yet another traumatic evening in my life. I silently wonder how many nights of sleep I’ll lose because of this attack and debate if I have any sleeping pills left at all.

“Hey, it’s okay, honey. I’m here.”

“I was so scared, Dad,” I mumble between breaths against his chest.

“I can only imagine. But you did good, sweetie. You were able to defend yourself, just like you wanted.”

As I push away from him and wipe my face, I peer up at his eyes. “Yeah. And I wouldn’t have been able to if it weren’t for Javi.”

My admission rests between us as red and blue lights swirl in the night sky and people mill about, even though I feel like my life has come to a complete stop.

By the time I give my official statement and get cleared by the paramedics, my father follows me home and offers to stay the night in my guest room if I want him to.

“No, it’s okay, Dad. I’ll be alright. I’m just going to take a hot bath and relax.”

“I let Byron know you won’t be in tomorrow.” He continues to click keys on his phone as he stands at the bottom of my staircase.

“I appreciate that. But I need to work. I have court tomorrow.”

“Court can wait, Sydney. Your life is more important than your job.”

I descend the stairs, staring up at him, fighting back tears again. “Thank you for being here, Dad. I love you.”

He kisses me on the top of my head while pulling me close. “I love you too, Sydney. You’ll always be my little girl.”

“I know.”

We say our goodbyes and then I head for my bathroom, filling the tub with scalding hot water, welcoming the burn against my skin since it makes me feel alive.

I could have been another victim of Jesus’s tonight if I hadn’t been

prepared.

If I hadn't taken my safety in my own hands and done something about it months ago.

If I hadn't trusted Javier to give me the confidence I so desperately needed after the first attack on my life.

And now that he's been arrested, perhaps he can suffer the consequences he actually deserves for what he did to Selena—and to Javi.

As I curl up under my covers and will my mind to sleep, the only thing I want more than anything after tonight is to tell the man I love that he saved me—and yet, I don't know that he'd want to know, not when he's been radio silent for weeks.

I reach for my phone, my thumbs hovering over the keyboard as I contemplate telling Javi what happened tonight, but my pride wins out. I don't want him to reach out to me out of pity or obligation. If he finally comes to his senses, I want it to be on his own terms so I won't question his intentions.

I feel defeated, beaten up and bruised even though I technically won the fight tonight. But the man I want by my side won't step into the ring with me. And that hurts more than anything—more than the psychological damage, more than the fear that this will happen again, and more than the idea that he should be holding me tonight, making me feel safe after terror ran through me just hours ago.

Chapter 32

Javier

“Javi, slow down!” Andre bellows over the sound of me punching the bag in front of me with all the strength I can muster this morning. I ignore his cry and continue to smash my hands against the leather.

“Javi!”

Another hit. Another swing. Another crack of my knuckles that gives me pain to focus on other than the gaping hole in my chest.

“Javi!” Two brawny arms shove me away from the bag as I tumble back on my feet and ultimately land on my ass.

Struggling to stand and catch my breath, I glare at Andre standing across from me. “What the fuck, Andre?”

“Jesus Christ, man. You’re gonna break your hand or give yourself a heart attack if you keep up that pace.”

“Whatever. Get out of my way.”

“No can do, Javi. You’re done. Go hit the showers.” He folds his arms across his broad chest and then widens his stance.

“You know what? Fuck you, Andre.” I storm off, headed for the locker room and a cold shower to cool myself down. But apparently Andre wasn’t finished with our conversation.

“No, fuck you, Javi. You’ve been an asshole to the hundredth degree since the night you had dinner with Sydney’s parents, and quite frankly, I’m sick and tired of it. And so is your sister.”

I spin around to face him, seething with anger. “Then get the fuck away from me. No one said you had to follow me in here.”

“I know. But you’re my best fucking friend and you need a little tough love, so I’m going to give it to you.”

I roll my eyes as I strip off my shirt and shove it in my bag. “Let’s hear it then.”

“I’m sorry that her dad gave you a hard time, but can you honestly say you expected anything less?”

I don’t respond. Instead I wait for more because I know it’s coming.

“You knew what you were walking into that night, and even if he said some harsh shit, I’m baffled how you let one evening derail your entire relationship with her. It’s been two weeks and you’ve been sulking like a fucking coward, throwing yourself your own pity party because your girlfriend’s father didn’t like you.”

The last two weeks have been the longest in my life, and Andre is right—I have been sulking. There were stretches of time in prison where I literally felt like time was standing still—but these fourteen days without Sydney beside me have been the longest and loneliest of my life.

I have struggled with picking up the phone to call her so many times, wondering what she was doing, if she was thinking about me every second of the day like I was her, craving just the sight of her so I knew she was alright. I ate lunch at Russo’s every day last week hoping to run into her accidentally on purpose, but she never showed. And the longer I waited to contact her, the more I didn’t know what to say.

How do I explain why I’ve been cowering in my house at night, ashamed of letting her walk out of my door without fighting for her?

How do I get her to see that I let my insecurities get the best of me and I regret pushing her away with every fiber of my body?

How do I tell her that I love her so goddamn much that being without her has been the worst pain I’ve ever felt, but I know I have no one else to blame but myself for that?

I’m past the humiliation phase, the acceptance that our relationship has many obstacles ahead but I want her more than all of those. Now I’m in the self-loathing phase where I’m so disgusted in myself that I’m searching for punishment in every way possible and apparently taking it out on others too.

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, if you’re this unhappy without her, then fucking fix it, because you are the one that has the power to do that. And until you pull your head out of your ass, you’re not allowed to punch a bag in my gym. The last thing I’m gonna do is watch you hurt yourself because you’re pissed off at the world.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to get my heart rate back down. Sinking onto the bench in front of me, I grip my hair and tug, welcoming the sting. “I don’t know how to fix it, Andre. That’s part of my frustration, man.” I peer back up at him as we lock eyes. “Do I go to her

dad's house and tell him to fuck off? Do I show up at her door and apologize when I don't even have a good enough reason for pushing her away in the first place other than I was an idiot? Or do I ask her to meet me somewhere to talk and hope to God that she shows up? I ... I don't know what to do."

Andre huffs and then takes a seat next to me. "You know her better than I do, so think about what she would want. I don't think confronting her dad is the right way to go, because if she does give you another chance, you're going to have to figure out a way to get along with him in some way. But surprising her could backfire too. Look, it's Saturday. Go home, relax, and try to come up with a game plan. Selena said if you cooled off and figured out your shit, she'd make you dinner tonight." I laugh as he lifts one corner of his mouth in amusement. "Talk it out with us later and then maybe we can help. I just hate seeing you like this. I know you love her, and fuck, she made you happy, Javi. I've never seen you like that. The woman took you by surprise, but I think she's exactly what you need. You have to fight for her."

I sit up tall and inhale deeply again. "I know, man. I fucking miss her. The look on her face when she walked out my door haunts me all day. I let her down. I don't ever want to see that look from her again."

"Then fix it." He clasps his hand on my shoulder before rising once more and walking out of the locker room.

I decide to shower at home, so I gather my stuff and hop in my truck to make my way back to my house. The place I've turned into my home has felt so empty and cold without out Sydney here. I hate sleeping in my bed without her body next to me. I hate not having her hover over me at the stove while I cooked her dinner. I'm disgusted with the way that night plays over in my mind each time I'm in the living room.

She's right. I am a fucking coward, but I'm done. I need her. A realization hits me as I exit my shower.

I thought I was scared to jump into a relationship with the girl who was someone I used to hate. I thought that fear was the worst once her father confirmed my deepest insecurities on the subject.

But now I know that the scariest part of all of this is knowing that Sydney loved me two weeks ago, and might possibly have changed her mind.

Nothing terrifies me more than to know I was so close to her, called her mine, and now she could become a stranger to me all over again.

I change into black shorts and a white t-shirt in record time as desperation overcomes me. I need to see her, talk to her. I can't wait anymore. I may

have lost her forever and then that will be the guilt I'll be living with for the rest of my life.

As I search for my keys, a knock on my door catches my attention. I sure as hell wasn't expecting any visitors, so the presence of one has me curious.

However, nothing could have prepared me for the person standing on the other side of the door as I swung it open.

George Matthews stands in front of me in khaki pants and a navy polo shirt. He pushes his glasses up his nose and then clears his throat as we stare at one another.

"Javier," he greets me as he pushes his hands into his pockets.

"Judge Matthews," I acknowledge him back as the hairs on my neck start to rise. What the hell is he doing here?

"Please, call me George." *What the fuck?* Okay ...

"George."

"Can I, uh ... can I come in, please? I'm afraid we need to talk."

I turn to check the time on the clock, wondering how long this will take. I had every intention of racing to Sydney's condo to beg for her forgiveness, but something tells me that George's unexpected visit may have something to do with that.

"Uh, sure." I hold the door open wider so he can come inside, then shut it behind him. I'm instantly nervous as I watch him assess my living accommodations, but I fight desperately to bury the anxiety. If I want this man to accept me, I have to stay true to who I am.

"You did all of this work yourself?" He asks as his eyes move around the room.

"Yes, I did."

"Sydney told me that, but to see it with my own two eyes. Wow. It's remarkable. Nice work, Javier."

"Sydney spoke about that?"

He turns to face me with a half-smile. "We've been talking about a lot of things lately, especially when it comes to you."

"I see." Maybe he's here to tell me she's changed her mind about me and that I'm never to contact her again. I've never put my hands on a judge before, but there's a first time for everything, I suppose.

He takes a seat on one end of my couch as I inhabit the other, resting my arm along the back. "How can I help you, George?"

"Well, Javier. It seems I owe you a much overdue apology."

My eyebrows shoot up at his words. “Okay ...”

“I’m sorry for the way I treated you a few weeks ago at my home. I know you don’t have children of your own, but I assure you when you do, you will only want to protect them as much as possible from pain and heartbreak.”

“I can understand that.”

“Although, it seems my actions that night inflicted a pain on my daughter that was completely my fault and I’ve been fighting to repair.”

I look down at the ground for a moment and then flick my eyes back up to his. “You’re not the only one who hurt her that night.”

“I know. But you wouldn’t have pushed her away if it weren’t for me. And I’m here to say I’m sorry that I misjudged you.”

“Uh, thank you.”

“I obviously know about your record and the time you served. But Sydney gave me quite the tongue lashing the next day and informed me of exactly why you went to prison.” Anxiety spikes in my chest as I absorb what he said. He knows about Selena and Jesus. She told him everything.

“Okay ...”

“And I want you to know that after hearing your story, I admit that I was wrong about you. I didn’t think you were the type of man that my daughter needs—someone to protect her and care for her the way I do. But I was wrong. Your actions, although violent, were completely warranted in my opinion. And regardless of what you think, you *did* protect your sister by keeping her secret for her and accepting a sentence that you never should have served.”

I swallow hard, fighting off the emotion that is bubbling up. This man who just weeks ago told me I wasn’t good enough for his daughter, is now commending me for the choices that landed me in prison. My head is spinning with this turn of events.

“Thank you. I appreciate that. I care about your daughter more than I ever thought possible, George. She and I didn’t start off on the best of terms, but after having her in my self-defense class, I could tell that her headstrong personality was enough to reel me in. I’ve regretted pushing her away these past two weeks and I realized I can’t live without her. She’s it for me. I want a future with her because my life these past two weeks without her in it has been meaningless.”

He clears his throat once more and then readjusts himself on the couch. “That’s actually part of the reason why I’m here.” He pauses and then says

five words that make my brain synapsis pop. “Sydney was attacked Thursday night.”

I pop up from my seat, chest heaving for oxygen.

“By Jesus Gonzalez.”

“Motherfucker!” Dragging my hands through my hair, I pull at the strands as I start to pace the room.

George rises so now we’re both standing, resting a hand on my shoulder, bringing me to a stop. “Javier, calm down. She’s fine. A little shaken up, but physically okay.”

“He touched her?” I swear to God, I’m going to kill him.

“Yes. But she fought him off. She defended herself, Javier. She used what you taught her and saved herself.” And those words about make me keel over.

She fought him off? She listened, she remembered everything I taught her, and she protected herself?

“She did?”

He nods. “Yes. And it was in that moment that I realized she may not be here right now if it weren’t for you. You saved my daughter from a world of pain, or worse, young man. And *that* right there tells me that you are the man she needs.”

I can feel the moisture building in my eyes, but I’ll be damned if I shed a tear in front of him. “I need to see her.”

He smiles knowingly and then fishes his keys out of his pocket. “I was hoping you’d say that. I came here to take you to her, Javier. She loves you and has been a shell of herself these past few weeks. I can’t bear to see her like this anymore. You two deserve to be happy. And I’m done standing in the way.”

As we drive to Sydney’s condo, my knee bounces in my seat with this turn of events. I question George about everything that happened that night and he tells me that Jesus was arrested. Thank God. He brags about how badly his nose was broken from the kick Sydney delivered to his face, making us both laugh. By the end of the twenty minute drive, I actually feel relaxed around the man I was convinced hated me and would never let me be with his daughter.

When we arrive at Sydney’s condo, George walks up to the door with me. He explained that he feared Sydney would push me away if I showed up alone. He wants her to know that he supports the two of us, and I expressed

my gratitude. There are definitely hurdles still to jump, but having his blessing is a huge step in the right direction.

A few minutes after George knocks on the door, Sydney opens it up wide and her eyes follow suit when she sees the two of us together.

“Dad? Javi?”

My God, she looks beautiful, even though I can tell she’s been crying. She has no makeup on, her hair is a mess, but she’s an angel in my eyes. How I ever thought I could live without this woman is beyond me.

“Sydney ... Javier and I just had a long talk, sweetie. I want you to know that I apologized to him for how I treated him at dinner and commended him for the honorable man he is. You have my blessing, sweetheart, even though I know you don’t need it. I love you and want you to be happy. I hope you’ll hear him out.” He steps to the side and pushes me forward a bit before blowing her a kiss and walking away.

I stand there as her eyes shift back to me and I anxiously await a reaction from her.

“Princess ...”

“Javi ...”

I stand there, waiting for more words, but then I reach for her out of instinct, slamming her into my chest and squeezing her in my arms

“I’m so glad you’re fucking okay,” I grate through tears I’m fighting off. The intensity running through me as I hold her in my arms again, knowing she’s alright after what happened is causing me to break. My body trembles as I encase her in my grip.

“I am. I’m alright,” she mumbles against my chest while returning the powerful hold on me.

We stand there for God knows how long before I finally release her on a shaky breath and I notice her wiping tears from her eyes.

“Can I come in so we can talk?”

She simply nods and then steps aside so I can cross the threshold. I follow her into the living room as she turns the volume of the television down and then curls up into the corner of her couch. I take a seat next to her, but not too close, trying to feel her out in case the display of desperation outside is short lived.

“How have you been?” she asks finally through a snuffle, breaking the silence.

I lock eyes with her, desperately wanting to pull her into me again and

inhale her entirely. “Horrible.”

“Huh.” She sits back slightly and then wraps her arms around her knees as she brings them to her chest.

“Huh?”

“Well, if you’ve been horrible the past two weeks, then I guess you have no one to blame but yourself for that one, don’t you?” I didn’t think she was going to make this easy on me, but she’s hammering it in right out of the gate.

“You’re absolutely right. It is my fault that I’ve felt like the sludge that builds at the bottom of a trashcan.”

“That’s quite the picture you painted there,” she says on a slight tip of her lips.

“It’s true. I’ve missed you and I’ve been a fool. I was on my way over here earlier when your father showed up on my doorstep.”

That bit of information makes her perk up. “He went to your house?”

“Yes. He apologized for the way he behaved during dinner and relayed to me that you told him why I went to prison.”

She nods in confirmation. “I did. I didn’t think it was fair that he was judging you for something that he didn’t know the whole story of. And I wanted to reiterate to him that despite your past, you are the man that I want in my life.”

I reach out to tuck a strand of unruly hair behind her ear, stroking her cheek with my thumb. “God, I’m an idiot,” I whisper as her eyes soften and search mine for clarity.

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Princess. I’m sorry that I let my own doubts and fears tear us apart. I’m sorry I was a coward and couldn’t get to this point sooner. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there for you when you needed me to be.”

She sighs and then reaches to hold my hand. “My father had a part as well, but here’s the thing, Javi. I’m scared that every time this happens, because it will happen again, that you’re going to run. My feelings for you never wavered. In fact, they only grew. I accepted all of you knowing that people would have opinions about the two of us together, especially if they know about your past. But I can’t be in a relationship where I’m constantly wondering if someone or something is going to make you run away and abandon me. I can’t live like that.”

I bob my head, hearing her loud and clear. Her concerns are one-hundred

percent valid. “I agree. And all I can do is promise you that it won’t happen again. This time apart has shown me that I can’t live without you. Now that I know you and you’ve been a part of my life, I don’t want to live without your soul intertwined with mine.”

I see the reservation in her eyes, the tremble of her lips as she contemplates my words.

“It’s now or never, Javi. I won’t do this again.”

I shake my head, preparing to correct her. “No, Sydney. It’s not now or never. It’s *forever*.”

“Forever?” she asks with a hopeful gaze, resting her head on her knees.

“Yes. I want forever with you.”

“You love me, don’t you, Javi?” Her smile builds and I can feel my lips do the same.

“Guilty as charged, Princess.”

She jumps across the couch into my arms and crashes her lips into mine, sealing our promise with a kiss that makes me dizzy and desperate for her. As we get more comfortable and Sydney straddles my lap, I give her the most intense kiss of her life. I show her that she’s the one I crave, the only woman who has ever made me feel worthy of anything—but most importantly, love.

“I love you, Javier Montes.”

“God, I love you, Sydney Matthews. It’s so strange to say that, but fuck, it feels so right.”

She chuckles and then kisses me once more, slower this time as we run our hands all over each other, savoring the feeling of being back in each other’s arms.

“I’ve been miserable without you,” I mumble against her lips before she leans back and looks at me.

“Then why didn’t you come to me sooner?”

“The longer I waited, the longer I couldn’t come up with a valid reason for staying away. Then I just became so fucking angry at myself, the last thing I wanted to do was show you that side of me while trying to reconcile with you.”

She holds my face in her hands as our eyes move together. “I want every part of you, Javi. Don’t you get that? I know that when you’re angry about something, it’s because you care. I know when you’re intense, it’s because you have so much passion running through your veins, you feel like

a rubber band about to snap. And when you're scared, I know you really just need me to remind you that everything will be alright as long as we're together."

"Fuck. How do I deserve you? How can you be such an incredible woman and want *me*? I feel like I've let you down in so many ways..."

"You've disappointed me, sure. But you've never let me down."

"What about Jesus? Your father told me about the attack. It's part of the reason he came to see me."

Her eyes fill with tears almost instantaneously. "I figured, given your reaction at my door ..."

"Yes. And I'm pissed I wasn't there. If I were, he never would have put his hands on you. That same guilt I felt about my sister came rushing back. But God, I'm so fucking proud of you, Sydney. You defended yourself, just like I taught you. When your dad told me that, I had never been so proud in my entire life. I thought I was going to fucking cry."

She chuckles as she wipes her tears. "I was so scared, Javi. But I just kept hearing your voice in my ears, telling me what to do, remembering practicing the moves with you in the gym. Even though you weren't physically there, you did save me. You helped me save myself."

I wrap my arms around her and move to stand as her legs wrap around my waist. "I think we've saved each other in multiple ways, Princess," I reply before crushing my mouth to hers again.

"Make love to me, Javi." My legs carry us upstairs as I briskly approach her bedroom.

"I plan on it, baby. All night. We have a lot of time to make up for."

Laying her down gently on her bed, I reach back and pull off my shirt, loving the way her eyes grow darker as soon as she sees my torso. I pop the button on my shorts and pull them down along with my underwear. While watching her rub her thighs together in relief, I pull her hands to help her sit up and then reach for the hem of her tank top, peeling it from her body. She has on a light sports bra, so I rid her body of that too, exposing her perky breasts to me, making me itch with need to touch her.

She pushes down her shorts and underwear and throws them to the ground, giving me a perfect view of her pussy, already drenched with her arousal.

"I missed you so much, baby. I want to savor every part of you tonight, but this first time might not be slow."

“I don’t care. I just want you.”

“Then lie back,” I declare as she follows my orders and then spreads her legs open wide, giving me a front row seat to the body that I plan on worshipping over and over for the rest of my life.

I dip my head down and swipe my tongue along her slit, eliciting a moan from her that echoes in her room. Teasing her clit, I flick her nub ever so lightly, toying with her as I hear her frustration build in her cries.

“Javi ...”

I don’t let her get another word out before I dive in, sucking her clit between my lips and plunging two fingers inside of her, making her gasp. I work her over, enjoying the way her thighs tremble around my head, the way her hands yank at my hair as she holds my head to her pussy, the way she calls out my name as I bring her over the edge and she comes all over my fingers and tongue.

“That’s one, Princess.”

“God, I missed your mouth,” she says as I hover over her and then kiss her deeply, allowing her to taste herself.

“I missed your mouth too, baby.”

“Then let me return the favor ...” She moves to sit up, but I stop her.

“Not this time. I have some making up to do, so sit back and enjoy the orgasms.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” she says as she reaches between us and runs my cock along her soaked pussy, lining me up to her entrance.

“Sydney?”

“I want to feel you, Javi. It’s all I’ve thought about while we’ve been apart. And I’m on the pill.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

Bringing my lips to hers, I kiss her softly as I thrust inside of her, stilling once I’m all the way in. I rear back so I can see her eyes, taking a moment to memorize the look on her face as I bury myself inside of her bare for the first time.

“Fuck, baby. God, you feel good ...”

“You too, Javi. I need you to move. I’m gonna come again,” she pants as I slide in and out, my mind spinning with how different and incredible this feels with nothing between us.

I move slowly, trying to savor every nerve ending being lit on fire and

not wanting to blow my load too early as well, but that doesn't stop Sydney from coming all over my cock, squeezing me between her legs as she rides out her release.

"Holy shit ..." she exclaims when she comes back down and I watch her body relax.

"That was so fucking hot," I murmur and then kiss her once more, picking up my speed.

After a few minutes, I decide to change positions, pulling out of her entirely and then lying behind her so her back is to my front. I lift her leg and then slide back inside, holding her in my arms, pinching her nipples as I thrust hard and deep and she moans out her pleasure.

"So ... fucking ... good," she breathes.

"Agreed, Princess. Fuck, you're gonna make me come." I growl in her ear as I feel the first tremor run through me. I reach around to stroke her clit while I pump more furiously, chasing that release, desperate to come inside of her. I've never wanted that more than I do right now—to claim her once and for all as mine.

"Me too ... harder, Javi," she pleads as I slam deeper inside of her and rub her sweet spot until we're both seeing stars. The moment my orgasm hits, Sydney joins me and we ride out our release together, trembling in each other's arms until we catch our breaths.

Still buried deep inside of her, my lips find her skin—kissing her neck, her shoulder, her back—showering her with touches we've gone without in the past two weeks.

"I love you, baby," I whisper in her ear as she hums her approval.

"I love you, Javi," she returns and then we both relax until we drift off to sleep. Sleep comes easy now that she's back in my arms, where she should have been this entire time.

I learned my lesson though, and I'll be damned if I do that again to this woman. I have the rest of my life to show her that I'm devoted to her, and I'll never stop as long as she lets me.

One Week Later

"Alright, guys. I wanted to talk to you about something." Sydney sits in my lap on the couch in my sister's living room as Andre and Selena sit on the

loveseat in a similar position.

Ever since we got back together, the last thing I want is to be without her touch. If she's near me, I make sure to wrap my arms around her, almost as if I'm afraid she might change her mind and run away. Ironic how her fear with me has now become mine with her. Nevertheless, we're working on communicating our fears and overcoming them together, being a team. I've never had that in my life, but Sydney says I'd better get used to it.

"Oh my God! Are you pregnant?" Selena shouts as my eyes go wide. I turn to search Sydney's face, wondering if she's keeping something from me, but she sees my concern and just rolls her eyes.

"No, I'm not pregnant. Can everyone focus, please?"

I blow out a breath of relief and then snuggle her in closer to my body. I definitely want children with this woman someday, but today is not that day.

"Okay. What is it?"

Sydney takes a deep breath and then speaks. "Jesus's arraignment was on Wednesday. Since the only charges against him are his assault on me, he's likely to only have to pay a fine."

"What? That's bullshit!" Selena shouts as Andre rests a hand on her shoulder.

"I agree, but given that it's his first offense, this is the likely result."

"So, what do you need from us?"

Sydney looks down at me and I nod, encouraging her to ask what she needs to. She discussed this with me prior to this conversation, and I told her I supported what she wanted to do, but it was up to my sister.

"Well, if he only has to pay a fine, he's likely to go back on the streets and try this again. Lord knows how many other women might have been a victim of his after you, Selena."

"Okay ..."

"So, I guess I'm asking if you'd be willing to press charges against him for rape."

I watch my sister's face go white and her body retreat in her seat.

"Please don't be mad at me ... but in the state of Texas you have ten years to file rape charges against someone. You're well within the time limits ... and, given that you had a rape kit done at the hospital the night that it happened, there is clear evidence that could put him behind bars, Selena."

"You ... you want me to come forward?"

Sydney and I both nod and then I finally speak. "Yeah, we do, sis. Think

about how many other women he could hurt. Sydney was lucky she knew how to fight him off. But others might not be that prepared. He's a filthy piece of shit that needs to be put behind bars. He needs to pay for what he's done to our family. And you have the power to help make that happen."

Andre looks at me and bobs his head up and down, just as Selena turns to face him. "You think I should do this?"

"I think now's as good a time as ever. Like Sydney said, we don't want him to get to other women, and you have hard evidence that can put him behind bars, babe."

Selena's eyes find the floor as Sydney squeezes my hand in anticipation.

"I know it's scary, Selena. But he deserves this punishment. He's only going to keep doing this because he knows he can get away with it."

My sister peers over at me. "Sydney's right, Selena. It's time to make him pay."

"You're right," she finally says as Sydney's shoulders fall. "I'll do it." Her smile grows as Sydney and her lock eyes and nod in agreement, silently waging a war against a man that has hurt them both.

"I'm so glad, Selena. I think it's going to make all the difference. One of my associates at my firm agreed to take on our case, and is confident we have enough to put Jesus behind bars for a while."

"Let's hope."

"Now," Sydney states, turning to face me. "There's one more thing I want to address ..."

"What's up, Princess?"

Her face softens as she stares down at me, brushing my hair off of my forehead. "One thing about being a Matthews is knowing a lot of people and having some pretty powerful connections."

"Okay ..."

"I talked with my father, who is close with our Governor in the great state of Texas, and he seems to think he may be able to help you as well."

My brow furrows as she waits for me to say something. "Help me how?"

"Well, I know you hate having the assault charge on your record, and once Selena comes forward, there will be intent for why you hit Jesus. Assault charges can't be expunged from your record through legal means unless you are pardoned by a Governor or the President. And sorry, but we're not in tight with the President." She winks and I'm still trying to follow her train of thought.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I might be able to get the charges off your record, Javi. That black cloud you claim follows you around could go away forever. I know it won’t give you those two years back you spent behind bars, but at least it will give you some sort of a fresh start.”

I feel my eyes start to burn. “You’d do that for me?”

She smiles down at me and then gently kisses my lips. “I’d do anything for you, Javi.”

“God, I love you.” I pull her in and smash my lips to hers as I hear Andre and Selena snicker in the background.

“Javi, this is incredible!” Selena finally says as we part. She stands and then comes over to us. “Sydney, I can’t believe you might be able to do that.”

All of us stand as we make our way to the kitchen. Andre grabs drinks from the fridge for everyone to celebrate.

“Nothing is guaranteed, but I think the facts of the case are in our favor. And the more I was talking with my dad, the more we decided that there needs to be more open opportunities for expungement in this state. A lot of times there are circumstances surrounding an arrest or conviction that don’t come out until later, and a person should have the right to clear their record after the fact. He’s convinced there are other cases like Javi’s and we might be able to help pass legislation to help more people like him.”

I grab Sydney and spin her around, high on the fact that she’s not only trying to change my life, but the lives of so many others. “You’re amazing, Sydney Matthews.” She giggles before I set her down and kiss her chastely.

“Seriously, Sydney. That’s incredible. Let us know how we can help.” Andre says as he raises his beer, proposing a toast. We all lift our bottles and listen for what he says next.

“To Sydney ... for showing us that first impressions aren’t always correct, that people can take you by surprise, and that true love can be found in a honky tonk.”

We all burst into laughter before we take a drink.

“Thank you, Andre,” she replies, reaching up to brush away a tear. “And I will definitely need your help for what I have planned.”

Pulling her into my side, I squeeze her tightly, thankful that she did spill soda on my crotch that night. Who knows where I’d be right now if it wasn’t for her making me want to be a better man.

Sydney Matthews flipped my world upside down that night, pulling me out of a dark place I was intent on living in in repentance for my choices. But she saw past my surly attitude and forced me to open my mind up to seeing her for who she truly is as a person. In doing so, I fell in love with a woman I thought was somebody else. And in turn she fell in love with me, giving me all of the unexpected things I never knew I wanted.

After we settle in my bed later that night, I pull her into my chest and turn her face toward mine. Staring into her aqua eyes, I bare my soul to her, making sure she knows how much I cherish the fact that she entered my life.

“Princess ... I hope you know that I didn’t want to fall in love. I really didn’t want anything to do with it. But then you appeared and I started to want everything. You’ve changed my life, Sydney. I love you for not only what you are, but for who I am when I am with you. You are everything to me.”

“I love you too, Javi. You helped pull me out of the hole I was living in. You’ve given me courage to stand up for myself and fight for the life I want.”

“Ditto, babe.”

“Now we have nothing but time to spend wrapped up in each other. And I don’t know about you, but that sounds like one hell of a way to live.” Her teasing grin has me growing rock hard in seconds.

“Oh, I agree. And I’m gonna make love to you right now, Sydney Matthews.” I roll on top of her, bracing myself on my forearms as I peer down into her eyes.

“No. Love me *forever*, Javi.”

Epilogue

Javier

Ten Years Later

“That’s it, baby girl. Swing with your right. Now left.”

I’m trying not to hover, but it’s so fucking hard granting your daughter some freedom when you want to help her with everything.

“Am I doing it, Daddy?” My seven-year-old turns to check for my confirmation.

“Yes, you are, Ivy. Keep going, baby.”

She smiles proudly and keeps hitting the bag along with the rest of the kids in the class.

It’s a Tuesday night at Elite Gym, and I’m standing in the corner of the room where the kid’s self-defense class is held. For the past five years, I’ve taught this class, eager for the day when my own daughter would be joining us. Sydney was relentless about waiting until Ivelisse was a little older to start, so she’s a little behind the other kids. But my girl is a natural with the way she’s hitting the bag.

Behind the glass windows I see Ally walk by, waving at me in passing. Taryn’s class is down the hall and Tanner will join the class of older kids that comes next.

I lift my hand up in greeting to say hello just as the timer goes off on my phone. “Alright, time to take a break. Grab some water, kiddos. Great job.”

The kids all struggle with taking their gloves off as parents rush over to help them. Ivy comes over to me as I pop the lid on her water bottle and squirt it into her mouth. I convinced her to let me do this instead of taking her gloves on and off each time, and she agreed it was easier. For a seven-year-old, she’s quite adaptable.

“Thanks, Daddy. That was fun, but man I’m gonna pass out later.” I bend down to her level and watch her with fascination, admiring how much she looks like her mom.

“Is that so?” I laugh.

“Yup. You’re giving me a tough workout. I’m gonna be sore.”

“Well, that’s my job. I did the same thing to your mom ten years ago.”

“Yeah you did. Although, I don’t think I’d be able to keep up with you now.” Sydney’s voice comes from over us as I rise from my crouched position to admire my wife. She’s holding our son, Damian, named after my father, on her hip, and the slight bump of our third child under her shirt is starting to become prominent.

A year after we met and fell in love, I asked Sydney to marry me. I didn’t want to waste any more time without her being my wife. We had a small ceremony of close friends and family at the Gibson Ranch in Newberry Springs. Her mother wanted a country club wedding, but Sydney wasn’t having it. We also bought a house in the same neighborhood as Ally and her family, one I actually had a hand in building.

Around that same time I got a promotion to project manager at Gibson Construction. Forrest was impressed with my work ethic and valued my passion for the job. Stepping into management gave us a little more financial freedom, which came in handy when we had our daughter two years later. Sydney was able to cut down her hours at the firm and focus solely on cases related to the legislation she helped pass to relieve people like me who were convicted of felonies with underlying reasons behind the act. She still works a few days at the firm each week, but she values her time at home with Damian and now the new baby that will be here in five short months.

After Selena came forward with the rape charges, two more women felt brave enough to press charges against Jesus as well. The man was sentenced to twenty years in prison and we celebrated with a trip to Puerto Rico. I was able to meet part of my father’s family and celebrate the fact that I was no longer classified as a felon, and that the piece of shit who caused so much havoc in my life was finally behind bars. I’m pretty sure that trip was when Ivelisse was conceived as well.

Since then we’ve been living the American dream—building a life together, growing our family, and celebrating our success with our family and friends. And after little convincing, I got Andre to agree to add self-defense classes at the gym for children, which has increased business tremendously.

“Uncle Javi!” My nephew Adrian and his little brother, Jaxon, come running up to me, arriving in time for the older children’s class that follows this one.

“Hey, boys. Where’s your mom?” I search the room for my sister, but

don't see her anywhere.

"She's yelling at Dad about something. I'm surprised you don't hear her." Adrian says with a roll of his eyes. Even my sister's kids know about her temper. I don't know how Andre handles her, but they're still going strong after all of these years. In all honesty, they'll probably fight and then fuck each other in his office to cool down. I hate that I know that, but it's true.

My sister found out she was pregnant with twins a few months after Jesus attacked Sydney, so my nephews were born a little less than a year later. I've loved being an uncle, and my mother and Emilio make sure to visit much more often now that there are grandchildren galore.

"Okay. I'm sure she'll be out here in a minute." Or twenty. "Go get your gloves on," I suggest as they run back toward their bags and start taping their wrists.

"Man, they're getting big," Sydney says, pulling my attention back to her.

"Yeah they are." I lean over our daughter and kiss Sydney's lips. "Hey, Princess. How was your day?"

"Pretty good. Damian resisted a nap, so I didn't get as much work done as I wanted. But at least I have more energy now that I'm in the second trimester."

"I know. And don't worry. Once this baby's out, I'll get your ass back in this gym and build up your stamina again."

She grins at me mischievously. "I don't need help with all of my stamina." And she's right. The woman is a sex fiend when she's pregnant. I'm the one who needs more energy to keep up with her.

"Well, we can just keep getting that kind of work out together then, if that's what you want."

"I'll never stop wanting you, Javi," she whispers as I feel a twitch in my dick when she says that. It's been ten years and I still want this woman every second of the day.

"Ditto, babe."

"Daddy? Is it time to get back to the class?" Ivy asks, pulling on my shorts as my eyes shift down to her.

"Yes ma'am. Let's go."

"Yes!" She pumps a fist in the air and then runs back to the bags.

"She sure does like the class, doesn't she?" Sydney adds, watching our daughter bounce in excitement as she adjusts Damian on her hip. The kid is

almost three, but he still loves being held.

“Yup. And I’m glad. It’s important for her to know how to defend herself. This way, she’ll be just as strong as her mom from an early age.” I turn back to my wife, beaming down at her.

“I love you, Javier Montes. We’ve come so far, haven’t we?”

“Damn right, Princess. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You and our babies.”

“Aw,” she hums, reaching up to cup my jaw, sending a flurry of feelings through my body from her touch.

This woman means the world to me. I still can’t believe she’s mine.

“You love me, don’t you, Javi?”

And I answer her the same way I always do when she asks me. “Guilty as charged, Princess.”

THE END

Thank you SO much for reading!

If you enjoyed Sydney and Javier’s story, PLEASE consider leaving a review on [Amazon](#) and/or [Goodreads](#)!

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Acknowledgments

When I first started toying with the idea to write a book back in January of 2019, this idea popped in my head of a lawyer who fell for an ex-con. I wrote it down, and then brushed it aside as more ideas came to me. But when I finished *Emerson Falls*, I knew this was the next story I wanted to tell because Sydney and Javier were talking to me and needed to come out. I loved writing these two, and there is something about a broken hero that just pulls at the heart strings.

This story is loosely inspired by my sister's own love story. She actually fell in love with a guy she knew from high school but hadn't seen in years at a time in her life when she felt like her world was falling apart. Needless to say, things started falling into place for her when this man came into the picture, and they are very happy together more than a year later.

To L: I remember talking about "The Ex-Con Book" so many times while we plotted other books, that I am so glad it's now written. You are one of the best friends I could have asked for and I couldn't do this without you. I love you.

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