



J.S. Scott

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A  
Sinclair  
Novel

The  
Billionaire  
Takes All

The  
Billionaire  
Takes All

THE SINCLAIRS

ALSO BY J.S. SCOTT



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*Nathan's Mate*

*Liam's Mate*

*Daric's Mate*

# The Billionaire Takes All

THE SINCLAIRS

J.S. Scott



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*This book is dedicated to my siblings: Beth, Sandie, and Terry. It's been rough since we lost Mom, but I'm so grateful that we've been able to push through the sad times together. Thank you for everything you do to support me. I love you all.*

# CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)



CHAPTER 26

EPILOGUE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# PROLOGUE



*A Few Years Ago . . .*

“Dude, you’re being a dick.”

Julian Sinclair flipped off his younger brother, Xander, for his negative comment. “Unlike you, I don’t have the luxury of going to see Mom and Dad right now. I’m trying to build a goddamn career!”

Was it so wrong for Julian to want his parents to be proud of their middle son? If that was going to happen, he needed to stay in Los Angeles and work. Julian’s brother Micah already had a successful corporation that he’d built himself. As the eldest, Micah had made his own mark in the world, even though he’d already inherited a billionaire status from their father’s wealth, just as all three of them had when their dad had retired.

Xander, the youngest, was already a music superstar.

All Julian wanted was a chance to prove himself without revealing that he was one of the billionaire Sinclair clan. He’d been busting his ass in Hollywood for years, living the life of a struggling actor to keep himself motivated.

“It’s their anniversary, man,” Xander answered reasonably. “And you haven’t seen them since . . . when? Your college graduation? Five or six years ago? You told them you’d be at the party.”

It *had* been a long time. And yes, he had told his parents that he’d come to their anniversary celebration, but that was months ago. Before he’d gotten the starring role in a movie that meant everything to him. “I’ll call them. I always do.”

Xander scowled at his older brother from his straddled position on a rickety dining-room chair in Julian’s sparsely furnished apartment. “They miss you. Micah can’t make it, either, but he just visited them for a week before he left for

business. You can catch a ride with me. I'm flying there tomorrow. It's just a couple of days."

"I'm not fucking going," Julian answered angrily, glaring at Xander as he tossed his movie script on the old table. He obviously wasn't going to be able to work on it until he got rid of his pesky younger brother.

This movie could be pivotal to his career. The last thing he needed was to be away for a couple of days.

Once he'd made it in the film industry, Julian would make it up to his mom and dad, visit them every month. He missed them, too. "I want to *be* somebody when I see them again," Julian told Xander as he leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his unruly hair in frustration.

"You don't get it," Xander answered sadly. "You *are* somebody. You're their son. They'll love you the same way whether you're mega-successful or not. It's what parents do. Dad admires the fact that you aren't using your money to buy success. He and Mom are both proud of you. All they want is to see you in person."

"I'm busy," Julian snapped. "It can wait. This film I'm taking on right now is special to me. Really special. And I finally got a starring role. This could be my big break." The screenplay was important to him for another reason that he hadn't yet revealed to any of his family. And he wouldn't. Not unless he could make the film successful.

Xander had been *discovered* almost immediately once he'd started his music career. Julian didn't believe for a moment that it was only because his brother was a Sinclair. Xander was talented. Always had been. But the fact that their family was one of the richest in the world certainly didn't hurt to open doors and find connections. Stubbornly, Julian refused to use the Sinclair name to try to launch any opportunities for himself.

He'd been damn lucky to get his current break, and he didn't want to fuck it up.

“Mom and Dad aren’t getting any younger, bro. How long do you think you have?” Xander answered. “They’re both in good health and pretty damn active. But they won’t be around forever.”

“Dad is still playing tennis and golfing like a pro, and Mom can work circles around other women her age and younger. They aren’t going anywhere. I can wait until this movie is done,” Julian insisted.

He was starting to get angry at his little brother for trying to guilt him into going to their parents’ place with him tomorrow.

Considering that he was a music superstar, Xander looked pretty relaxed in a pair of black boots, jeans, and a black T-shirt underneath his dark leather jacket. He never seemed stressed over concerts, touring schedules, recording, or the rest of his busy life. And Xander always . . . *always* put family first. Fame hadn’t seemed to change Julian’s younger brother much at all.

Unfortunately, living close to Xander meant that Julian got frequent visits from his younger brother, since they lived only about fifteen miles apart. Micah, who was headquartered on the East Coast, visited when he was in town for business, so Julian’s interaction with his older brother was sporadic.

It wasn’t that Julian didn’t care about his family, but since he lived a completely different lifestyle, he felt like none of them could relate to his struggles. Being reminded by his siblings and parents that he actually had a portfolio worth billions of dollars, which his father had settled on his kids when he’d retired, could tempt Julian to give in and use his money and connections. It would be so much easier. But it wouldn’t feel the same as making it completely on his own.

Xander rose and kicked the chair out from under his butt, easily catching the back of it to return it to its place against the table. “I give up. I promised the folks I’d do what I could to bring you with me, but I can’t make you understand that you’re being a self-centered asshole to parents who love you regardless of what you’ve achieved.”

Julian rose, furious now. “It’s not like I’m sitting on my ass doing nothing. My career matters, dammit!”

“I know that. Mine matters, too. But your priorities are all fucked up, Julian. We’re lucky to have great parents. All of us were raised in a life of privilege, and unlike our cousins, we had a great mom and dad who’ve always been supportive of whatever our personal dreams might be. I’m never too busy to go see them, because I *want* to spend time with them.”

“Yeah, you were always their precious baby boy,” Julian sneered as he stepped up nose-to-nose with his sibling.

Xander slammed Julian in the chest to push him back. “Bullshit. They never played favorites with any of us and you know it. You just want to justify the fact that you’re a dick. Go ahead. Tell yourself whatever makes you feel better. Just remember, you may regret not seeing them more often someday.”

Julian flinched as Xander walked out of his apartment and slammed the door.

“Fuck him,” he cursed as he strode back to the table and picked up his movie script. “I’ll make it up to Mom and Dad once the movie is done.”

He’d eventually apologize to Xander, too, for his angry words. Honestly, Julian’s parents *hadn’t* played favorites with their children. But he and his brothers were close in age, and Micah had always been brilliant with business and eventually special because he was skilled with extreme sports. Xander had excelled as a gifted musician from a very young age.

*And I’m still trying to find my damn place in the world.*

It wasn’t that Julian hadn’t gotten the same amount of attention. It had just been . . . *different*. He’d been a kid who’d liked books and movies. Pretty boring when one compared his childhood interests with Micah’s and Xander’s talents. But his mom never failed to discuss the books he was reading with him, and his dad took him to movies and shows that he wanted to see, on opening day.

Nothing his parents or brothers had done had caused Julian's discontent. He just wanted to be extraordinary in his own way, which was why he needed to make it without using the Sinclair connections or money.

He forgot Xander's words a few moments later as he focused on movie scenes.

The next time he thought about what Xander had said, it was at his parents' funeral. They were both dead, and Xander was in the hospital clinging to life.

Julian had been wrong. He'd never gotten the chance to make *anything* up to his parents, and Xander had been right.

Julian had what seemed like a million regrets, and even though he wanted to turn back the clock and do things in his adult life with his parents all over again, he couldn't.

There *were* no do-overs, and no second chances sometimes. Life wasn't like a movie or a Broadway show, where you could have multiple takes, rehearsals, dress rehearsals, and then, hopefully, a perfect opening night, or a polished, finished movie after an incredible amount of preparation.

Life was finite and unpredictable.

Unfortunately, Julian grew up and learned that lesson much too late.

# CHAPTER 1



*The Present . . .*

“Order up!”

Kristin Moore cringed as Ned, the cook at Shamrock’s Bar and Grill, slammed another plate down at the service window. The grumpy old man got the job done, but he made sure everyone knew he didn’t like the fact that he was behind the bar instead of in front of it. Ned was a drinker, and Kristin didn’t know from one day to the next whether he’d show up for work. Today was one of those days she wished Ned, along with his shitty attitude, would have stayed home.

*My lucky day! He decided to come to work.*

She finished doing two beers on tap, slamming the lever back in place when she had filled both frosty mugs. Shamrock’s had great beer. It was one thing she could say about the bar. They used a lot of local vendors, something her dad had done from the day he opened the place a few decades ago. Small-business owners here in Amesport tried to support each other whenever possible.

After quickly delivering the drinks, she went to snatch the plate Ned had almost broken, looking down at the sad state of the daily special. The Reuben sandwich looked soggy instead of nicely browned on both sides, and the onion rings were overcooked.

*Dad has to get rid of Ned before his crappy cooking runs him out of business.*

Problem was, her dad was distracted, his brain too full of worry about other things to be bothered with hiring another employee.

Kristin would have done the cooking, but that would leave Ned to handle the bar, and that wasn’t happening. He’d drink more than the customers.

Fighting the unsanitary urge to straighten up the food items on the plate so they at least *looked* better, Kristin delivered the food to one of the tables. Ned had been cooking badly for months. Today, since Shamrock's had a lot of business, she hoped his food *tasted* better than it *looked*.

*Please order dessert.*

She smiled at the middle-aged gentleman as she gave him his food, hoping he'd be hungry enough to try the daily special dessert.

Since Kristin had made it herself, using some of her best friend Mara's incredible products, she knew the wild-blueberry cheesecake was good. It was her mom's recipe, and she'd been making it for years.

Glancing up at the clock, Kristin noticed it was only five p.m.

*Four more hours!*

She was already dragging, having put in a full day at Dr. Sarah Sinclair's office as a medical assistant. The time between now and closing seemed like an eternity.

She was tired.

Her feet were killing her.

She was stuck with a grouchy burger slinger until the dinner hour ended.

And, for once, Shamrock's was actually slammed with customers. It was a Friday night, and the whole weekend would be busy since Amesport was hosting a local art festival. Main Street was closed to traffic, and artists and vendors would be setting up their booths to showcase their art early in the morning.

*Apparently, all of the artists decided to show up early.*

Getting the locale for the event was an attempt to keep the tourists coming, even though summer was long over in the Maine coastal town. Luckily, it was looking like the snow would hold off, so it might be chilly, but the festival should be a success. The town had a backup plan to set up at the



Amesport Youth Center if the weather was bad, but it had been an unseasonably warm fall and early winter.

Amesport really needed some off-season winter events because so much of the town counted on summer tourism. Grady Sinclair, one of several of the billionaire Sinclairs who had settled in Amesport, was doing everything he could to help his wife, Emily, liven up the slow seasons.

“Order up!”

Kristin flinched as the plates hit the steel counter. *Jesus!* She should be used to Ned’s crotchety, loud voice and his preference to try to break the plates rather than get them to the customers, but she still startled with every noisy, disruptive bellow the man let out before he *whacked* the food down. Probably because his declaration was shouted loud enough to hear next door, and she was right in front of him at the bar.

It wasn’t like he *had* to shout. She was only five feet away from the mean-tempered cook.

*Be patient. Be patient. Be patient.*

She tried to rein in her redheaded Irish temper, just like her father did. Her mother was nearly a saint in Kristin’s eyes, and she knew she was much more like her dad: slow to anger, but when she finally reached her melting point, she went off like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

At the moment, with the place so busy and her body so weary, Ned was pushing her closer and closer to Independence Day.

“You don’t need to call out the order so loud,” Kristin told the ornery cook as she lifted up the plates and balanced them on her arm.

Ned looked up and glared at her. “Yes, I do. It’s the only way I can get through the night. Hate this job. In Boston, at least I had some pretty waitresses in short skirts to look at. Don’t have that here in *this* miserable bar.”

Kristin gaped at him, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. What in the hell could she say to that? Her temper flared, not really because he was insinuating that she

was nothing to look at, but because her father had given Ned a chance, even though he had very few references.

No doubt, the obstinate jerk had been fired from previous jobs for his drinking problems. Her dad had trusted that Ned would straighten himself out.

He hadn't.

Kristin knew he'd already been arrested for drunk driving in Amesport, and it was obvious he had no desire to quit drinking.

Studying him from a medical perspective, he had the red nose and bloodshot eyes of a longtime alcoholic, that bleary-eyed stare of a man who couldn't get on the wagon.

She felt sorry for Ned, but she was also angry at him.

Alcoholism was a disease, but her dad had taken Ned at his word that he'd work to straighten himself out, and he hadn't put in a single bit of effort. Her father and the present cook were old Navy buddies, and when Ned had called, her dad had helped . . . as usual. Dale Moore had assisted his friend by finding him a reasonably inexpensive place to live and giving him a job without too many questions. In return, Ned had taken advantage of her dad's friendship and kindness, never even attempting to get help or to attend one single AA meeting.

Without another word, she carried the plates to the customers. When she got back, she told Ned quietly, "Just keep your voice down, okay? It's annoying for the diners."  
*And me!*

She heard him curse none-too-quietly before she turned her back to him and started to carefully mix up some cocktails. She could muddle through bartending, but she was slow with cocktails she wasn't familiar with making. Most of the locals came here for the beer or simple alcoholic drinks. In the summer, a very large percentage of tourists came in to try the microbrews.

"Mai tai," she muttered to herself, her brows crinkling as she reached for the cheat sheet she used for fancier drinks.

“I got it, missy,” a friendly male voice told her confidently as he set out a glass on the counter.

She looked up and saw the kindest face she’d seen in quite some time, a man about her dad’s age who winked at her and gently pushed her aside.

Strangely, he looked like he belonged behind the bar more than she did, and that fact kept her silent for a minute, trying to figure out why he was here.

He talked while he worked. “A great mai tai is deceptively hard to make. Anybody can throw the ingredients together, but they don’t always do it right.” The unknown man started tossing glasses and bottles of alcohol in a fancy juggling act as he alternated pouring ingredients into a shaker. “They shouldn’t be yellow or red. A good mai tai is smooth and tan.”

Kristin knew she should step in and ask what in the world the stranger was doing behind her father’s bar, but she was caught up in his showy style of bartending. It was clear the guy knew how to make a drink. In fact, he knew his way around a bar better than anyone she’d ever seen before.

She finally opened her mouth as he garnished the drink. “Who are you? And why are you behind my bar?”

He put a hand on his chest. “My bar now. From the looks of things, you could use the help.”

Kristin looked around in panic, wondering whether the man was crazy. There were a lot of strangers in town for the festival, and he was obviously an out-of-towner. He was wearing a pair of knee-length shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops—an insane kind of outfit considering it was almost winter in the Northeast.

Her gaze found and locked with a pair of gorgeous blue eyes that had haunted her wet dreams for months, a guy so stunningly gorgeous that her heart skipped a few beats.

It didn’t matter that she knew him, or that they were unfriendly acquaintances. Involuntarily, her body reacted every single time she saw him again.

*Julian Sinclair!*

He was leaning against the bar, grinning at her as his too-azure eyes continued to stare at her mischievously. “He’s your replacement for a while. We have a wedding to attend.”

Kristin felt a pang of sadness over the fact that she wasn’t attending Micah and Tessa’s wedding. She’d grown close to Tessa, a hometown Olympian who had tragically lost her hearing years ago. Since her best friend, Mara, was now married to one of the wealthy Sinclair men, Kristin had slowly come to know and like most of the family . . . well, maybe *except* for Julian. For the most part, he was an annoying pain in her ass.

Tessa was marrying Julian’s older brother, Micah Sinclair. Kristin was one of the few non-family-members invited to the Vegas wedding, and even though Micah was paying all expenses, Kristin couldn’t leave her parents or the bar.

She’d been feeling melancholy since the afternoon, when Sarah had left the office early to fly out to Vegas with her husband.

“I’m not going,” she told Julian with a confused expression. “I already told Tessa I couldn’t make it.”

“You’re going,” Julian answered confidently. “I’m here to pick you up. Tessa would be disappointed if you didn’t go.”

Kristin was more than a little disappointed *herself*. She’d never been to Vegas, and she had desperately wanted to see Tessa’s happy ending after so many years of heartache.

“I can’t make it,” she told him a little more forcefully, sending Julian a warning glance not to argue with her.

Looking directly at him was a mistake. The man was hot enough to melt glaciers in Greenland. It was no wonder he was in high demand as an actor. Not only was he gorgeous, with his artfully messy blond hair and sky-blue eyes framed with lashes any woman would kill for, but he also had a body so toned and fit that Kristin was fairly certain she could bounce a quarter pretty damn far off almost any muscle mass in his entire body.

No man should look quite as sinfully perfect as Julian Sinclair. The *really* unfair part was that he was as talented as he was handsome. With one Academy Award under his belt, and a second movie already a blockbuster hit, Julian was probably one of the most recognized A-listers in Hollywood. In addition, he was also filthy rich, a member of the elite Sinclair family.

Unfortunately, he was also a major prick. Cocky. Bossy. Arrogant. Way too used to getting his own way.

Maybe she *had* seen a little more insightful side of Julian *occasionally* during their last few encounters, but overall, he was still an antagonistic jerk.

“Your bag is in the car, and my jet is waiting. Mara went and packed a bag for you with your mother’s help. Apparently, your parents are more than willing to have somebody fill in for you. They want you to go. They’re happy you’re getting away for a weekend.”

*My parents know I passed up the opportunity to go to Vegas? Bastard! There’s no way Mara would have told Mom and Dad without encouragement from Julian.*

Kristin’s parents were her weakness, and she knew they’d be disappointed if she turned down a trip to Vegas because she was needed to tend the bar. If she’d told her dad that she wanted to go, he would have closed the bar for a few days if necessary. But she hadn’t wanted to do that. Her parents couldn’t afford to lose the weekend revenues.

She wasn’t sure why she was arguing with him. This all had to be some kind of elaborate joke. Julian liked to screw with her for some reason. He seemed to get his kicks from doing it.

*He’s not serious.*

“I can’t,” she told him, turning her head to watch as patrons started moving toward the bar, ordering drinks just to admire the skillful new bartender. “Even if the bar is covered, I need to do lunch and dinner this weekend.”

Julian put his arm around a petite blonde next to him and swaggered over to Kristin's side. "This is Sandie Retzlaff." He nodded to the bartender. "That's her husband, Carl. Sandie can cook, and Carl, as you can see, can handle the bar just fine. He's used to working a busy place. And he loves to show off his skills."

"I'll just go check into the kitchen," Sandie told Julian as she smiled at him and wandered through the door to the food-prep area.

Kristin grabbed the sleeve of Julian's light-blue sweater. "You're joking, right? Sandie and Carl Retzlaff own Retzlaff's Restaurant in California. That's not . . . them, right?" She nodded her head toward the bartender.

"Yep. That's the same dynamic duo. Now that Carl has taught all of his skills to his bartenders, he was getting bored. He wanted a challenge."

"Sandie Retzlaff is a master chef and one hell of a businesswoman." Kristin had heard of Retzlaff's. Most people in the bar or restaurant business knew them at least by reputation. The elegant restaurant was famous throughout the nation for their amazing food and showman bartenders who could toss out some elaborate cocktails.

"Carl's actually damn talented, too. He's won mixology competitions all over the country," Julian added amiably. "Now let's get going. Vegas awaits, and I don't know about you, but I could use a drink and some food."

"My bartender is wearing flip-flops," she answered drily. "Julian, I can't leave Shamrock's and just take off for Vegas."

Leaving on a whim wasn't possible for her. Maybe *Julian* could do it, but she wasn't a Sinclair, and her life just didn't function that way.

Her waking hours were filled with work.

And she *always* had responsibilities.

"Tessa's getting married. You aren't *just leaving*, and it isn't exactly going to affect your parents' business. I persuaded the best two professionals in the country to run

Shamrock's while you're gone. I told you once that I owed you for doing me a favor. You weren't willing to collect. So take advantage of me now."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kristin could see more and more people swarming around the bar to watch Carl. Since when had bartending become a spectator sport? She could hear Carl talking about his years in the Marine Corps while he was doing some pretty precarious tosses with liquor bottles before he garnished several drinks with a flourish.

"I. Can't. Leave." Her voice was tight and irritated. Julian's ruse had gone on long enough.

She didn't know why he'd gone to this much trouble to make her feel guilty, but she didn't really care. There was no need to defend herself or her situation. She just wanted him to leave.

"Of course you can," Julian said with an annoyingly calm tone.

"My cook is a problem," she informed him.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Ned came flying out of the kitchen and landed on his ass behind the bar.

Sandie leaned into the service window as she warned, "And stay out of the kitchen. If you can't even make a decent hamburger without copping an attitude, you're fired."

Kristin bit her lip to keep from smiling as she watched Ned rise to his feet and limp out the door of the bar.

Obviously, the petite master chef had kicked Ned's ass in under a minute. Seeing somebody put Ned in his place was almost worth this whole farce.

"He's not a problem anymore," Julian finally answered drily as he grabbed her hand. "We're out of here."

She tried to shake her fingers from his grip. "No, *we* are not. You can't just walk in here, replace the staff, and expect me to walk out the door with you willingly."

"That's exactly what I expect," he contradicted in a sexy baritone that skittered up Kristin's spine. "Do you really want

to disappoint everybody who wants you to be at Tessa's wedding?"

"Of course not," Kristin denied, feeling angry at herself for giving in to the guilt Julian was laying on so heavily. "But you can't just arrange my life to get what you want." She huffed and started to walk away. "I want to go, but I learned a long time ago that you can't always get everything you want."

"You have no reason *not* to go—other than pure stubbornness." Julian wasn't smiling anymore, and his expression was more determined than amused.

She shrugged. "Think what you want, but I resent you trying to tell me what to do. I'm not one of your employees or part of your fan club."

"No reason to *think*. Your responsibilities are covered," Julian remarked casually. "I was hoping to make it easy for you to go. But I should have known you'd still be stubborn. We'll just have to do this the hard way." He raised his voice. "Hey, Carl. Quarterback skills. We're going forced exit."

Without missing a beat, Carl pulled Kristin's purse out from under the bar and tossed it over the crowd to Julian. It was a perfect throw and an expert one-handed catch.

Kristin was still trying to yank her fingers from his grip when Julian easily picked up her significant weight and slung her over his shoulder like she was barely a burden, then bodily carried her out of Shamrock's without saying another word.



## CHAPTER 2



“Don’t even think about it,” Julian warned as he leaned back on the plush seat of their limousine.

“Think about what?” Kristin asked angrily.

“If you jump from a moving vehicle, you’ll more than likely end up breaking your neck, and that would be a shame. You’d miss Vegas and the wedding.”

It irritated her that he not only had known exactly what she was contemplating, but had quickly come to the same conclusion as her. There was no way she was taking a swan dive from a moving vehicle.

She’d been so shocked by his outrageous behavior that she hadn’t been able to speak until now, even though they’d been riding for several minutes. How he’d gotten the fancy limo down a closed street, she didn’t know. But Kristin was fairly certain it had a lot to do with the chief of police being Julian’s cousin, Dante. The old chief had retired just a few months ago, and Dante Sinclair had taken the promotion when it was offered to him.

Kristin shot Julian a furious glare. Even though it was already getting dark, the vehicle had lights in the passenger area. As far as Kristin could tell, the fancy car had everything, any luxury a person could ever want. Hell, she could throw a damn party in the back of the limo if she wanted. Unfortunately, parties were the *last* thing on her mind.

As she stared at the man across from her, it was impossible not to notice how Julian was sprawled across the seat, looking like he hadn’t just kidnapped a woman from her father’s bar, and like there was nothing he couldn’t do if he wanted to do it. He seemed to exude some kind of alpha-male pheromones that made her uncomfortable. Sure, he was handsome. He was, after all, a superstar. But there was

something about the way Julian seemed comfortable in his own skin that rattled the hell out of her.

Unless he was performing, she highly doubted he gave a damn how he looked. But even dressed carelessly in a pair of jeans that had obviously seen some wear, and topped with a light-blue fisherman's sweater, he still wore those clothes confidently. If she was being completely honest, casual was a good look on him. If she added his frequently spiking blond hair that made him look like he had just rolled out of bed—but in a sexy, totally unfair, hot kind of way—and his expressive blue eyes, she didn't doubt that women all over the world wanted to be the one to catch his attention.

Tearing her eyes away from the tempting sight of his big body lounging casually on the seat, she asked, "Why do you care if I jump out of the car? I haven't even figured out why you're here."

"I told you why I'm here. Mara said she couldn't persuade you to come, so I decided to swing by and pick you up." He paused before adding, "Turns out I had to pick you up literally."

*Smartass, cocky bastard!*

"You didn't pick me up. You kidnapped me," she accused, still feeling like everything that was happening was surreal. "And you left my parents' livelihood in the hands of a man in loud shorts and flip-flops."

"Carl thinks they're sexy. He likes to impress the ladies. I don't think you saw his 'signature shake,' but customers seem to love it. And in all fairness, I *did* tell him we were going to the coast. He just didn't realize which one until he and Sandie got into the jet."

Kristin crossed her arms over her breasts and shot Julian a stubborn look. "He's married. He shouldn't care about the ladies."

"He doesn't mess around. He just likes to attract attention. He's actually the best bartender in the country. By the time we get back, he'll have increased your parents' business tenfold.

Between Sandie's culinary skills and Carl's bartending expertise, you'll have a line waiting to get into Shamrock's. Look, Sandie and Carl are friends. They're doing me a big favor. Can't you just let go of your pride and admit you wanted to go to the wedding? You look exhausted."

Julian lifted a brow in question. "Maybe I wanted you to be at the wedding. Maybe I didn't want to be the only guy present without a date. Maybe I never forgot how it felt to kiss those adorable, pouty lips of yours, or the chemistry between us." He hesitated for a few seconds before adding, "After I had a taste, you had to know I'd be back for more."

Kristin opened her mouth and then closed it again, letting what he said sink in. "It was just a kiss. It was nothing."

*Sweet baby Jesus!* Did he really need to mention that day in the bar—not so long ago—when he'd had her moaning for more as he claimed her with an embrace she'd certainly never forgotten?

The car seemed to be getting warmer and warmer as she recalled exactly how she'd felt that day.

*Desperate.*

*Wanting.*

*Free . . . if only for a moment in time.*

A sigh escaped her lips unchecked, and she chastised herself as Julian searched her face, as though he was looking for something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"It wasn't nothing," Julian replied huskily. "It was something."

Kristin didn't want to recall that heated encounter. She needed to focus on the fact that he'd bodily hauled her away from her parents' bar and tossed her into the back of the limo like he had every right to do so.

She took a deep breath, unable to stop her body from reacting to his scent. It was everywhere in the vehicle, a tantalizing aroma that made her think of mint, musky sandalwood, and pure, unadulterated sex.

*Not. Going. There.*

She wrestled with her instinct to cross the space between them, straddle his body, and find out how intoxicating it would be to have full-body contact with a man who probably knew exactly how to please a woman.

“You really expect me to believe that you detoured all the way to the East Coast just so you could have a date? You have women falling all over you in California. Why couldn’t you just pick one of *them*? I’m not your type, and I’m certainly not a woman you’d want to be seen and photographed with, Hotshot.”

She resorted to using the nickname she’d given him from the first day they’d met. He’d nonchalantly referred to her as “Red,” a nickname she’d always hated. So she’d come up with one to sling back at him. Not so much because he’d been arrogant—although he definitely was—but it reminded her that she had nothing in common with him.

She wasn’t rich.

She wasn’t a movie star.

And she definitely was not an adoring fan.

Kristin worked from early morning until late at night to keep her family afloat. She didn’t have time to think about hot kisses from a movie star. She and Julian might cross paths occasionally, but they were from different universes.

Kristin wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans, resisting an attempt to straighten out her messy ponytail, and wishing she had donned a nice shirt instead of the sweatshirt she was wearing with the Shamrock’s logo.

*It doesn’t matter how I look. I’m not out to impress Julian Sinclair.*

“Yes, I detoured here for *you*, and no, I don’t want us photographed. The last thing I want is for you to have to live the way I do.”

He sounded so forlorn that he had Kristin’s attention now. Julian Sinclair had everything a man could ever dream about.

He'd been a Sinclair billionaire long before he'd risen to stardom. What could be so bad about that?

"How is your life?" she asked curiously.

"Spent hiding from the press, hunted like a prey animal every time I step out the door. I can never assume I'm alone, because there are cameras everywhere. People break into my homes, and I've lost track of how many times I've changed my phone number," he rumbled. "I might get attention, but it isn't always pleasant."

"I'd think you'd like that. Well, except for maybe the burglary part. You made it. You're an A-lister. Everybody wants you."

"The fame is a part of what I do. I've been in the public eye since the day I was born because I'm a Sinclair, but never to this extent. I'd never want you to come under fire by the media. They're fucking relentless."

His words made her think about the day he was being pursued by a rabid group of fans. Kristin had taken pity on him that day and helped him get the women off his tail. Maybe it had been the quick flash of vulnerability on his face that had made her help him. He'd reminded her of a fox being pursued by a hungry pack of hounds.

Honestly, she hadn't been thinking about her quality of life when she had said he wouldn't want to be connected to her with pictures. She'd been thinking more along the lines that she wasn't anything like the women she'd seen him photographed with in the past: A-list actresses, supermodels, and other beautiful women in the film business. "Nobody would believe we were dating anyway," she shot back at him. "In case you haven't noticed, my hair is bright red and unruly, I have freckles everywhere, and I'm overweight and dumpy. Like I said . . . not your type."

She wasn't exactly insecure, but she was realistic. Women like her didn't go out on dates with men like Julian Sinclair. She was comfortable with the genes she'd inherited, and resigned to the fact that she'd never be model thin. Her body wasn't built that way.

There was silence in the back of the limo as Julian's gaze lazily swept over her face and body, his expression revealing nothing. "My dick doesn't agree, and neither do I," he countered.

*Damn him! He's trying to disarm me by being outrageous. Does he really think I'll fall for his bullshit?*

"Stop looking at me like that," she insisted irritably, knowing he was just playing with her. He had to be.

He straightened up and leaned forward, his hands on his rock-hard thighs. "Like what?" he questioned in a low, husky baritone.

Kristin leaned back into her seat to put more distance between them. "Like you find me attractive," she blurted out. "I don't like it."

"It's not like I'm thrilled about sporting wood every time I see you, Scarlet. But I'm not going to deny that I do."

She lifted a brow. "Scarlet?"

He shrugged. "You don't like to be called *Red*."

"I'd prefer not to be referred to as a color shade, either," she told him huffily.

"I don't exactly like being a hotshot," he replied, his lips forming a small grin as he looked at her in challenge.

Kristin looked away from him long enough to realize that they were almost to the airport outside of town. Panicked, she put her nose to the glass window to try to see landmarks before turning to him again. "Enough! You have to take me back, Julian. You've had your fun."

His grin got bigger. "We haven't had *any* fun yet. But I'm sure you'll learn how to smile when we get to Vegas."

"I can't go to Vegas. I can't. This joke stops here." Kristin was starting to become concerned that Julian really *was* going to get her on his plane, whether she wanted to go or not.

How far did his nonhumorous practical joke go? The situation was so brazenly outrageous that she was starting to

feel like she was being *punked*.

“You’re coming,” he answered arrogantly, leaning back in his seat like he had every right to tell her exactly what to do.

*Jesus!* Was it possible he was serious? That this really wasn’t all a joke? He looked pretty unrelenting and serious now.

Had Mara really packed her suitcase, with her parents’ cooperation? What if he really did have her things in the trunk?

“This isn’t a joke, is it?”

“I never said it was,” Julian replied calmly. “My oldest brother is getting married, something I thought would never happen. Your friends are all going to be there. Do you really want to stay here in Amesport and miss the chance to see Tessa and Micah get married?”

He was looking at her expectantly, waiting for her answer.

His comment about giving up things she wanted sliced her through her heart. She’d been missing out on things most of her life, and she didn’t regret doing it. But sometimes it did make her feel different, and sometimes it downright hurt.

Her heart started to beat hard against her chest wall, and she licked her lips anxiously as she realized that Julian really *was* here to pick her up for the wedding.

Her indignation still simmered, but she had calmed down enough to feel her stomach begin to roll.

“I can’t go.”

“Of course you can. Your suitcase is in the trunk, and everything is arranged. Don’t be stubborn, Scarlet. Take a weekend away and enjoy yourself. It’s not going to kill you. How often do you get an all-expenses-paid weekend away?”

The vehicle came to a halt, and Kristin fumbled with the handle to get out.

She didn’t *ever* get a vacation. It wasn’t the way her life worked. She couldn’t just fly off to Vegas at a moment’s

notice. It wasn't that she didn't desperately want to go. In fact, she'd come close to giving in to Mara's persuasion and asking her dad if he could cover Shamrock's for the weekend. But she knew she was going to have to tend the bar. It wasn't a good weekend for her to be away.

Besides, there was her other embarrassing problem . . .

She scrambled to get out of the car, but Julian blocked her exit. "You can't run away now. We're at the airport."

Gritting her teeth, she told him angrily, "Let. Me. Out."

"Kristin? What's wrong?"

Panicked, she started to claw at the door. "Hurry. Let me out. Please."

Julian opened the door and got out, grabbing her by the arm and then quickly pulling her from the car.

Kristin gulped for air, oblivious to the cold. "Shit!"

"What the hell is wrong?" Julian asked, sounding confused.

Kristin didn't answer. She couldn't. Turning to avoid Julian, she promptly bent over with her hands on her knees and started to vomit.



# CHAPTER 3



“Is she comfortable now?”

“I think so,” Julian mumbled into the phone, answering his cousin Dante’s wife, Sarah, who was a physician in Amesport. His cousin and his wife were already in Vegas for Micah’s wedding. Sarah had been the first person he’d called the minute he realized Kristin was sick. “She ate, and she’s had a dose of Dramamine. She says she’s feeling better.”

“Good. We’ll see you soon,” Sarah answered happily. “I’m so glad you’re bringing Kristin. She could use a break from Amesport. I tried to convince her. We all did. You must be more persuasive than we are.”

Julian couldn’t help but feel remorseful as he thought about how Kristin had looked sitting in the airplane seat after he’d carried her on board. She’d been pale and weak, her usual spunky attitude gone, which he’d actually missed. Seeing her sick and defeated had eaten at him. After he’d fed her, she’d slunk away quietly with her suitcase to clean up. Shit! Maybe she had gained some color after eating and taking some medication. Maybe she wasn’t puking her guts out anymore, but he still felt like an ass. How in the hell could he have known that she suffered from motion sickness? He’d never traveled with her before.

Why hadn’t she said anything as soon as they’d gotten in the car?

“Is it safe? I mean, will she get sick again?” he asked, not wanting to miss anything that would help Kristin to feel better.

“I doubt it,” Sarah replied, talking louder because of the casino background noise. “Make sure she keeps getting small meals with lots of protein, and give her two more tablets in four hours. It’s a long flight.”

Julian knew it would take more than four hours for them to land in Vegas. “Okay. Anything else?” he asked anxiously.

“That’s it. She’ll be fine, Julian. You sound stressed. Motion sickness isn’t fatal. If she’s feeling better, you can get going.”

*Easy for Sarah to say.* She was a damned physician. Julian had never felt so helpless as he’d stood and supported Kristin’s limp body while she’d been throwing up, continuing to heave even after she’d emptied what little was in her stomach.

He and Sarah hung up after he’d gotten the itinerary for the wedding plans the next day.

Impatiently, he drummed his fingers on the wood table in front of him, watching the door to the bedroom after he’d given the pilot permission to start rolling.

*Where in the hell is she? What if she’s sick again?*

He rose and strode to the back of his private jet where the bedroom was, wondering if he should knock on the bathroom door.

Glancing around the bedroom, he saw Kristin’s suitcase on the bed, open and obviously searched through for something to wear.

He grinned as he looked around the plush interior of the jet. He’d resisted getting his own air transportation for years, wanting to use as little money as possible to work his way to the top of his field. Julian had wanted to make it on his own, never using the Sinclair dynasty to propel him to the top. He’d lived in a small, crappy apartment, paying his dues in Hollywood and making a living however he could until he clawed his way up the ladder.

There was a certain satisfaction in knowing that almost no one in Hollywood had known he was related to the billionaire Sinclair family and that he was actually obscenely wealthy himself. Sinclair was a common last name, and nobody had ever asked. Very few of his closest friends had even known, and the few who did hadn’t outed him. Julian had struggled right along with them as he’d built a career like a normal

person, brick by brick, year by year, getting a little bit closer to a starring role in a movie by playing any role he could get.

When he'd finally reached the pinnacle he'd always dreamed about as a kid, his identity had inevitably been discovered. And when he finally decided to spend some of his money, he hadn't spared any cost in getting the best private jet money could buy. Not spending and just investing had made Julian even richer, and he had more money than he could spend in several lifetimes. He commanded a very high price for his films now, too, and he'd earned that money on his own talent.

Having done without for over a decade had made him realize how little he really needed, but he *had* enjoyed spending it on a few toys after his real identity was revealed. His jet had been his ultimate splurge. If he was going to travel like he did, comfort was a priority.

His bedroom and bathroom might not be enormous, but they were loaded with every necessity a person required to travel long distances comfortably.

Frowning as he heard Kristin fumbling with the doorknob, he moved forward and almost ran into her as she exited the bathroom.

Moving back to survey her face, Julian could tell she was feeling better. She was dressed in a fresh pair of jeans and a green sweater that made her damp hair brighter and sexier than he'd ever seen her before. Hell, not that it mattered. His cock was instantly hard no matter what she was wearing.

He remembered that she'd referred to herself as overweight, which was far from reality. Kristin had a curvy body, a small waist, and a nice, full ass that had left him stroking himself off more than once to thoughts of having his hands all over every one of her naked curves as he brought her to a screaming climax that she'd never forget.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly as he stared down into a pair of emerald eyes that made his gut ache.

“Yeah. I think so,” she answered, moving around him to close her suitcase.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, feeling even worse as he looked at her mortified expression. “I didn’t know you had motion sickness.”

Looking away from him, she admitted, “I’ve had it since I was a kid. My mom finally started to let me ride up front and it got better. If I’m driving, I’m fine. If I’m sitting in the front seat, I’m fine. But put me in the back of a car where I can’t see where I’m going, and I’ll be throwing up by the end of the ride.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to go to Vegas?” He took her by the hand and led her to a plush cream seat across from him at the dining area, not liking the fact that she’d stopped arguing with him. That meant she still wasn’t herself.

“Partly,” she confessed, putting her palms flat on the table as the plane started to move. “We’re leaving?” she squeaked.

He nodded. “Fasten your seat belt.”

He’d let her face the front, his back to the nose of the plane.

“Julian, this is crazy.”

He smiled, knowing she was getting her spunk back again. “Then let’s be crazy, Scarlet. Run away with me for a few days. Let’s go to Micah and Tessa’s wedding and have a good time in Vegas. You have to be back for work on Monday, and I have to leave to shoot on location. In the meantime, let’s just relax. Everything is taken care of, and you have no reason not to go.”

He watched as she chewed on her bottom lip, obviously thinking about the alternatives. “Then you get your way. I hate that. I have a feeling you get what you want way too often.”

“Hardly ever,” he lied, standing to fasten her seat belt and then sitting down across from her again and buckling up himself.

“Why are you really doing this? Maine is a long way out of your way to pick up a wedding guest.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I never stopped thinking about that sexy kiss you gave me.”

Her face flushed as she answered, “I gave *you*? You kissed *me*, remember?”

Shaking his head, he replied, “I distinctly remember you throwing yourself at me, Scarlet.”

Honestly, he’d been fucking desperate, and he’d been tempted to pin her to the bar and nail her on the spot. Unfortunately, that hadn’t been possible. Maybe she hadn’t initiated that kiss, but she’d responded. Her hot capitulation, and then her eager participation, had made him damn near crazy.

“You wish,” she snapped back.

“Yeah, actually, I do.”

Kristin sighed. “Does Hollywood make you feel like you have to flirt with every woman you meet? We used to just fight.”

“Foreplay,” he answered with a grin.

“Pervert,” she replied with a little less rancor.

“Truce, Kristin? For just a few days? Micah and Tessa will only have one wedding day.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him, but her lips were starting to twitch, and Julian was gratified to see her slowly softening. “Why should I stop fighting with you after what you did?”

“Because I’ve seen you puke? We have to be friends after that. I even held back your hair for you.”

“It was in a ponytail.”

Okay . . . it had been, but he’d held back the loose strands for her. Didn’t that count? “I tried. Truce?” he asked again.

She was trying not to laugh, and that made Julian glad that he'd bullied her just a little. Kristin had always had a sense of humor, dry and sarcastic as it might be at times.

She twirled a damp lock of hair with her fingers. "I'll think about it."

After he felt the plane lift off, he grumbled, "Think harder."

*Christ!* He was sporting a seriously hard dick watching her twirl her curly hair around her finger. All Julian could think about was seeing that fiery mass spread across a pristine white pillow while he pounded into her until he was sated.

She laughed. Not one of the coy giggles he was used to, but a sexy, throaty sound that made him instantly harder.

"I'm not sure I want to be friends with you. You're arrogant, bossy, high-handed, and always determined to get your own way," she mused.

"You've never gotten to know my nicer side," he argued, starting to wonder if he'd want to be friends with himself. Maybe he *was* a prick. But there was something about Kristin that made him want to be a better man.

She formed an expression of mock surprise. "You mean you have a nicer side?" She chewed on her lip as though she was trying to find something good to say. "You are a good tipper," she said helpfully.

He remembered the night he'd left her an outrageously large tip when he'd been in Shamrock's with Micah, helping his cousin Evan to get through his broken heart.

"I never thanked you for that," she said softly. "It came at a time when I really needed it."

Her words were sincere, and Julian swallowed hard, wishing he'd left another few thousand. The thought of his proud Kristin ever hurting for anything made him majorly pissed off. "You're welcome," he acknowledged simply. "So are we calling a cease-fire for now?"

"It won't last," she warned.

“Why?”

“Because you’ll do something else to piss me off.” She laid her palms back on the table as the jet started to climb.

He laughed just because she was positive that they couldn’t be civil for very long. There was something about the way she judged him as a person instead of a superstar or a rich Sinclair that made him want to please her. And he really hadn’t given a shit about anyone’s opinion of him for a very long time.

“You okay?” he questioned as he looked at her concerned expression and the placement of her hands.

“Yeah. Sometimes if I put my hands on something tangible, it helps.”

“Sarah told me the medicine would help.”

“It does. I’m fine. Really.”

She didn’t look fine, and Julian hated that. “You look nervous,” he observed.

“I’ve never flown before. It’s . . . different.”

Julian knew that she was almost twenty-eight, several years younger than he was, but still, he wasn’t sure how it was possible that she’d never been on a plane. “Why? The motion sickness?”

Kristin shook her head. “No. I’ve just never had the chance.”

He watched as she seemed to visibly relax. “No travel?”

“Only by car. I’ve never gone far enough to need to fly.”

He’d found out enough about her life that her answer made sense. “So I’m your first?”

Kristin rolled her eyes. “The *plane ride* is my first,” she retorted and raised a brow. “Maybe I haven’t flown, but don’t you think a twenty-eight-year-old virgin would be a rarity?”

Her question made Julian think about Kristin with other men. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. He didn’t want to

contemplate her being intimate with anybody except him. Possessiveness clawed at his gut, and he clenched his fists on his thighs to keep from grabbing her and making her forget there had ever been other guys.

Slowly, he calmed himself down. He didn't need to be her first.

But he was damn certain he was going to be her last, best, and only from now on.



# CHAPTER 4



Okay . . . maybe Kristin *hadn't* been with a *ton* of men, but she wasn't about to share her sexual history with Julian Sinclair. Yeah, she'd only been with two guys, two boyfriends that had never worked out, but that was *her* business.

Julian wanted a truce, and Kristin could agree to that . . . for now. But she and Julian were always at each other's throats, so it wouldn't last long.

*Foreplay?*

For her, the attraction had always been hidden beneath the surface, kept at bay only by being on the defensive with him. He probably *did* have good qualities. She had just never wanted to look at them. It was easier to keep her distance. Besides, they really did have very little in common.

*It's only for a weekend, a special few days off work that I never have. I can manage to tolerate his bossiness for that long.* "Okay," she finally relented. "If you stop being a high-handed jerk, I'll stop fighting with you for a few days."

He nodded, a stormy look on his face as he inclined his head.

"Drinks?" The flight attendant stopped beside the table, a beautiful woman with rich dark hair, a skinny body, and wearing a dress with heels.

Julian asked for a beer and then looked at her.

"Ginger ale?" she asked tentatively. She had no idea what they stocked on this plane, but her stomach had settled, and she wanted to keep it from rebelling again. Living through the humiliation of puking in front of Julian once was enough.

The woman nodded and walked away, so Kristin assumed the bar was well equipped. "Nice jet," she mumbled, still not able to quite take in the opulence of the aircraft. Maybe she'd

never flown, but she'd seen what a normal airplane looked like on the inside. And it *never* appeared this comfortable on TV.

The seating area was in sections, but all of it was done in cream leather. There was a couch along the wall in the front, some plush leather loungers, and the seats with a table in between that she and Julian were presently occupying. The bedroom and bathroom had been a luxury she hadn't expected, but she had taken full advantage of the facilities to feel human again.

"I like it. I avoided spending money when I was building a career. I wanted to be successful on my own. If I had to fly, I used Micah's or Xander's jet or just flew commercial."

"What's it like to fly in a regular plane?" Kristin was curious since she'd never stepped foot on anything that flew.

"Hell," he admitted. "Especially in economy. No legroom, and if you get stuck next to somebody who doesn't believe in deodorant, you're screwed for however many hours the flight lasts."

Kristin laughed, finding it hard to imagine Julian stuck in a small economy seat. The man took up space. But just the fact that he'd lived like a normal person made her soften a little. "I can understand why you didn't want people to know who you were, but weren't you ever tempted to tell anybody?"

"Once," he answered thoughtfully. "A woman I was dating. In the end, I was glad I didn't. Seems she didn't want to be with a struggling actor. She wanted somebody to help her get upward mobility. She wanted to fuck me, but she didn't really want to be with me."

He was aloof, but she could hear the tiny thread of bitterness in his tone. "She hurt you. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. Not long after I finished college."

"You went to college?" Since he was an actor, she'd just assumed he hadn't continued on after high school.

"I went to Juilliard. My dad wanted me to chase my dreams, but he also wanted me to be educated when I did."

“Your father must have been a smart man,” Kristin concluded. She paused before adding, “I’m sorry about your parents and Xander.”

She knew about what had happened to them. Almost everyone knew now. It was an unthinkable tragedy. Both of Julian’s parents murdered, and although Xander had come through his injuries alive, he would probably bear the emotional and physical scars of the incident forever.

“Thanks,” he acknowledged, then changed the subject. “So what were your dreams when you were a kid? Did you always want to be in medicine?”

She nodded her head. “I wanted to be a doctor when I was young.”

“Why didn’t you pursue it?”

“It wasn’t realistic for me. But I love what I do. Working with Sarah is wonderful. She’s a good doctor. The patients love her. I’m pretty happy doing exactly what I do now.” She didn’t regret not being a doctor, since she’d had other priorities when she graduated high school. Luckily, she was still able to do what she loved. “How’s the movie going?”

“Almost done. I just need to shoot on location for a few weeks.”

“Is it better than the last action movie?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen the whole thing put together yet, but the plot is pretty thin.”

“What’s next?” she asked curiously.

“I’m not sure. You were right when we were talking in the bar and you said movies can be made for simple entertainment. They do help people get away from their lives if they need to for a little while. But I’ll probably wait for the right script to come along after this film is done rather than do a big-budget picture where the special effects overtake the plot. I want to do something . . . different.”

“Something like your first movie?” It had been a tearjerker about a bipolar man and his struggles with the

mental condition.

He laughed. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“How do you know that the right film will ever come along?”

He shrugged. “If it doesn’t, I’ll wait until I finish writing my current screenplay.”

“You write, too?” Now she was really intrigued.

“I wrote my first movie. That’s how I ended up being the lead. Getting it into the hands of somebody who would read it was hell. But I finally found a guy who wanted to produce the movie and they gave me the starring role after I went through multiple auditions. They decided nobody else could do the lead like the guy who had written the screenplay. I doubt I would have even been asked to audition if I didn’t already have my foot in the door. I actually made it on my writing, not my acting.”

“But you got an Oscar,” she answered defensively.

“Two, actually. One for best screenplay, and the other for best actor. But I wouldn’t have even had a shot at a leading role if nobody had picked up my screenplay.”

He was good. Damn good. His first movie had been insightful, deep, and a film that was in-your-face gritty. She’d seen it several times, and she bawled her eyes out every single time. “I didn’t know you wrote it. It was fantastic.” She might not like him, but she admired his talent.

“I had a friend who was bipolar. He was my inspiration.”

“What’s the next one about?”

Julian was silent for a moment before he answered. “I started a manuscript about a drug addict, a man who was driven to drugs to escape.”

“Like Xander,” she concluded, an encouraging note in her voice. She knew Julian had to be concerned about his youngest brother, and if he wanted to talk, she’d listen.

“Yeah. But I didn’t know how it ended, or all the facts about how it began. So I started something else and put that one away for now. It was too personal. This one is kind of a bittersweet love story. Totally fictional this time.”

Kristin’s heart melted. She could see how much Julian cared about his brother, so much that he couldn’t write a story that reminded him of Xander’s struggles. “He’s in rehab,” she reminded him softly. “He can change.”

“He *has* changed. Unfortunately, it’s not for the better. Hell, he used to be the nicest, biggest-hearted Sinclair. Now I don’t know him anymore.”

“Then he has the core of a nice guy.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“But he wasn’t always that way,” Kristin argued.

“He’s my little brother. They’re always a pain in the ass. We fought, and we disagreed like most siblings do sometimes. But he was a hell of a good person. His fame never went to his head. He was always well grounded and kind. Now he’s just an asshole. I just hope he dries out.” Julian sat back and ran a hand through his hair in apparent frustration. “Shit! I don’t blame him for being depressed. He had to watch our parents die in front of his eyes. Their death almost destroyed all of us. The way it happened, so damn much gone in just seconds. But it’s like we lost our little brother, too. He’s alive, but he isn’t the sibling we knew anymore. I can’t get through to him, but I can’t let him go,” Julian rasped.

“He has to want to live clean, Julian. It’s not you.” Kristin had never had an addict in her family, but she’d worked with plenty in her job as a medical assistant. “If he’s not willing to try, nothing you say will matter. Give it some time. He’s stayed at the rehab center. That’s something to be positive about.”

She was gratified that after a few moments, Julian started to grin. “Are you trying to make me feel better, Scarlet?”

Kristin shrugged, trying not to return his infectious smile. “You did hold back my hair when I threw up. Isn’t that what

friends do?”

Julian was quiet, pausing as he watched her.

Her heart beat just a little bit faster as their gazes met. Her breath caught as she saw the predatory look in his beautiful blue eyes.

“I think we both know this is a hell of a lot more than friendship we’re feeling,” he answered in a husky tone. “But I’ll take it . . . for now.”

Instead of letting the moment pass, she asked breathlessly, “Why are you pursuing this? Okay. Yeah. I’m attracted to you. I think probably most women in America think you’re a handsome guy. But I don’t understand why you want to push this with *me*.”

“Because I have to,” Julian answered mysteriously. “I can’t *not* talk about it.”

*Damn!* It was an answer without *really* being an answer. Obviously he wasn’t going to clue her in on why he’d come all the way to Amesport to make sure she got to the wedding. And he wasn’t going to explain why he kept looking at her like she was . . . well . . . as beautiful as a cover model that he was lusting after.

They were interrupted as their drinks arrived, and Julian asked the flight attendant to bring them a light meal.

“I’m not hungry,” Kristin said, smiling at the gorgeous woman who gave her an ice-cold ginger ale in a fancy crystal glass and a napkin.

“Bring it to her anyway,” Julian demanded. He shot Kristin a pointed look not to argue as the woman left to go get the meals.

“I said I’m not hungry,” she whispered to him angrily.

He lifted a hand to cut her off. “Dr. Sarah’s orders. She said you needed small meals to keep the nausea away.”

“You talked to Sarah?” Kristin asked, surprised.

“You were sick. Who else would I call? I’d think that you trust her medical advice. You work with her.”

*Caught!*

What could she say to that comment? Not only was Sarah her boss, but Kristin trusted her more than any other doctor she knew. “If I didn’t think she was a great physician, I wouldn’t be working with her,” she confessed. “Why did you call her? I was just motion sick.”

She knew she was being difficult, but Julian was making her crazy. Even when he was being high-handed, he didn’t seem to think he was.

“I was worried,” he confessed without hesitation.

Kristin toyed with her glass, swiping at the condensation with her napkin. *Nobody* worried about her except occasionally her parents or Mara. And for quite some time, her mom and dad had been too consumed with other things to fret over their only child. They knew she was capable of taking care of herself. She took care of *them* now.

Although she couldn’t tell Julian, he’d totally disarmed her with three simple words. If he’d come back with a smartass comment, she could handle that. But when a friend did something out of concern for her well-being, it was a little . . . disconcerting, maybe even touching.

She’d suffered a simple incident of motion sickness, something she’d had all her life, a difficulty that rarely popped up. But he’d called her boss and friend, a doctor, who could confirm he was doing everything right.

“Thanks. But I told you I’d be fine,” she reminded him.

“I was still worried,” he answered honestly. “You were pale, and you were sick. How could you be sure it wasn’t something else?”

She smiled, unable to hold it back. He *had* been concerned because she’d gotten sick, and it was a novelty for her, something she wasn’t quite accustomed to, but it was . . . nice. “Believe me, I know the feeling of motion sickness. I’ve

experienced it enough over the years, but I've learned to avoid situations where I actually get that sick."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was angry. I assumed what you were doing was all a joke. And I didn't want it to go on any longer. Maybe I thought you were just making fun of me. I just wanted to get back to the bar. Honestly, I didn't even think of my little problem until we were almost to the airport."

He took a slug of beer from a frosted mug before answering. "No joke," he rasped. "Why in the hell would you ever think that?"

"Because rich, amazing superstars that look as hot as you do don't kidnap women like me." She glanced at him over her glass as she sipped her soda.

"You think I'm hot?" He raised a brow with a smirk of satisfaction on his face.

Kristin rolled her eyes, irritated that he was trying to embarrass her. She decided to retaliate, using his irritating sexual references by slinging them back at him. "Yes, Julian. I have fantasies every night about you. My vibrator needs new batteries at least every other day, and I nearly swoon every time I see your picture," she told him sarcastically as she fanned herself with her napkin.

He leaned back in his chair, a mischievous smile on his handsome face. "Good . . . because I've been having the same problem lately. I think about kissing every freckle on your beautiful face, and I dream about making you smile. I want to see if you have those adorable freckles everywhere on your body. And if you do, I want my mouth on them, too. I stroke myself off in the shower just thinking about burying my face between your thighs and feasting until you come so hard that you can't say anything except my name. But it isn't enough. I want you desperate. Begging me to fuck you. I want to see that beautiful, curly, sexy red hair on my pillow while I bury myself so deep inside you that you never want me to leave." He took another large gulp of his beer before he finished, "So I guess we have the same thoughts."



She squirmed in the plush leather seat, her core clenching with need and her nipples as hard as precious gems. *Jesus!* She couldn't play sexual games with this man, because he had no problem and felt absolutely no embarrassment at blurting out whatever he wanted to say.

Unwilling to let him win, she said suggestively, "You never think about having my hands and mouth on you, sucking you off until you beg for mercy?" She ran her finger along the rim of her glass slowly, deliberately.

"I'd be fucking begging for more," he growled as he surged forward and reached out to grab her wrist, stopping her caressing motion on the crystal. "Don't keep playing this game with me, Scarlet. You'll lose. I'll have you bent over the table naked in about ten more seconds."

She shivered at the warning tone of his voice, finally realizing she was playing with fire. Licking her lips nervously, she realized he was serious. "Why?" she whispered, confused because this was much more than a game, and the intensity she clearly saw in his expression was almost frightening.

It wasn't scary because she feared Julian. It was terrifying because her body reacted to every single emotion he displayed, feeling like they echoed her own.

"Why? I'll tell you why, Scarlet. Because I want to fuck you so badly that I won't be able to stop myself!" he grumbled, releasing her hand so she could rest it on the table. "You're traveling, and you're sick. It's the only thing keeping me from pinning you against the nearest solid object and doing what I've wanted to do since the moment I met you."

She gaped at him. "We don't like each other."

"Oh, I like you. Maybe a little too much," he grumbled as he sat back in his chair again, guzzled the last of his beer, and placed the empty mug on the table with more force than necessary.

*Foreplay?*

Kristin grudgingly admitted to herself that she'd liked him, too. But he'd been just a little too rich, just a little too

handsome, just a little too funny, and more than just a little dangerous. Her instinct had been to push away the impossible.

Julian Sinclair had created an immediate fight-or-flight instinct deep inside her. Since she'd never been the type who ran away, she'd fought with him. They'd been mostly slinging insults at each other ever since.

When she thought about the kindness he'd shown in the past, from the large tip to the compliments he'd tried to give her that she'd shoved back in his face, she was starting to understand why she'd reacted so violently to him.

"I've always liked you, too," she admitted. "But you annoy me."

"I get under your skin, sweetheart, just like you get under mine."

He did. She couldn't deny it. Julian Sinclair aroused some complicated feelings that she couldn't explain. "Maybe we can discuss what we do to irritate each other and we can try to get along. What can I do to make you feel less uncomfortable? How can I make me feel more like a friend than a woman you want to screw?"

He shook his head slowly. "All you have to do is breathe. I've been fighting the attraction between us since we met. I'm not doing it anymore." He crossed his muscular arms over his chest and stared at her, as though he was waiting for some kind of answer.

She nearly knocked over her glass as she fumbled with it nervously. She had no idea how to deal with his bluntness. Part of her still insisted he was just playing with her, but reason couldn't really support that theory anymore. He was rich, a Hollywood star. He had better things to do than go pick on some chubby redhead from a small town in Maine. She'd seen him with his relatives, his cousins, and his little brother. Julian wasn't a mean bully. He was a guy who cared about the people he let into his inner circle.

"It's just a chemistry thing," she finally answered. "It will go away."

The minute the words came out of her mouth, Kristin knew she was rationalizing. Her inexplicable longing for Julian had started a long time ago, and even though she didn't really wear out her vibrator every other day, she thought about him when he was gone.

A lot.

"That's what I thought, but nothing has changed," Julian replied morosely. Moments later, in a more curious voice, he asked, "Do you really touch yourself and think about me when I'm gone?"

Kristin nearly spit out a mouthful of ginger ale. Swallowing hard, she coughed for a moment, not sure how to answer. "Honestly?"

He nodded.

She'd never felt this free discussing sexual needs. But the way he asked made it less uncomfortable. She was a medical person. Sex was part of life. It just wasn't something she generally discussed with a guy who made her feel like Julian did.

He made her feel wanted.

He made her feel desired.

Like some kind of sexual goddess.

Kristin was used to discussing sex in clinical terms, not personally with the man who was causing her sexual frustration.

"Maybe occasionally," she hedged. "Usually I'm so tired that I fall asleep when my head hits the pillow." It was true, but she'd been lying awake a lot more often since Julian Sinclair had invaded her thoughts.

His brows drew together slowly. "How many *occasions*?"

Kristin blew out a breath, exasperated. "Okay. A lot. I do it a lot. I didn't used to, but I guess you make me hormonally crazy."

“Horny,” Julian concluded. “You need to get hot and sweaty with me, babe.”

She snorted and broke into laughter as she stared over the table at him. “Arrogant much?” she asked as she recovered.

“Never,” he answered confidently. “I never promise something I can’t deliver.”

Oh, she was pretty sure that Julian *could* give her exactly what she wanted. Problem was, he wouldn’t be a one-night stand she could use to scratch her itch. He was related to all of the Sinclairs in Amesport, and she’d see him again in the future.

“I can’t sleep with you, Julian,” she told him seriously. “Maybe it would be nice to have a fling, but I can’t. Not with you. We’d see each other again, and it would be awkward. You’re related to most of my friends, for God’s sake. Your cousin is my best friend’s husband.”

“I wasn’t suggesting a one-night stand,” he answered calmly.

“Then what—” Kristin closed her mouth in midsentence as the flight attendant came back with their meals.

By the time the food was set up and the hostess had brought them another drink, the conversation had moved in another direction, a safer subject.

Strangely, she actually had the urge to ask Julian what he wanted again.

Kristin just wasn’t quite sure she wanted to know the answer, so her question went unanswered.

# CHAPTER 5



“I am not staying with you.” Kristin literally stomped her foot as she glared at Julian the moment the concierge had left the enormous suite, after delivering their suitcases and asking if he could do anything else for them.

The penthouse was enormous, with floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls. It was totally breathtaking and opulent, the gold and greenery seeming almost incongruent, but it worked. However, Kristin wasn’t gawking at the suite anymore. She was alarmed that she had to share space with Julian Sinclair.

“The hotel is booked. And the suite has two bedrooms. It’s not like I’m asking you to share a bed, although I’m perfectly willing if you get lonely.”

She ignored his provocation. “Everybody is staying here. We can’t be in the same room.”

He yanked off the baseball cap he’d put on when they’d landed, leaving his hair adorably spiked. Kristin tried not to notice, but she was failing miserably.

“It’s a suite. Two bedrooms and you have your own bath.” He sprawled on the couch and pointed to the windows. “Nice view. What do you think?”

*I think I want to crawl on top of you and ride that gorgeous body until I can’t sit down anymore!*

Aloud, she said, “It’s lovely. There’s so many lights.” If the hotel was full, there was no use arguing the sleeping arrangements. Although she would like to be as far away from Julian as possible right now.

She wandered over to the window, her heart hammering from the thought of sharing this space with Julian for two days. It was a penthouse, so the views *were* amazing.

“It’s so . . . bright.” Vegas was alive with color and neon lights, even at their current height. The city view from up high was like one massive light show.

“Welcome to Vegas,” Julian said in a smartass tone. “You’re adorable when you’re nervous, by the way.”

“I’m not nervous. I just don’t want anyone to get false . . . ideas.”

“You don’t want them to think I’m fucking you into madness because we’re in the same suite,” he concluded.

*Pretty much!*

Really, it wasn’t appearances that bothered her. She was twenty-eight years old. If she wanted to bonk a handsome superstar while she was in Vegas, it was her business. Actually, it was the close proximity to temptation that honestly did make her apprehensive.

“Sin City,” she mumbled as she leaned against the wall and looked at the sprawling city awash with light.

Julian had hired a car, concerned that a limo or driving something flashy would *out* him. So far, nobody had recognized his face, but Kristin was pretty sure it was just a matter of time.

Even in a baseball cap and a normal vehicle, he still looked like Julian Sinclair. Hell, he *felt* like Julian Sinclair. There was something about him that exuded a special aura no matter where he went or how he was dressed.

“Yeah. It is Sin City,” he said huskily beside her ear as he slipped his arms around her from behind. “Want to sin with me, beautiful?”

Her body tensed, but his seductive scent made her relax back against him. Breathing him in, she closed her eyes and let herself be held against his rock-hard body for a moment, feeling content just to be close to him. “No sinning for me,” she said regretfully.

His mouth caressed the side of her neck, making her body tremble. “Sinning is mandatory in Vegas. We have the

wedding tomorrow, but I think we should go out afterward and do some crazy things. Something you don't usually do."

His voice was deep and persuasive, making Kristin want to take a day to be free. "What?"

"There isn't much you can't do here. Name it, Kristin. I'll make it happen."

She sighed and turned around, completely hypnotized by Julian's low, sexy baritone voice offering to basically make any dream she had come true. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she became mesmerized as she looked into his deep ocean-like eyes, feeling like she was drowning in them as she murmured, "I'd like to take a bath in that enormous tub the size of a bed that I saw when we came in."

"Done. But that one is too easy." He looked down at her with a naughty grin she couldn't resist. "Think big. Think of something you really want."

"Kiss me?" she asked him huskily, unable to stop herself. It was the most important thing she could think about at the moment.

It was as if he'd just been waiting for her request. Julian swooped down like a hawk seizing prey and covered her mouth with his.

Moaning against his lips, she threaded her hands in his hair, letting her senses become overwhelmed by the coarse feeling of the strands between her fingers. He pinned her against the wall with the force of his desire, and Kristin wallowed in the feeling of his body plastered against her as he plundered her mouth with an urgency they shared.

He grasped handfuls of her hair, moving her head so he had her exactly where he wanted, positioned so his tongue would lash deeper into her mouth.

Whimpering helplessly, Kristin pushed back into him, letting herself get lost in Julian's kiss, not caring about what would happen in the future, that she'd crossed a line where she could never go back.

Just once, she wanted to know what it felt like to be wanted with the almost-violent need that Julian seemed to be feeling right now.

She felt it, too.

And it was burning them alive.

Both of them were panting as he finally moved his mouth to the sensitive skin at the side of her neck, leaving a burning trail wherever his lips and tongue decided to claim.

“This!” Julian rasped against her neck. “It’s this that’s always been there, Kristin. This is what we’re both afraid to explore.”

“I know,” she whispered desperately, tilting her head to give him better access.

“I’m not fucking afraid of it anymore.” He nipped her neck and then soothed over the spot with his tongue.

Kristin moaned, wanting to just give in to her insatiable urges, needing nothing except Julian to touch her.

Her hands moved down his muscular back and under his sweater, needing to touch his bare skin.

“I want—”

Kristin was cut off by a powerful knock on the door.

“Goddammit!” Julian rumbled, lifting his head with a tortured groan.

She froze as the sound came again. “Who is it?”

“Probably Micah. I told him what time I’d be here and asked him to come up for a drink. He’s scared as hell that Tessa will run screaming from the altar and change her mind. He needs to loosen up.”

Her body trembling with unspent need, Kristin stepped back. Julian was the only brother here for Micah’s wedding. “Go answer it. I think I’ll go take that bath.”

He kept her trapped against the wall and gave her one more rough kiss before he let her go. “This isn’t going away,



Scarlet.”

She darted out of the hole he'd left open when he'd moved, anxious to go somewhere and try to pull herself together.

As she entered her bedroom, she could hear the boom of Micah's voice and the jovial greeting passing between the two brothers. Closing the door, she leaned against it, her heart racing as she took a deep breath, then released it slowly.

It took her a while to go seek out the enormous bathtub.



Even though Kristin had retreated to her room, Julian could still smell her on his clothing, sense her presence in the suite. His cock was still rock hard as he sat down with Micah in the living area, both of them with a beer in hand.

“How's Tessa holding up?”

Julian had come to adore his brother's fiancée, and even though Micah was panicking, it wasn't because he was getting married. He was just afraid that Tessa would decide she didn't want to marry him at the last minute.

“Better than me, I think,” Micah admitted.

“She isn't going anywhere, Micah. She loves you.” Julian knew *that* was true. He'd never seen two people who belonged together more than his brother and his fiancée.

Julian was grateful that Tessa had agreed to marry Micah. Hell, he was glad that his older brother had somebody who loved him so damn much. His brother had changed, his mind finally on something other than business. And he looked pretty damn happy. Well, except for right now. But he'd get over it once the wedding was over.

“Yeah. Don't you think that's kind of crazy? She's a perfectly sane woman,” Micah asked Julian, his tone sounding like he was only partially joking.

Julian knew if Micah weren't so nervous, he'd be hard pressed not to laugh. Micah Sinclair, one of the greatest businessmen Julian knew, was reduced to a puddle of fear over

one petite woman who adored him just as much as he adored her.

“Nope,” he said simply. “You two were made for each other.”

He chugged some of his beer from the bottle, just soaking in the fact that he and Micah were actually in the same place at the same time. They’d seen so little of each other during the years he’d been trying to build his career. Living on opposite coasts had made their visits few and far between. Even when they did meet up, it was usually brief.

For the most part, he had spent more time with Xander because they both lived in California, but since his parents had died . . . not so much. His younger brother had rarely visited, and Julian should have suspected something more was going on than just grief over their parents’ deaths.

*I wanted to give Xander his space after what happened, but I ended up giving him way too much. If I’d only known what was really going on . . .*

He watched Micah down half of his beer in moments before his brother finally answered, “She could do better.”

Julian did smile then, wondering how in the hell a woman could do better than his brother. “Dude, for some reason, she wants you. Don’t rock the boat.”

Micah’s expression formed into a grin. “She’s crazy.”

“So you’re perfect for each other,” Julian teased. Since Micah was an extreme-sports mogul, and he participated heavily in some of those activities, he needed a woman who could accept him exactly as he was. Tessa did.

“Smartass,” Micah said happily.

“How are your headaches?” Julian scrutinized his brother’s appearance, but he didn’t see dark circles under his eyes anymore, and he looked nervous but healthy. Hopefully, he hadn’t had another migraine.

“Been good. Haven’t had another one since Tessa agreed to marry me.”

Julian still felt guilty that Micah had taken on most of the responsibility for the family. Xander had overdosed several times, but Micah hadn't wanted to rain on Julian's parade. His older brother had wanted him to enjoy the success he'd sacrificed so much to achieve. Nevertheless, to Julian, the whole situation with Micah constantly needing to take care of Xander was bullshit. Julian was in the same state as his younger brother, for Christ's sake. Yeah, he traveled a lot, but he still should have been there for Micah to help share the responsibility. With their parents gone, Micah and Xander were all Julian had left of his immediate family. They were brothers.

Julian took a deep breath before he spoke again. "I have to do some time on location and then the movie will wrap. I want to be there to help you with Xander after that."

"You can't," Micah insisted. "You're at the peak of your career, Julian. I can handle it. If he finishes rehab, he can come back to Amesport. He has a home there now."

"I can come back to Amesport, too. I heard I have a home there now, too." He shot his brother an amused look.

"The builders are getting there. Since we've had a mild fall and early winter, they're almost done. I always knew you couldn't live there, Julian. Not with your career in Hollywood. I guess I just wanted you and Xander to know that you always had a home where I was going to live."

Just the fact that Micah had purchased land outside of Amesport to build a house for himself and each of his brothers caused Julian to swallow hard to get rid of the lump in his throat. His brother wanted what their cousins had now: all of the family in one place again. The influx of Sinclairs to Amesport had started with Julian's cousin, Grady. Then Grady's brother, Jared, had built homes for himself and his brothers. Then came Micah. The Sinclair branches were on opposite sides of Amesport, but it was a small town. After years of seeing no family, Julian was drawn to the place where they'd all settled down, in the same coastal town in Maine.

“We’ll talk about it later. Let’s concentrate on getting you married off.” Julian would deal with Xander when the time came. Right now, he wanted Micah to focus on his wedding.

Micah looked around curiously. “Where’s Kristin?”

“Taking a bath,” Julian replied abruptly, trying not to think about all of that soft skin relaxing into a pile of bubbles.

“You okay with her staying in the same suite?”

*No. Fuck no. She’ll never be safe with me!*

“Yep. We’re good. It’s a big place and it has two bedrooms.” He was lying to his brother, but he wasn’t about to share his problems with Micah right now.

Micah rose and chugged down the rest of his bottle of beer and set it lightly on the table. “I’d better get back. I left Tessa in the bathtub, too. What’s with women and big bathtubs?”

Even though Micah was grumbling, Julian was pretty certain that his brother had probably built Tessa a bathtub the size of an Olympic swimming pool in their new home, and he told him so.

“It’s pretty big,” Micah confessed. “She deserves to have whatever she wants. As long as she takes me, too.”

Julian slapped him on the back. “She’ll be there with a smile on her face. I don’t have a single doubt.”

“You better be right,” Micah warned.

“I’m always right,” Julian reminded him as he followed Micah to the door.

“I’m glad you’re here, man. It means a lot to me.”

Maybe he’d never been there for his brothers before, but Julian was learning just how important his family was to him. “I wouldn’t miss it. The first one of us to get hitched.”

Julian wasn’t surprised when Micah actually yanked him in for a massive hug. The men pounded each other on the back for a moment before his big brother stepped away. “Stay out of trouble,” he warned Julian.

He grinned, knowing what Micah was really saying was to stay safe. After losing both of their parents and almost their younger brother, Micah had become the caretaker of the family.

After seeing his brother out, Julian made a call to his agent and finished off his beer, still trying not to think about the fact that Kristin was so damn close that he only had to take a short walk to see her.

*Leave it alone right now.*

Julian knew he needed to give her a little space, but it was the last thing he wanted.

Problem was, he knew it was the right thing to do. Maybe he'd come to understand what was happening between the two of them, but Kristin was still figuring it all out.

He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out another beer, twisted off the cap with a flick of his wrist, then sat down on the couch.

Digging into the pocket of his jeans, Julian pulled out the dark stone that Beatrice had given him on the day that Tessa had skated in New York.

It hadn't left his person since the day he'd received it.

He rubbed the stone absently, knowing it had certainly worked for him.

Kristin was another matter entirely. "I can wait," Julian said aloud, then put the crystal back in his pocket and took his tired ass to bed.

# CHAPTER 6



Her dress was too damn short!

Kristin frowned at her reflection in the mirror as she twirled left and then right. The slinky black dress was like nothing she'd ever worn before, and she felt half-naked.

It was her size; it wasn't her style.

Obviously, she had Mara to thank for some additions to her wardrobe. Honestly, she didn't own a decent dress. She had no reason to have one. But what her best friend had chosen wasn't the dress for a chubby redhead. The hem flirted with her knees, but the material didn't cover them. Instead, it clung to her thighs, making Kristin want to keep pulling it down, which only made the bodice lower.

"Damn!" She turned away from the mirror as she cursed. It wasn't like she had another dress, so she was going to have to deal with it.

Really, her legs weren't that bad. It was her big butt that she had to keep covered with far less material than she really needed.

*I'll just have to be careful not to bend over much or my ass will be hanging out of my flimsy undies.*

Her buddy had gone the sexy route, complete with stockings, garters, and barely-there fancy black silk underwear. There was no way she could wear a bra, so her breasts were standing proudly right beneath the skimpy fabric.

Telling herself it didn't matter, Kristin scooped up the little black bag that had been included and managed to get to the living room without tripping on her too-high heels.

"Jesus Christ! I didn't realize that dress would look like *that!*"

She turned to see Julian standing at his bedroom door, breathtakingly handsome in his black tuxedo.

Her heart fell to her feet. “I know. It doesn’t look good. But Mara didn’t pack anything else.”

He strode into the room, his eyes never leaving her. “You look like a fucking goddess, but it will be impossible not to be fighting the men off you all afternoon and evening.”

She put her hands on her ample hips. “Chubby redheads shouldn’t wear little black dresses. And I do mean *little*.”

Kristin had done what she could with her hair, leaving it down with a natural curl. Her makeup had been applied carefully, something she rarely wore.

Julian stepped up to her and kissed her on the forehead. “You look beautiful, Scarlet. I’m just not sure I want other men looking at you and thinking the same thoughts I am right now.”

“I feel naked,” she confessed as she looked up at him.

“I wish you were naked,” he answered hoarsely as he reached into his pocket. “I already knew you were wearing a black dress. I just didn’t realize it would be quite so sexy.”

Her heart jumped as she saw the sincerity in his gaze. For some unknown reason, Julian really *did* find her attractive. His heated gaze made her feel a little more confident.

Kristin automatically reached out as Julian shoved a box into her hands. “What’s this?”

“A friendship gift from Vegas,” he answered with humor in his voice.

She got nervous when she saw the label of an exclusive jeweler on the lid. She fumbled with the top, finally letting it fall to the floor as it came free from the bottom.

“Oh, my God. Julian. No.” The delicate black pearls were stunning, each one of them just a little different from the others, making the set unique. There was an equally elegant bracelet, and earrings to match.

Wordlessly, he took the box from her hands and dumped the jewelry into his hand. He carefully put the necklace on her and fastened the catch, then the bracelet. He took her hand and dropped the earrings into her palm.

“You’ll have to do those. I don’t want to hurt you, since your ears are pierced.”

Stunned, Kristin fingered the beautiful necklace. “I can’t take these. They probably cost a fortune.”

“I’m rich,” he reminded her with a Hollywood smile.

“I’m not,” she retorted, reaching for the catch on the necklace.

“Don’t.” Julian caught her wrist to stop her from taking off the pearls. “It’s perfect with your dress, and I like seeing you wear them. It gives me pleasure.”

“Why?”

“Because when you’re wearing something I gave you, I feel like you’re mine,” he answered candidly. He paused before adding, “Don’t be stubborn, Scarlet. For me, it’s a small thing.”

For some reason, Kristin was reluctant to throw the lovely, thoughtful gift back in his face. Pulling her wrist from his grip, she turned and walked to the mirror near the couch and put the earrings in.

There was nothing gaudy or ostentatious about the set. They suited her dress perfectly, and they were small but classy.

She turned and faced him. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing. Or *thank you* would be good. It’s generally the appropriate thing to say when someone gives you a gift.”

She hesitated, but couldn’t quite bring herself to refuse his gift. It obviously made him happy, and for some odd reason, she didn’t want to hurt his feelings right now. Maybe it was the flash of vulnerability she could hear beneath his casual sarcasm. Or perhaps it was because he told her she looked beautiful in a way that almost made her believe him. “Thank you. It’s the nicest thing anyone has ever given me.”



It was also thoughtful because he'd gone to the trouble of finding out what color she was wearing in order to choose a gift. Why would a guy as busy as Julian do that?

"You deserve the world," Julian answered. "But I'm still not happy about that dress. My dick will be hard as long as you're with me. And for Christ's sake, don't bend over."

"Should I run away so you don't have to protect me?" she asked lightly.

He caught her up in his arms and growled. "Try it and I'll find you wherever you go."

His fierceness took her breath away. She took his head between her hands and gave him a tender kiss on the mouth, lingering before pulling away again. "I'll have the hottest date a woman could ever want. You look gorgeous in a tux."

Actually, she was pretty sure he looked good naked, but she wasn't going to go there. But with his blond hair partially tamed, and in formal wear, Julian was the hottest guy she'd ever seen. If she'd thought casual was his style, maybe she was wrong.

"I never get the bow right," he said unhappily.

She took a step back and played with the bow, adjusting it until it was completely straight. "There. Now it's perfect."

"I just noticed you're not wearing a bra," he mentioned gruffly.

Looking down, Kristin was mortified when she realized being close to Julian, inhaling his masculine scent, had made her nipples hard. They were sensitive as they abraded against the silken material every time she moved.

"Then try to tone down the testosterone," she admonished him, still embarrassed that her breasts were giving him an aroused salute. "I already feel naked enough in this dress."

Julian stepped forward and ran a gentle finger down her cheek. "I like it," he argued as the tracing finger went down her neck. "I just wish you weren't going to send every man around into a lust-filled frenzy."

*Jesus!* She wished he'd stop saying those things to her. Maybe he *was* attracted to her, but she still found that fact pretty surreal. "I think you'll be the only one looking."

"I hope so, sweetheart, but I doubt it. But if I catch some guy staring at you, it will piss me off."

The covetous note in his tone made her shudder as his finger reached her breast. She couldn't move as he tracked her hard nipple with his index finger. One touch and she was destroyed.

He pulled her into his arms, his hands running over every curve of her body. "I love the way you feel. Don't ever say you're dumpy or overweight. Your body is perfect."

"My butt is too big. And my hips are ridiculous. I've never been thin and I never will be," she answered sadly.

"Thank fuck!" he rasped. "I'd have nothing to grope, and that would be a shame."

"I've never seen you with a woman shaped like me in photos," she replied accusingly.

"Because you've never seen me with a woman I wanted to fuck," he said huskily.

"The models and actresses that you're pictured with—"

"Friends only. I hate going to publicity events alone."

The way he was feeling her up almost made her believe he liked his women rounded.

Julian's hands roamed down her back, then to her hips, and finally, he grabbed her ass.

He pulled her against him so she could feel just how much she affected him.

"Julian. We can't. Not now. The wedding starts soon."

He growled as he let her go. "Tonight. Come with me after the wedding. Let's get crazy together."

Kristin knew he wanted to go out on the town after the wedding, and she was tired of being afraid. Julian Sinclair

wanted to be with her, and she wanted some stolen time herself.

*Take it. When will I get another chance?*

“Okay. I’m yours after the wedding and dinner.”

“Be careful what you promise,” he cautioned, but Kristin recognized the pleased look on his face.

“I’m not afraid, Hotshot,” she shot back at him. He had to be on location Monday morning, and she had to be back to work.

This night was going to be hers, and she no longer wanted to waste a single minute of that time.

Julian pocketed his wallet and the keys, then politely opened the door for her.

They made their way to the wedding, Julian continuing to make her feel like the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on.

Kristin relaxed and relished the illusion, letting herself live out her Cinderella fantasy for as long as it lasted.



Julian couldn’t help the fact that every time some asshole turned his eyes on Kristin, he wanted to smash the guy’s face in.

He’d gotten through the wedding and the reception by hammering a few hard-liquor drinks, minus anything to dilute the effects. Then he’d stopped drinking alcohol the moment he’d gotten her into a show without being recognized, a theater where he’d spent more time concentrating on the beautifully entranced expression on her face in the dim light than he had on the production he’d been wanting to see for quite some time.

Thankfully, at least during the performance, he hadn’t needed to put up with men staring at her, because it was too dark to see very far.

How she'd ever gotten the idea that she was anything but stunningly beautiful was beyond Julian's comprehension. Her flame-red hair drew a man's eyes first, then her shapely body kept those eyes all over her. Every bastard who looked at her was probably wondering what it would be like to see her come, just like he did. Julian couldn't imagine how they couldn't be, since he was so obsessed with that fantasy himself.

Maybe she downplayed her looks in Amesport, but with her curly locks unbound and flowing down her back, there was no way a guy wasn't going to look and then check her out a second time. And a third. Julian knew he couldn't resist her, and fuck knew he'd tried.

Granted, it hadn't been her physical appearance that had first grabbed his attention. It had been the unimpressed, funny, and teasing disregard she'd shown him from the very start. She hadn't been the least bit interested in the fact that he was a superstar, or that he was a billionaire Sinclair.

She'd immediately pegged him as a conceited, self-centered prick. And she may have been partially right. After that, he hadn't been able to resist poking at her temper simply because she actually got irritated with him. It had been a novel experience.

Now, he was well and truly screwed. He actually admired her, liked her, and that was a pretty uncommon experience for him. That had started his obsession with Kristin, and the more he got to know her, the more he wanted her.

"Where are we going?" Kristin asked from beside him in his hired vehicle. They were both sitting up front, and he'd already taken precautions so she wouldn't get nauseated.

"Since you didn't decide what you wanted to do, I made some executive decisions for you. Hope you're not afraid of heights." Her motion sickness had precluded a few of the thrill rides, and his lack of desire to see her in any really dangerous situations by herself had crossed out a few more possibilities.

*Zip-lining?* Too dangerous, and her possibility of getting sick was still too high.

*Jumping off a building suspended by only a cable? Oh, hell no. Just fucking . . . no!*

Maybe he could have asked her, but he didn't want to take the chance that she'd be daring enough to jump off a building over eight hundred feet up in the air. His heart couldn't take it.

Anything that spun around was taken out of his plans. Since most of those rides were also at a ridiculous height, he was more relieved than disappointed that they'd miss them. He'd done them all before—never having stopped to consider the risk to his own person because the rides were as safe as they could be. It hadn't been a big deal when he'd done it himself on previous trips. Having Kristin dangling off the side of a drop that would definitely kill her if something happened was another matter altogether.

So he'd opted for a more sedate schedule, something his heart could handle. "We're going for a ride. That's why I gave you some pills."

He'd given her the motion-sickness pills at the end of the show.

For once, she didn't argue. "The show was amazing. I've never seen anything like that before." Her voice was elated and happy.

Her blissful tone slammed Julian right in the gut. It was an emotion he'd never heard before, and he wished to hell he could keep her exactly like that for the rest of her life. How often had Kristin really been pleased or relaxed? Her life had pretty much been about work, and although she seemed to take everything in stride, he wanted so much more for her.

"I've been wanting to see it for a while. It's been a few years since I've been here, and I'd heard it was fantastic," he answered hoarsely, the cheerful tone of her voice still affecting his response.

"Did it live up to your expectations?" she asked, still sounding breathless with excitement.

"Oh, yeah," he replied. Anything that made Kristin that enthusiastic was fucking amazing in his opinion.

“This has been a magical night for me, Julian,” she said in little more than a dazzled whisper. “Thank you.”

The sincerity in her voice touched a place inside him that he wasn't certain had been reached before. “You're welcome. But the night isn't over yet.”

He pulled onto a road near the airport and parked next to one of the white buildings as he announced, “We're here. How are you feeling?”

After unbuckling his seat belt, he reached over and undid hers since she wasn't moving.

“Are we flying again?” she asked as she stared at the helicopter that sat ready to take off on the heliport behind them.

“If you get the slightest bit queasy, you tell me,” he said insistently before he got out of the driver's seat and walked around to open her door.

When he pulled her out of the passenger seat, he tried not to look at the shapely amount of leg she was showing as she swung both feet out of the car. She hadn't changed out of that damn sexy dress, high heels, or black stockings. They'd been too busy to change, but he'd yanked off the bow tie of his tuxedo the moment they'd gotten into the theater, tired of feeling like he had a noose around his neck.

Her face lit up like a damn tree at Christmas. “Okay,” she agreed as she beamed up at him.

One smile and Julian was toast. He wanted to see that happy expression on her face for the rest of her fucking life.

It didn't take long for them to get settled into the helicopter, since the pilot was a friend who'd flown Julian previously, and he'd made damn sure she could see out the front window in addition to the side views. The aircraft was spacious and state-of-the-art. He also trusted the man at the controls, who had plenty of hours and experience logged in his twenty-year history as a helicopter pilot.

He noticed Kristin putting a hand to her belly as they lifted off, then started to head for the Vegas Strip.

Unconsciously, she grabbed for his hand and squeezed, an action of trust that made Julian's heart soar.

"Okay?" he asked her huskily.

"Yeah. Fine. It just feels weird going straight up," she answered excitedly.

Julian had ridden in so many helicopters in his lifetime that he couldn't really remember his first time. Probably with his dad when he was a kid, since his father had preferred that mode of travel whenever possible. "You're going to tell me if we need to land," he grumbled, watching her for any sign of sickness.

There was none.

"Oh, my God. Look. That's our hotel!" she exclaimed, squeezing his hand harder as she pointed out the landmark. "The lights up here are amazing. I'll never be able to explain how it looks from the air to somebody else. There are no real words for how beautiful it looks right now."

It was a nice night for flying over Vegas. It was clear and the lights were spectacular. But what made it special was sharing it with the woman next to him, even if she was cutting off all the circulation of blood to his fingers right now.

He grinned at her, knowing that even if he lost a few digits, her reaction would always be worth it.

# CHAPTER 7



Kristin gnawed on her bottom lip as she looked at her cards, then at the black chip in the circle in front of her.

*A hundred-dollar chip! What in the hell am I doing?*

By now, it had to be five or six in the morning, but since there were no clocks in the casino, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she was really starting to like White Russians because they went down smooth, and Julian was enjoying one of the several whiskeys he'd slammed down since he'd started to teach her how to play blackjack in the casino, when they'd returned from their marvelous ride in the sky.

Her fairy tale was almost over, but she was going to enjoy every last minute of her time with Julian.

"You have fourteen. Take a hit, Scarlet," Julian drawled patiently.

"But what if he has something small under his face card? Why don't we know what he has?" The game would be a hell of a lot easier to play if she knew the total of the dealer's card.

There was a queen up for the dealer, and she was stuck with fourteen.

"The house likes to keep their advantage," Julian answered with amusement. "Whatever he has showing, you assume that he has a ten underneath, with only a few exceptions. I told you that already."

Julian *had* told her what the rules were and how to play consistently with the odds, but what if he was wrong? "He could have a five," she retorted, wondering vaguely why she was making hundred-dollar bets at a blackjack table. Probably because that was the minimum. Julian had sought out a higher-limit table where there was nobody else playing, and they were still the two lone players at this particular game.



If the stone-faced older dealer had recognized Julian, he hadn't mentioned it.

"There's no guessing what to do at blackjack. Just take a hit. You know you have to."

She'd argued when Julian had brought her to the table, insisting she play with him when she'd told him she'd just watch and learn. He'd had none of that, splitting the chips he'd bought between them and urging her up into the chair next to him.

Making the signal to take a card, she closed her eyes, feeling her heart pounding at the thought of losing a hundred bucks. Not that it was her money, but she didn't want to lose Julian's money, either.

If she weren't more than a little drunk, she probably wouldn't be playing at all. But her inhibitions were flying out the window with every creamy sip she took of her drinks.

"Open your eyes, sweetheart. It's a seven," Julian told her teasingly. "You're damned lucky tonight. You need to stack those chips up and bet higher."

Her stack was already much higher than it had been when she started. "I don't want to lose a bet. It's not my money," she admonished him.

He leaned over as the dealer paid them both and the waitress brought more drinks. "I've got news for you, baby. You could lose every chip on this table and I wouldn't give a damn."

His baritone flowed over her senses, making her entire body tremble as the heat of his breath wafted over her sensitive earlobe. He wouldn't care? *She'd* care, wouldn't she? Or maybe she'd regret it later. Right now she was too high on Julian's presence to be in her right mind.

Or was it those tasty little White Russians she was drinking?

"Do it. Go wild," Julian demanded before he leaned back into his seat and tipped the waitress and the dealer.

Her head spinning with his insistent encouragement, she put a huge pile of chips into the circle, wanting to do whatever he wanted right now. He'd given her so much tonight that she'd let him have his way this time.

She tossed back the rest of her drink and reached for the one the waitress had just brought, taking a healthy swig of that one, too, while the dealer gave them their cards.

"Blackjack," Julian informed her, because she had closed her eyes for the deal.

In front of her, there was the jack and the ace. A quick glance at the dealer's eight told her she had won.

Julian held his hand up and Kristin gave him a high five as the dealer revealed his solid eighteen and they both won their hands.

"Ready to quit while you're ahead?" Julian asked with a grin.

Squinting at the chips, she tried to count, but was unsuccessful. About all she could comprehend at the moment was that she'd started with one pile, and now she had several. "Yes." She nodded so hard that her hair fell into her face.

Julian laughed so loud that he drew some attention, a few of the players at other tables looking over to see what was happening. "Trouble," he grumbled as he quickly cashed out and got larger-denomination chips from the dealer so he didn't have to carry stacks. As he scooped up the chips, he grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

"Julian! Julian Sinclair!"

The excited shouts came from another table, but he ignored them, tugging Kristin behind him as he strode quickly toward the elevator.

"They're calling you," Kristin mumbled as she trotted to keep up with him.

"I know. I'm not answering."

"Julian! Wait!" another female voice hollered as he passed the roulette table.

Suddenly, they were running, a screaming horde of fans behind them.

Kristin stumbled along in her high-heeled shoes, her head spinning as they sprinted for the elevator. The excitement in the air was electric when it began to feel like every gambler in the casino had realized that Julian Sinclair was in the building.

Darting into an available elevator with an open door, he wrapped a strong arm around her waist and literally lifted her into the small space with him, before shoving his key card into the slot that allowed him to get up to the penthouse suite. He pushed the button over and over, the crowd moving as they pursued him.

Kristin was caught up in the chase, but she didn't like the feeling of being followed by a probably drunk, possibly rowdy group of people. Even if they didn't mean them any harm, there were so many of them that she was afraid he'd end up trampled by the masses.

Finally, the door *whooshed* closed just seconds before anybody reached them.

She swallowed hard and turned to look at Julian as she felt the elevator start to climb. "That was . . . close." She leaned back against the wall and started to laugh, the effects of the alcohol making the whole situation seem unreal. "But the fox got away from the hounds to live another day."

Julian's body visibly relaxed as he swung her into his arms. "Smartass," he accused. "Somebody can get hurt when that happens." His admonishment sounded serious, but his expression was amused as he watched her continue to chortle.

"It's awful. I understand why you think so," she answered, still trying to stop herself from laughing. Honestly, it was highly unpleasant to run away from a crowd. "I just think it's amusing that I had to run with you. They weren't after me."

"I wasn't going to throw you under the bus, Scarlet. The questioning might get brutal. People can get crazy, and we know damn well most of those people are under the influence."

Both of them still had a drink in their hand. Kristin's had sloshed as she'd moved awkwardly with him, but her glass was still half-full. "To the escape," she proclaimed, holding her glass up high.

Julian barked out a low laugh as he clinked his glass with hers. "Sweetheart, I think you're totally trashed."

"I'm not *trashed*. I'm just feeling . . . really good. I've never been drunk before."

"Trashed," Julian repeated, a smile still on his face. "Another first?"

She frowned at him. "I thought you wanted me to cut loose." Hadn't he told her to *get wild*? Well, she was feeling pretty untamable right now.

As they reached the top floor, the door opened and he took her hand. "I did. I do. I just don't want you to feel like shit when you wake up."

"I'm not tired," she argued, swilling the rest of her drink as Julian guided her down the hall to their suite.

"I don't know if we can go back out," he said regretfully.

"I think I'm okay with that. This has been a super fantastic night," she answered enthusiastically as he pushed her gently into the suite. "It was magical. My Cinderella night."

"So what happens now?" Julian questioned. "Do I turn into a pumpkin?"

"No," she said sadly. "It just ends. The dress comes off, I put on a nightgown, and when I wake up I'll put on my old clothes again."

It was the last thing she wanted. Being with Julian had been exhilarating, intoxicating. She didn't want to see it end.

What she really craved was to strip off his clothes and make him give her satisfaction. He'd been teasing her all night with his too-handsome looks in a tux, his scent, his irresistible sense of humor, and his careful planning to make sure she got an experience she'd never forget.

“I need an orgasm,” she told him boldly. “Not some little, teensy-weensy thing I get with my vibrator. I need a real live man.” The more she thought about it, the more she needed Julian right now. He was real, and he was the only man she’d wanted in a very long time.

Julian slugged down the last of his drink and took her empty glass from her hand. “Not this way, Kristin. Not when neither of us completely have our brains intact.”

She watched him as he set the tumblers on the table, his expression grave. Not liking his unhappy expression, she stepped up and put her arms around his neck. “Please. Just this once. Give me something to really remember.”

“I’m not just some guy and a one-night stand,” he said in a graveled voice, grabbing her ass and pulling her flush against him.

“Mmm . . . I know that. God, you feel good. You smell good.” She buried her face into the exposed skin that had been revealed earlier when he’d taken off his tie and opened a few of the buttons on his shirt.

Inhaling deeply, she fell just a little more under Julian’s spell. Oh, hell, who was she kidding? She’d always been hot for him. White-flame hot. She’d just never been uninhibited enough to tell him exactly what she wanted. Right now, she didn’t care.

“Who am I?” he demanded, tilting her face up to look into her eyes.

“Julian,” she whispered immediately. “The only guy who has ever made me feel this crazy, this desperate.”

“Dammit! I don’t think this should happen this way, but God help me, I don’t think I can walk away,” he rasped, his stormy eyes devouring her.

“Don’t. Please. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything as much as I want you right now, Julian. I need you.” Her voice had a whimper of longing she’d never heard come out of her mouth before.

“Fuck!” The curse flew out of him as he leaned down, his heated breath flowing over her mouth, making her tremble with need.

*Do it. Please, just do it now.*

“Kiss me,” she pleaded, his mouth just an inch or two from hers.

“I don’t want you to hate me later,” he confessed, sounding anguished.

“I won’t. Show me what I’ve been missing, Julian. Show me what it’s like to be with a man who really wants me.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Not really. Sex was never amazing for me. I’ve only been with two men my entire life, and both of them walked away because they couldn’t handle my lifestyle. Neither one of them cared enough to stay. To be honest, I don’t think I wanted either one of them. I just wanted to be normal, to be with somebody who cared.” Suddenly, she felt like confessing everything to him, and if it was because of the alcohol, she didn’t give a rip.

“I won’t walk away from you. I literally can’t,” he said in a husky whisper as he finally swooped in to kiss her, his mouth instantly ravishing and volatile.

His words made her heart beat faster and spirit soar. Maybe all of this wasn’t real, but she could pretend just for now that Julian found her irresistible. Her body and soul were aching to be touched by Julian, and *now* would be all she ever had.

Just one stolen night of pleasure.

Without breaking his possessive embrace, he lifted her into his arms and took her into his bedroom. It was past dawn, the early-morning light flooding the room with a romantic glow.

He lowered her carefully to her feet and broke off the breathtaking kiss. “There is no going back after this, Kristin. Understand that?”

They never would be able to undo what was done here this morning, but she didn't care. All she wanted was both of them naked, feeling his heated skin against hers.

"I know," she acknowledged, reason flying out of her head as she watched him slowly unbutton his shirt with a carnal, feral expression on his face that she'd never seen before.

Kicking off her annoying heels, she stepped forward to put her fingers on every part of him that he was slowly revealing. His chest was broad and strong, the warmth of his skin so enticing that it made Kristin crazy with her need to run her hands over his entire hard body, to explore all of the places she'd longed to touch since the very first day she'd met him.

When the white garment was completely unbuttoned, she nearly tore the shirt from his body to get to his flesh. "I need to touch you," she shared, not caring how desperate or pathetic she sounded.

She'd wanted to be like this with Julian for a long time, and the feeling was so delicious that she wanted to savor every moment.

"Easy, sweetheart," he warned. "I don't have much patience right now."

"Then go wild," she told him earnestly, repeating his earlier words. "Let's live out this fantasy together."

"I have every intention of doing that. But I don't want it to be over before it even begins."

For Kristin, time didn't matter. Nothing mattered except for the desires of her heart, mind, and flesh right now.

Dropping the discarded shirt to the floor, she said, "I can't wait to have you inside me."

"Christ! If you keep saying those things, I'm not going to live through this, Scarlet."

Kristin wasn't about to stop fighting for exactly what she wanted. "What's so wrong about wanting this so much?" she reasoned, frowning at him.

He looked at her for a moment, their eyes locked in a clash of green and blue. “Not a damn thing,” he admitted gruffly. “I want you to want me.”

She speared her hands into his hair and closed her eyes, practically melting into a puddle as his big hands stroked over her back, then made their way to the zipper on the back of her dress. He had it sliding to the floor seconds later.

The rampant desire showed on his face as he stepped back to look at her, his eyes starting at her breasts, lingering there for a moment before he moved and adored her completely with a lustful gaze. “Holy shit! I’m dead! I have to be.”

There wasn’t an ounce of shyness in her body as Kristin shivered from the intensity in his eyes. “I think Mara bought the stockings and the underwear,” she confessed.

“I hope you aren’t entirely attached to them yet.”

“Why?” she asked curiously.

He reached for the panties and pulled them from her body in one powerful jerk.

Cool air wafted over her pussy, making her desire that much more urgent.

“See me, Julian. Please see *me*.” It took her a moment to notice she’d said the words aloud.

“I do *see* you,” he answered as he lowered himself down to his knees. “And in a few seconds, you’re going to *feel* me.”

It took only a moment for her to scream aloud, unable to help herself as nothing but pleasure assailed her and threatened to break her entire body apart.



# CHAPTER 8



“Oh, God,” Kristin gasped, reaching for the bedpost to hold herself up as Julian placed one of her feet on the mattress to give him the best access to what he wanted.

His tongue and mouth were everywhere, leaving her skin scorched wherever they touched. He left her stockings and garters in place, but tongued the vulnerable, exposed areas at the tops of her thighs, making her frenzied for him. “Please,” she whimpered, the plea escaping her lips uncensored. “I need . . .” Her voice trailed off, those two words enough to explain the unhinged desire that shot through every nerve ending in her body.

Suddenly, he was exactly where she wanted him, and she felt his velvet tongue lave over her pussy from bottom to top, stopping at her clit before sensually lingering there.

“No. Don’t. Stop.” Perspiration began to moisten her skin as she waited, anticipating her satisfaction.

“You taste exactly like I knew you would,” Julian growled as he pulled his head back and blew a long, hot puff of air over the pink flesh that was already quivering with need.

He was teasing, taunting, and making Kristin crazy. “Now,” she demanded, spearing her free hand through his coarse hair and urging it forward. “Right now, Julian.”

He groaned as she urged his mouth against her, this time with commanding precision and laser focus. He groaned again against her clit, the vibration causing her to let out a throaty moan in response. “Yes,” she hissed, needing more.

As he tongued the tiny bundle of nerves, his motions almost frantic, Kristin panted, not sure if her leg would hold her up, even with her hard grip on the solid wood bedpost.

Just when she was certain she was going to collapse into a puddle of fierce longing on the carpet, Julian stood, ripped

back the covers on the bed, and lifted her onto the mattress.

“We come together this time,” he rasped, standing straight to remove his tuxedo pants and belt deftly, his eyes never leaving her.

Really, Kristin wasn't about to argue. She licked her lips as she watched him roll the pants and briefs from his body in one quick action, then kick them off his feet.

*Jesus!* As he liberated his cock, her mouth went dry with anticipation.

Just like every other part of his body, Julian was huge, and how desperately he needed her was revealed in one big, engorged, ready-to-go male member that left her speechless.

“Fuck me,” she requested, holding her arms out to him.

He stepped forward and rested one of his knees on the bed, simply staring at her. “I feel like a teenager who is finally realizing his fantasies,” he said hoarsely as he fingered a few of her curls. “I've imagined this so many times, you in my bed, your gorgeous red hair fanned out on my pillow.”

“Is it living up to your dreams?” she asked, suddenly feeling shy.

He moved like lightning, his body covering hers before Kristin could even blink. Julian grasped her wrists and held them over her head, his chest heaving. “So much fucking better,” he replied, his uneven, harsh breaths wafting over her face. “This is reality, and you look like you're mine.”

At that moment, she *was* his. Their damp, naked bodies were pressed together like they fit perfectly, and were never going to part. Kristin absorbed the erotic sensation of feeling his big body shudder with ravenous hunger, and the carnal, feral expression of impending possession on his face.

Nothing in her former sexual experiences had prepared her for *this* kind of violently elemental, raw yearning. Her senses were attuned with his, and the same fierce craving she knew he was experiencing was present inside her, and just as strong as it was for him.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she urged him, “Fuck me, Julian. Don’t wait. It doesn’t have to be perfect or practiced. It just has to be us.”

“This isn’t the way I planned it,” Julian retorted. “There’s nothing I want more than to satisfy you in every way possible. But I can’t control this. I can’t control what’s happening.”

“No control,” she insisted. “Go wild.” She yanked her wrists free of their imprisonment, desperate to touch him.

She released a panting sigh as her hands stroked over the hard texture of his back, marveling at the smooth, damp skin over the top of hard, taut muscles.

“Christ. Yes. Fucking touch me. But I’m not going to last,” Julian muttered as he moved, positioned himself, and entered her in one frenzied thrust.

Kristin gasped at the size of the invasion into her sheath, but the momentary discomfort gave way to an intense feeling of satisfaction that Julian was finally embedded deep inside her.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” She couldn’t say anything more, her body consumed by the need to strain closer to him.

He started to move with an agonized groan. “So. Fucking. Good.”

Her hips rose up to meet his relentless strokes, and he swallowed her next moan with his lips.

He wasn’t gentle as he claimed her mouth, owning it like it belonged to him, leaving no part of it untouched.

A roaring fire started in her belly and torched its way straight to her core with a violent spasm. Her back arched as Julian tore his mouth from hers and straightened on his knees, gripping her thighs to thrust deeper, harder inside her.

“Come for me, baby. You look so beautiful right now.” His voice was tight with tension and heavy with need.

His hand moved up her thighs and then his thumb stretched to tease her aching clit, stroking over it with the same covetous, frenzied movements of his cock.

“Julian, it’s too much.” Kristin felt incinerated, and her head thrashed on the pillow as her fingers gripped the fitted cotton sheet in panic.

The incendiary flames had engulfed her core, and she was suddenly gripped by a release so volatile that it was almost painful. Fortunately, the waves became a pleasure so deep that Kristin could feel it in her very soul as she rode her climax. The muscles of her channel clamped down on Julian’s cock, causing him to roar as he hammered into her unceasingly. “Never enough!” he finally answered in a tormented voice. “Never enough.”

Kristin was starting to spiral back to Earth as she milked Julian of his hot release, her satisfaction greater as she watched him throw his head back with abandoned pleasure and call out her name. “Fuck. Kristin!”

His grip tightened on her thighs, and his muscles flexed erratically as he continued to let go with masculine pleasure she’d never seen before.

He looked deliciously dangerous, wildly aroused, and most definitely pleased to the point of madness. She knew it was something she’d think about forever, the way he looked when he was out of control, something so uncharacteristic of the Julian she knew.

He levered himself down and kissed her, an embrace that spoke of so much more than just getting off. It was deep but tender and sweet, a leisurely embrace that left her even more breathless than she already was.

After lifting his head, he buried his face in the side of her neck. “This *is* us,” he muttered against her sweaty skin. “It’s raw. It’s real.”

She didn’t have to ask what he meant as she stroked his hair, reveling in the afterglow of the most amazing thing that had ever happened to her. Kristin understood exactly what he was trying to say. Right now, she was laid bare and vulnerable to him, able to be that way because he’d done the same.

“It’s terrifying,” she whispered. “In a good way.”

Julian rolled, taking her with him, leaving her blanketing his body, him taking on her limp weight. “Never. Don’t ever be scared of me or of us,” he answered fiercely.

He stroked a hand over her hair as she sighed and laid her head on his chest. Something about Julian felt so solid and safe, which was actually so contrary to who he really was. It baffled her, but her inebriated mind couldn’t deal with reason right now, so she enjoyed the moment.

“Tired?” he asked tentatively.

“Not really. But I don’t want to move.” She wanted to stay right here, her naked body sprawled over Julian’s.

He chuckled as he sat up, keeping her cradled in his lap. “Are you hungry?”

She smiled because he seemed so intent on taking care of whatever needs she might have. Didn’t he know that he already had? “I think that problem has just been handled,” she answered with good humor.

Julian stroked a finger over her breast and teased one of her nipples. “I didn’t touch you enough. There’s so much more —”

She quickly touched two fingers to his lips. “Don’t. It was perfect. Don’t you dare say that it wasn’t.”

His eyes captured her gaze, and they stared at each other in understanding. “I can’t say that,” he admitted. “But it was only one of many fantasies I’ve had about you,” he teased, letting the hand on her breast drop to her thigh.

Her heart jumped at the adoring look she saw in his eyes before he leaned his forehead against hers.

In the middle of the silence, her stomach suddenly rumbled.

“I think I need to feed you,” Julian remarked with mirth in his voice.

Kristin wasn’t sure she was hungry, but as Julian carefully untangled their bodies and stood, she took his extended hand to let him get her on her feet.

“Whoa,” she murmured as she felt the effects of the alcohol she’d been consuming all night. Her balance was still off, but she felt a burst of euphoria as she leaned against the hard, male chest in front of her. “Sorry.”

“Shower time,” Julian pronounced as he swung her naked body up into his powerful arms. “Then food.”

“Okay,” she happily agreed, snuggling into his warmth as he headed for the bathroom.

On the way across the bedroom, Kristin noticed that the sun had fully risen, daylight flowing into the bedroom. It had to still be early morning, but she had no idea what time it was. But while she was being held by Julian, she couldn’t bring herself to care.



Somewhere between sleeping and waking up, Kristin figured out she was going to die.

Her gut rolled, and her head felt like it was in a vise. Everything hurt, and her mouth was as dry as the Sahara.

Okay . . . maybe she *wasn't* going to die, but she certainly felt her body circling the drain.

“Oh, shit,” she groaned, trying to open her eyes, only to have the blinding sun make her slam them shut again.

Her scrambled mind tried to figure out where she was and why she was so sick.

*The wedding.*

*Julian.*

*Alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol.*

Hangover?

She suddenly understood why she never drank to excess. Last night, she’d thrown every rule she’d ever made for herself right out a proverbial window along with her clothing.

She was stark naked, which, by itself, was alarming. She tried not to think about why she was minus her clothing, but she was pretty sure that answer would be terrifying. Some

muscles in her body hurt that hadn't been used in a very long time.

Forcing her eyes open, Kristin looked around the bedroom.

*Julian's room.*

Memories came flooding back to her as she noticed a large bottled water on the bedside table and a couple of pills. She propped herself up on her elbow painfully and scooped up the handwritten note.

*Kristin,*

*Lots of water to hydrate, and take the pills for your headache and body aches if you wake up feeling hungover. I left your pills for travel in the living room. Take two before you fly. I didn't want to wake you, so I hitched a ride with Jared since I have to be on location very early in the morning on the East Coast.*

*We'll talk as soon as I'm done filming and wrap this movie.*

*Don't be stubborn. Take the pills and drink the entire bottle of water before you get up.*

The only other thing in the missive was the number for her to call his pilot when she was ready to leave.

"What the hell time is it?" she wondered, glancing around for a clock.

Her eyes landed on the alarm clock on the dresser, and she squinted through her blurred vision to see the numbers.

"Four o'clock. Four p.m.," she whispered in a startled voice, suddenly panicked because she knew she had to be back to work in the morning. "Everybody is gone."

She opened the water and slammed back the pills, knowing she needed to get her wits about her as soon as possible.

“Coffee,” she said urgently, getting up painfully to go fix herself a cup in the small convenience kitchen.

Alternating water and coffee, she sat on the bed, trying to ignore the twisted bedcovers and the scent of sex that seemed to permeate Julian’s bedroom.

Calculating the time difference and how long it would take her to get ready and then fly home, she came to the conclusion she’d make it in plenty of time to get to work. But it didn’t stop the painful ache in her chest caused by not seeing Julian again before he left.

Honestly, she knew he had to leave or be late for his film shooting. The location was several states south of Maine, but the trip would be just as long. And saying it was early morning was putting things kindly. He had to be there for makeup by three a.m.

“The fairy tale is over, Cinderella. Time to turn back into a pumpkin again.”

She rose and drained her bottled water, tossing the container in the trash before picking up her coffee and heading toward her own bedroom.

There, she wouldn’t be reminded of what had happened in this bedroom.

There, she could escape the lingering smell of one hot encounter that had rocked her world.

There, she could transform herself into the woman she was really supposed to be.

She exited the room without looking back, firmly closing the door behind her.



# CHAPTER 9



*Three Weeks Later . . .*

“I don’t know how to thank you for everything you’ve done here,” Kristin told Carl and Sandie sincerely.

What could she say to two people who had overhauled the Shamrock’s image in town, making it more profitable than her father could ever dream about? People were even driving from neighboring towns just to come to the pub.

The couple were leaving, returning home to California via Jared’s private jet. But they’d left behind some enormously talented trainees who could draw a crowd all by themselves.

“Don’t thank us,” Carl answered gregariously. “Julian helped us get our start by spreading the word about our place in the early years. Since he’s come into his fame, he talks about our place a lot. It’s kept us thriving.”

Kristin shook her head. “He might have helped, but you two are an amazing team. Sandie’s dishes will be the talk of the town for a very long time.”

“They’ll carry on,” Sandie replied confidently. “You have some great cooks now, and you can afford them.”

Kristin hugged both of them gratefully, still stunned by how quickly the bar and grill had become *the* place to go in Amesport.

It was barely four, and Kristin had just left the medical office to get to the bar to say her good-byes to Sandie and Carl. The place was already jam-packed, even with the quick renovation job that had been done to add more tables and more seats at the bar.

Eventually, they’d have to really expand, build onto the existing building or rebuild if things kept moving the way they were right now. Time would tell, but right now, the kitchen

was putting out the best deli food in town, and customers poured in for the new and improved gourmet burgers and specials, and to watch the talented new bartenders make fancy drinks. Most of the positions were part-time, but all of them had been trained by Carl and Sandie, and they'd transformed the atmosphere from a tired bar to a place where everybody wanted to gather.

The added seating had taken knocking out a wall, but it had been completed overnight, and the decorating had been done the next day. Looking at the revenues, Kristin had to admit that being closed for two days hadn't hurt the bar one bit.

She waved at her two saviors through the new decorative door, Carl *still* wearing a pair of flip-flops as he exited. He'd told Kristin that there was no sense changing his image when he was going to be back in California shortly.

"I like them. I like them both," Mara said to Kristin, speaking for the first time as Kristin slid back into the booth where they'd all said good-bye.

"Me too. I'll miss them. They've been the best thing that's happened to this place in a long time. And they were just getting started. Dad has a list of things to do as the place grows. He seems happier, more excited than I've seen him for a long time."

"He deserves it," Mara mused as she started to devour a juicy burger with guacamole, chili, and a combination of other items that made it difficult to get her mouth around the enormous creation.

Mara moaned in appreciation as she chewed and swallowed. "This is not only huge, but it's delicious."

Kristin smiled at her as she stirred her Diet Coke. "Sandie trained the cooks well. Dad's employees are so picky now that they won't let anything they consider imperfect go out the service window." She found that amusing, since Shamrock's had been serving up subpar food forever. "People just needed the right training. Unfortunately, I couldn't manage to do much of that. I wish I could have."

After wiping her mouth, Mara insisted, “It’s not your fault, Kristin. They have the experience, the vision to create something, because they’ve done it before. It’s not like you’re familiar with the pub scene.”

“It feels so weird,” Kristin shared with her best friend. “All I did was work. Now that Dad’s place is handled and prosperous, I don’t know what the hell to do with my time anymore.”

“Relax a little? Date?” Mara said hopefully. “There are a few nice guys working for me now. I’d love to hook you up.”

Kristin rolled her eyes. “Now that you’ve married your dream guy, you’re just hoping everyone else will, too.” She knew Mara so well. Since her buddy was so content in wedded bliss with Jared Sinclair, she wanted to make sure her friends were all happy, too. “Not everyone is destined for marriage, Mara.”

The brunette shook her head because her mouth was full. Once she’d swallowed, she remarked, “You are. Beatrice gave you *the stone*. I know she gave Julian one, too. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me? You two were together in Vegas. In the same suite. And you want me to believe you were just bunking together because the hotel was full?”

There had never really been a time when she hadn’t told Mara everything. But there were some things that were just too intimate and raw to discuss right now. “We had a good time at the wedding. I got to know him a little bit better. But he’s still annoyingly managing and bossy. He’s just not my type.”

He was all of those things she’d just mentioned, but there was so much more there beneath the surface when it came to Julian. He was a private man who’d had his whole life turned upside down by fame. Strangely, he dealt with it well, accepted it as part of doing what he loved, without letting his ego go into overdrive. Kristin suspected that his confidence and bossiness came more from being a Sinclair than his A-list status. He’d probably been born feeling like he could control the world.

“Okay,” Mara agreed eagerly. “Then let me fix you up with my marketing manager. He’s a successful guy, and he’s pretty hot.”

Truth was, Kristin didn’t feel anywhere near ready to date. Her mind was still on Julian and what had happened over that magical weekend. Well, except for the times she was vomiting and then hungover. But the rest of her time spent in Sin City was something she hadn’t been able to forget.

She hadn’t heard a word from Julian after that stolen weekend, not that she’d expected him to show up for her. Going in, she’d known that those few days were going to be an experience that could never last. But it didn’t make her heart ache any less. She had gotten to know a different Julian, a separate man from the one who constantly did anything he could to annoy her.

*Foreplay.*

The word floated through her mind in his sexy, husky baritone, making her feel goose bumps on her flesh. As she rubbed her arms over her sweater to calm down her reaction, she told Mara, “Not now, okay? I just got some free time, and I’d like to do some things.”

Mara stared at her suspiciously. “What?”

“Read some books. Catch up on the TV shows everybody is talking about. Maybe see a movie some night.”

“Movies are perfect for a date. You just basically told me you didn’t know what to do with yourself. Now you’re saying you want to hide like a hermit?”

“Yeah, I kind of do want some time alone. It’s something I haven’t had in years.”

Mara’s expression softened. “I know. Just think about it, okay?”

“I’ll let you know when I finish my books and TV shows,” Kristin said as she smiled at Mara. She took a sip of her soda before adding, “I never did thank you for the dress.”

Mara shot her a confused look as she polished off her burger. “What dress?”

“The new one you packed in my suitcase for the wedding—along with the other . . . stuff. You went to my parents’, right? You packed my clothes.”

The brunette shook her head as she dipped her onion ring in ketchup. “I didn’t. Honestly, I was thrilled when I found out you were coming to the wedding, but I didn’t pack your bag. Though I would have if I thought that would bring you to Vegas.”

*What. The. Hell.*

“Then how did Julian get a packed bag for me? Some of the stuff was mine.”

Mara shrugged. “I don’t know. You’d have to ask Julian.”

“You and my parents are the only ones who have a key to my apartment,” Kristin said, still astonished to find out that Mara hadn’t been the one to add that sexy underwear to her suitcase . . . or the tiny dress.

The mystery was killing her, and she knew she’d end up dropping over to her parents’ house later.

“Ask your mom and dad. Maybe they gave it to somebody to pack your stuff.”

“Julian lied. He told me you did it.”

“Does it really matter?” Mara answered softly. “I’ve known you most of my life, Kristin. If he hadn’t pressed the issue, you would have stayed here worrying about Shamrock’s.”

“Very possible,” Kristin answered stiffly, not bothering to bullshit her best friend. Mara knew her too well.

“I would have been Julian’s accomplice had he asked,” Mara confessed. “But he didn’t. It had to be your parents.”

She shuddered as she thought about the possibilities. Had Julian gone straight to her parents, or had somebody else intervened?

“There’s something creepy about not knowing who went through your underwear drawer,” Kristin admitted unhappily.

Mara laughed. “Afraid your dad might find your vibrator?” she teased.

*No. I’m afraid a stranger might have seen the pathetic state of my intimate apparel. I never thought about it being my dad, but the thought is almost as bad.*

Kristin shot Mara a mischievous grin. “Nope. I don’t hide it in my drawer.”

Her best friend laughed even harder as she finished off her dinner. “That was delicious.” As Mara’s eyes darted up to the clock she added hastily, “Damn! I have to run. I have a meeting at the factory.”

Kristin refused to let Mara pay, telling her it was on the house for trying out the new food. She watched as her friend pulled on a beautiful wool coat, still not used to seeing her previous doll-maker friend as a successful CEO of her own business.

Kristin hugged her when Mara threw her arms around her while telling her, “I’m going to start working on your dates. Now that you’re finally free in the evenings, there’s no excuse not to try out some new guys. Just because the old ones were selfish duds doesn’t mean they all are.”

“Reading time, remember?” Kristin reminded her as she followed her friend to the door.

“Yeah, yeah.” Mara blew her off. “Start reading soon. I’m going to ask Rob if he’s free for dinner tomorrow night.”

Really, Mara was right. She had no reason *not* to do some casual dating now that her evenings were free, but for some reason, the idea didn’t provide even an inkling of interest for her.

*Am I secretly waiting for Julian? He’s not coming back for me. It was a one-weekend thing. I knew that when we were together. It’s over. He’s already moved on and I haven’t heard a word from him.*

She waved at Mara as her friend hustled out the door before Kristin could answer.

Grabbing her own jacket and purse from behind the bar, she pulled on the old coat and hurried out the door behind her friend, eager to finally figure out the mystery of how exactly all of the changes had occurred at Shamrock's . . . and more importantly . . . why?

Her father had given her a halfhearted explanation, but she was pretty sure it wasn't the entire truth.

The cold air took her breath away as she stepped outside and started down the sidewalk determinedly, knowing exactly where she wanted to start.



“So you’re telling me that you just decided to invest in Dad’s bar for no reason?” Kristin questioned Liam Sullivan as she stood in a newly renovated Sullivan’s Steak and Seafood restaurant, speaking with Tessa’s brother.

Her father had told her Liam had helped him out when she’d returned from Vegas. Kristin wanted to know just how much Tessa’s brother was involved.

The restaurant wasn’t open for business yet, but it would be shortly. She had suspected Liam would already be at Sullivan’s. Luckily, she’d caught him during prep time, and she was determined to make him talk.

“Not for *no* reason,” Liam answered evasively, his back to her, preparing lobster for Sullivan’s famous lobster rolls. “I’ve always thought the place could be . . . more. Now that Tessa is married, I have more time on my hands.”

Putting her hands on her hips, she knew she had to call *bullshit*. “And tons of money? Somebody had to have given my dad an influx of cash. This didn’t all happen without a significant investment.”

“I have money, and I have . . . a partner.”

“Who?” Kristin demanded doggedly.

Liam turned, his expression frustrated. “Julian Sinclair. I went in with Julian because I thought his ideas and visions were good. I didn’t really know him, and he knew me only by reputation because we worked in the same business when I was in Hollywood. But I didn’t need him to partner with your dad. He wanted to be part of my half of the investment.”

She glared at him, still trying to understand why Julian had tied himself to an investment in Amesport. Liam wasn’t what she’d call conventionally handsome, but he was muscular and big, and her casual conversations with him had been cordial. “Did you pack my suitcase for Vegas?”

He shot her a confused expression. “Hell, no. Why would I want to do that?”

“Somebody did.”

Liam shrugged. “Probably Julian. He might have gotten the key to your place from your parents when we signed the papers.”

“I can’t believe my parents did this before they even asked me,” she answered irritably.

“Why? It’s their business.”

“One that I’ve busted my ass to keep afloat for them by working every damn minute of the day,” Kristin exploded as she panted for breath. “I went there every night, knowing my dad needed to be at home. I stressed myself to death about their welfare. I thought they’d at least consult me.”

“I’m sorry,” Liam replied gruffly. “I know none of this has been easy on you. But the place is making money like crazy. People came here to Sullivan’s because of the quality of the food, even before we remodeled. The place was always prosperous. But I’ve seen the books for Shamrock’s. It was barely making a profit, even though it has the better location. It needed a boost, Kristin. Either that or it was going to eventually go into the red, and then go under. You couldn’t keep working the hours you did forever. You doing all the labor was the only thing saving your dad from bankruptcy.”



He was right. Kristin knew Liam's words were true. But it didn't help the empty feeling of knowing her parents hadn't even bothered to consult her before selling off half of the bar. "I wish they would have told me."

"What would you have advised?" Liam asked curiously.

Knowing what she did now, she would have encouraged it. Her dad was able to work hands-off, and the business was helping him get relief of his worry that he wasn't going to be able to make a living. However, if she'd known before the changes happened, she might have felt differently. "I don't know," she admitted quietly.

"Then maybe it worked out for the best."

"Why was Julian interested?" she asked inquisitively.

"I think you'd have to ask him that. He was actually the one with the plans. We met up for a beer one night after we found out we knew each other by reputation. It was his idea. After that, he moved pretty fast, and I wanted to be part of the project. I had the money to invest, and I couldn't think of a place in that location that wouldn't thrive with the right menu, entertainment, and management. It's not your dad's fault it's gotten run-down, and it isn't yours. It's the circumstances."

"He made a good choice," she answered, shooting Liam a small smile. "I know you've been around Shamrock's a lot, making some excellent decisions."

He shrugged. "It keeps me busy, since we're only open for dinner here."

Kristin smiled wider, knowing Liam was full of shit. He had bought into Shamrock's, and he was ambitious enough to make it successful. "What's Julian's role in this partnership?"

"He set up the training programs, which went off pretty damn well. But since he has to be away most of the time, he agreed to be basically a silent partner after setting up the training. He didn't really want anyone to know what he was doing, but you're damn good at wringing information out of a guy."

“Not always,” she said with a sigh, thinking about the fact that she hadn’t gotten nearly as much from Liam as she would have liked. What in the hell was Julian’s motivation to do all of this for her parents?

“For what it’s worth, I think he was trying to help,” Liam said earnestly. “The investment and profits are going to be like pocket change to him.”

“What about you?” she asked curiously.

He turned and grinned at her, transforming his face to one that was ruggedly handsome. “Spending money,” he answered mysteriously. “I may not be as rich as the Sinclairs, but the investment isn’t going to affect me much one way or the other.”

She thanked Liam and left the restaurant, clearer about what had been transpiring at Shamrock’s, but more confused about Julian Sinclair than she’d ever been in her entire life.

# CHAPTER 10



True to her word, Mara had set up a coffee date with her marketing manager, Robert Larkin. Not seeing any way out of it without being rude, Kristin had gone to meet the guy at Brew Magic the next evening. Turned out, he was pretty attractive, pretty nice, and pretty darn polite.

Unfortunately, Kristin couldn't see him ever being anything more than a friend. There was just no spark, no chemistry.

*Because he's not Julian.*

Irritated with herself that she was still thinking about *him*, she took another sip of her chocolate caramel coffee as she listened to Rob talk about how much he admired Mara, and how much he appreciated his job.

"Kristin?"

She suddenly realized that her mind had drifted off somewhere else as Rob had been singing his praises about Mara's company. "Yes?" She trained her eyes on his face, determined not to let her mind wander . . . again.

Rob had a kind face, dark hair and eyes, and the slight, slender build of a man who looked like he worked in an office.

"I asked if you wanted to go to the office holiday party with me. You didn't answer."

Maybe because she hadn't heard the question. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

He smiled at her, and she noticed his teeth were perfect. Rob had the kind of friendly smile and brilliant teeth that were perfect for a marketer. Kristin was pretty sure he could be persuasive given the right audience.

"Say yes," he said, his smile growing even larger and more inviting.

She didn't want to think about holiday parties, but Christmas would be here and gone before she even noticed, this year, if she didn't start planning her Christmas list. She'd done the Christmas cards for Sarah's office right after Thanksgiving, but she hadn't done anything for her personal friends yet.

*This just isn't working for me!*

Rob was a nice guy, and he deserved to be going somewhere with a woman who was really interested in him. As much as she'd tried, this evening, Kristin knew she was edgy and distracted. Honestly, she wondered why Rob even wanted her to go to the party with him.

*Maybe because I'm Mara's best friend and he thinks it will get him in a better position with the boss?*

Instantly, Kristin hated herself for thinking the worst of a guy who'd taken the time out of his evening just to meet her. Sure, Rob was polished, but it was part of his job to be a communicator, a polite person who was able to persuade people to buy Mara's products.

But, for Kristin, she couldn't lead him on by accepting and giving him the impression that she was interested in anything more than being his friend. It wouldn't be fair to him. "I really—"

"Can't make it," a husky baritone finished her answer as he slid into the seat beside her. "Sorry, she can't go."

She turned her head in surprise, already knowing who was sitting right next to her because his scent and his voice had immediately gotten her attention.

*Julian.*

He looked angry, his blue eyes emanating malice as he looked at Rob.

Annoyed, Kristin told Rob, "That wasn't what I was going to say." Turning to Julian, she asked irritably, "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "Where else would I be, sweetheart? Sorry it took me so long to get back. There was a little accident while we were filming, so we went over schedule. And the damn location was in the middle of nowhere. Bad cell service."

He looked all banged up, bruises to his forehead and plenty of scrapes on his face. "What happened?" she asked, concerned as she looked at his visible injuries.

"Nothing real serious." He blew off her concern. "Who's your *friend*?"

"My date," she corrected, looking back at Rob. "This is Julian Sinclair."

Obviously not one to miss a good connection, Rob reached across the table to shake Julian's hand. "I recognized you. Robert Larkin. I work for your cousin's wife, Mara. It's a pleasure to meet you. I've seen your movies. Liked the last one the best."

Julian mumbled under his breath, "You seem like the type who would."

Kristin jabbed him in the side with her elbow, only to hear him groan with pain. "Oh, God. You really are hurt."

She was starting to get worried about Julian's physical condition.

"I'm fine," Julian answered gruffly, his eyes still focused on Rob. "You aren't really on a date," he informed Rob matter-of-factly.

"We are," Rob pronounced happily. "I just met Kristin tonight, but I can tell she's special. She and Mara have been friends forever. I can see why. I'd like her to go to the holiday party with me this year."

"She can't," Julian remarked angrily.

"I don't see why not," Rob replied, still wearing a winning smile.

Julian leaned forward, putting him physically closer to Rob as he stared the smaller man down. "Because if you ever

touch her, I'll have to kill you."

"Julian, don't be ridiculous," Kristin told him, her heart starting to pound in alarm. What the hell was wrong with him? Had he hit his head harder than she imagined?

"Hey, man, I didn't know you liked her." Rob put his hands up in surrender.

"Of course I fucking like her. She's my wife," Julian growled, seizing Kristin's hand and pulling her to her feet. "Let's go home."

Rob shot Kristin a questioning look. "You're married to Julian Sinclair?"

She shook her head from Julian's, noticing that people around them were starting to stare. "Stop it. Stop making a scene." She turned to Rob. "No, we are *not* married. I think he's delusional. Maybe he hit his head. But I am not married to Julian Sinclair. I'm sorry. I have to go get him some medical attention."

"Nothing a little attention from you won't cure," Julian whispered into her ear as he moved closer to her.

She grabbed Julian's hand to shut him up and squeezed hard for him to stop talking. Then she dragged him toward the door.

He went willingly enough, but stopped briefly to say to Rob, "I meant what I said."

Kristin was mortified as she yanked Julian out the door. "Are you crazy?" she asked him as they stepped outdoors.

"Yeah. I probably am."

She turned and faced him, letting go of his hand. "Are you all right physically? Because if you are, I swear I'm going to kick you in the balls for telling Rob we're married."

Julian grinned for the first time since Kristin had seen him tonight. "So you won't kick a guy when he's down?"

She took in his massive, toned body dressed in jeans and a button-down shirt, his black wool jacket open and flapping in

the cold breeze.

“I’d like to. But no, I can’t.” She was too concerned with whether or not he was even in his right mind.

He motioned toward a black SUV parked at the curb. “Get in.”

“You shouldn’t be driving,” she admonished.

“I’m fine,” he answered huskily. “But I’m still recovering from seeing you on a date with another guy. What in the hell did you think you were doing?”

He hit the button on the keys to unlock the doors of the vehicle and held open the passenger door.

She scrambled into the seat, the cold wind starting to become uncomfortable.

When Julian got settled in the driver’s seat, she asked again, “Should you be driving? You looked almost serious about believing what you said.”

Reaching into the pocket of his jacket, Julian pulled out a folded piece of paper and dropped it into her lap. “I’m dead serious, Scarlet. We *are* married. I don’t like seeing you with another guy while I’m off working, and I knew exactly what I was saying.”

Reaching up, she flipped on the reading light as Julian started the vehicle.

It was a marriage certificate, with her and Julian’s names as the bride and groom. Her eyes searched for her signature, noticing it looked familiar but was pretty mangled. “I couldn’t have signed this. When did it happen?”

“Sometime after the champagne breakfast and before I left. I remember bits and pieces of the ceremony now, but I couldn’t recall much before I left.”

“Oh, God.” Kristin just stared at the paper, her body tense as she thought about the fact that she’d actually gotten married in Vegas. “Why would we do that?”

He shook his head. “What happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay there. Sometimes you do something that will affect the rest of your life.”

“We couldn’t have, Julian. This has to be a joke.”

“Does it look like a fake marriage certificate to you? I started to remember more and more, so I ordered a copy. It’s legitimate, Kristin. We did get married while we were both trashed.”

“We can get it annulled, right?” She was panicking now.

“Probably not legally. We did have sex, and I remember that part extremely well,” he drawled lazily. “Best night of my life. Although I’m a little hazy on what happened after we got hitched, but I’m pretty sure we consummated the marriage when we got back to the hotel. That might not have been my best performance, because we were both pretty drunk.”

“Be serious!” she answered testily. “This is a problem we have to fix. I don’t remember any of it.”

“What’s the last thing you remember? I’ll try to fill in the blanks.”

Kristin searched her mind for information. “I remember saying we were going to get some breakfast. After that, all I know is I woke up with a hangover from hell. It was enough to make me never want to drink again.” She hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol since that morning.

“At least you remember the hot sex part,” he said, shooting her a grin.

“It wasn’t that *hot*,” she lied.

“Bullshit,” he answered with humor in his voice. “You told me. It was perfect.”

“I don’t remember,” she lied again. “I thought we couldn’t leave the building again.”

“Security helped us make a quick exit out the back, and I was wearing my cap and sunglasses. I remember how happy you were, especially after finishing a hell of a lot of complimentary champagne when we stopped to eat. After that,



I vaguely recall us filling out the papers for a marriage license and the quick ceremony with strangers for witnesses. You said you didn't want pictures because you'd always remember those moments in detail for the rest of your life. Guess that was the alcohol talking, since you don't remember anything," he finished drily.

She turned off the overhead light to make it easier for Julian to drive, then shoved the paper into her purse. "If we can't get an annulment, I'm sure we could get a divorce."

"We could," he agreed amiably. "But I don't think we will."

"What's that mean? Of course we need to clear this up and get divorced. Neither one of us knew what we were doing. I don't want any of your money. I just want to be free."

"So you can date Rob?" Julian rasped.

"So I can get married to somebody who loves me, someday, and so can you. We can't just let this go, Julian. Someday, it will bite one of us in the ass." Most likely, it would be him, because she certainly had no marriage prospects in sight.

"What about the slick salesman?"

"How did you know he was in sales?"

"Because he acted like he was trying to sell something."

"He's not the guy for me," Kristin admitted with a sigh. "But there might be someone in the future. Before you so rudely interrupted, I was going to turn Rob down."

"Good," Julian replied in a smug voice.

Kristin leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes in horror. "I can't believe I married you. We don't even like each other."

"That's where you're deluding yourself, Kristin. I've never disliked you."

"We fight."

"Foreplay," he stated in a mischievous voice.

“Marriage is a lot more than just sex,” Kristin argued. “You have to have loyalty. You have to be best friends.”

“I haven’t had sex with anybody else. And I’ve told you things I don’t normally discuss,” Julian pointed out as he turned on a two-lane highway leading out of town.

Her heart raced faster. “You haven’t been with anyone else?”

“Of course not. I knew I was married.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Julian leaned back in his seat, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. “We really did have bad cell service. That was the last way I wanted to tell you if you didn’t know already.”

“Where are you going? You missed my apartment.”

“My house is done. It’s nice. We can go there.”

“I don’t even have a change of clothes. I need to go home, Julian.”

“We are going home. And I had my assistant stock my place with new clothes for you.”

“I can’t live with you.” *Jesus!* Kristin pondered once again if he was completely coherent. He was driving fine, and he seemed to be oriented.

“You’re forgetting something very important,” he mentioned in a concerned tone.

“What? That we got married and I don’t even know if it was Elvis who tied our knot or a quickie Vegas minister?”

“No,” he denied calmly. “But we did have hot, sweaty sex without birth control. That’s probably why I couldn’t help coming so fast. That and the fact that I’d been wanting to nail you since the minute you opened your sassy mouth.”

“I know we did. I remember the sex part.”

“Then you realize that there is every possibility that you could be pregnant?”

Kristin was silent and put her hand on her abdomen, knowing *that* particular possibility had never crossed her mind.

# CHAPTER 11



“Is that what you’re worried about?” she asked quietly.

“For your sake, yes. I don’t know if you’re ready for a kid. But otherwise, no. I’m not worried. I think I can support any number of children, and I’d like to have a child. Maybe not now, but someday.”

She wanted to ask him what he’d do if she *was* knocked up, but she had to let him off the hook. “I’m not. I never went off birth control after my last boyfriend several years ago. It helps regulate my periods, so I just stayed on it. I’ve already had my period. I’m not pregnant.”

Kristin rubbed her belly subconsciously, almost mourning something that had never even begun.

“You sure?” he answered, sounding almost disappointed.

“Positive.” She couldn’t help the note of sadness in her voice.

“Sweetheart, do you want a baby?”

She nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. “More than anything. But I don’t think I have much that I can give a child. Hell, I’m struggling just to survive.”

“Not anymore,” he told her calmly. “You have a husband. You have me.” He pulled onto a newly paved road, then turned into a driveway that was lit up by lanterns on posts, spaced out perfectly to line and light the way to Julian’s house. “We’re home.”

Kristin gasped when she saw the well-lit home with brick exterior. Not only was it grand, but it was an elegant design. “You’re going to live here all by yourself?” The home was enormous, an executive-type mansion. Not that she expected anything less from a Sinclair, but it was still pretty damn impressive.

“No. I’m going to live here with you,” he answered with a chuckle as the garage door opened and he pulled his vehicle into the nearly empty space.

“Not. Happening,” she told him stiffly. “I’m going home.”

Julian shrugged. “We are home.”

“I have my own place, and I’d like you to take me back into town.”

He closed the garage door once he’d parked, then got out of the vehicle. “Why? We’re married.”

Kristin gritted her teeth, knowing he was being deliberately obtuse. The only thing she didn’t understand was why. “We need to get a divorce,” she told him irritably as she exited the vehicle to talk to him, following him through the door in the garage. “I know we had sex before we went out and got married. But are you sure we did it after the wedding? Do you remember?”

“Not the details. But knowing me and how much I want to nail you every time I look at you, I think we did,” he answered vaguely.

So no annulment. She couldn’t take the chance that it wouldn’t be legal.

As expected, the home was enormous, but it had a homey feeling nevertheless. Kicking off her shoes in the mudroom, she trailed behind Julian as he strode silently into the house.

With vaulted ceilings and a chef’s kitchen, the place was inviting and warm; a gas fireplace that was already lit stood between the kitchen and what looked like a large family room. “This kitchen is amazing,” she couldn’t keep herself from murmuring as she ran her hand over the granite countertops in appreciation.

“I wouldn’t know. I only use the microwave,” Julian told her with a grin as he removed his coat and took hers. “Want a tour?”

She shouldn’t, but she had to admit she was curious about exactly how Micah would design a house for Julian. A giant

media room? Somewhere to play games? What colors? What style? Nobody was going to know Julian like his older brother. Absently, she wondered if Julian had helped with the décor.

“Yes,” she finally answered quietly, giving in to her desire to see more of the home, then followed him room by room until they finally stopped in front of an elevator.

“You have an elevator in your house?” she asked, bemused. “You look like you can handle the stairs.” Her eyes scanned over his broad, powerful body.

He waved her into the elevator. “I might not have parents anymore, but you do.”

She swallowed hard as his meaning hit home. “My mom . . .” Her voice trailed off.

He simply nodded, then said, “I was thinking of adopting a dog, too. And what if I got an older dog who couldn’t make it up the stairs?”

Kristin shook herself from her fog, reminding herself that Julian hadn’t really been planning for her to live here when the house was being built. Adding an elevator had probably been Micah’s idea. If somebody was going to have an enormous luxury mansion, an elevator made sense.

“You actually want a dog?” Kristin had to admit, she was surprised.

“I like dogs. But I haven’t had one since my Lab died when I was a teenager. I was never around to spend any time with an animal.”

Kristin sighed as she stepped into the upper level. “I always wanted a cat.”

“Never had one, but I’m willing to give it a try. One dog and one cat that get along.”

“Julian,” she said in a warning voice.

“What?” he said innocently as he showed her the bedrooms upstairs, each one actually a suite with its own small sitting room and bathroom. “I’m just giving you some options.”

“I’m not living with you.”

Kristin stopped short as she saw the enormous library attached to the sitting room in the master suite. “Oh. My.”

Floor-to-ceiling shelves lined the room, and they were all full of books, all of the books labeled by category. Walking slowly around the room looking up and down in amazement, Kristin noticed he had everything from philosophy and the classics to a horror collection with science fiction right next to it.

“You like to read,” she uttered softly as her palm caressed the bindings of some of the books. “This is quite a collection.” She sat in the cozy nook window that was big enough to seat two. “I love this.”

Julian crossed his arms and smirked. “I thought you might. You can see the ocean from this window. In the summer you’ll be able to sit here and read while you listen to the waves wash in.”

“Or a storm coming in,” she said wistfully, momentarily getting caught up in Julian’s fantasy. “I love thunderstorms.”

“Me too,” he agreed huskily. “They remind me that there are things that are out of our control, things so much bigger than ourselves.”

Maybe it was an odd thing to hear from Julian, but Kristin felt exactly the same way.

He moved forward and held out his hand. She took it and let him pull her to her feet.

“One more thing,” he said enthusiastically. “The master bathroom.”

She chuckled because he sounded so excited about his new home, and she followed him compliantly. “What about it?”

As he reached a connecting door in the bedroom, he turned the handle and pushed the door open, waving her inside.

The first thing she saw was the bathtub. Not that she could miss it. It was enormous and the focal item in the space. It looked like someone had split open a giant crystal and carved out the pool that was placed next to the enormous rain shower in the bathroom. The tub was half-sunken into the floor for easy entrance and exit. Blue hues glinted off the white surface, and it was one of the most inviting things she'd ever seen. Twirling around, she noted the size of the room and the elegant contemporary design that tied everything together. "Holy shit," she whispered to herself.

"Your tub anytime you want to use it," Julian said cajolingly.

"It's *your* tub. And I think I'd probably drown," Kristin answered, trying and failing to imagine herself bathing in the enormous bath.

"I'd be more than happy to dive in and save you," he mentioned amiably.

Kristin pictured herself pretending to be sliding under the water just so Julian would get that hot body naked and jump in with her. There was room enough for two. Hell, there was room enough to have a giant orgy if one was into that kind of thing.

She turned to him, resigned. "You have a beautiful home. Thank you for the tour. But I really need to get back to town."

"Your house, too," he grumbled unhappily.

The fairy tale had ended when she'd left Vegas, and she had to remember that. "This is your life, not mine," she told him firmly as she started toward the stairs.

He followed closely. "Kristin? What's wrong?"

"I can't do this. I can't pretend that this marriage is anything but a big mistake." She choked back a sob, tears filling her eyes as she went to take the first step and misjudged the distance, pitching her forward.

"Fuck. Kristin. No!"



A muscular arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her backward as Julian pitched sideways and groaned before tumbling down the long flight of stairs, his balance off from the effort it took to pull her back to land on her ass on the second step.

“*Jesus!* He’s injured,” she rasped as she suddenly understood why he’d sounded like he was in pain just before the fall. “Julian!”

Kristin took the steps as fast as humanly possible and dropped to her knees beside his way-too-still body at the bottom of the steps.

He was on his back, and his eyes were closed and his head was bleeding. The stairs were marble, and there had been absolutely nothing to cushion his hard fall.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry,” she babbled as she felt for his pulse and watched the rise and fall of his chest with relief.

Regret tore through her, but she went into medical mode, ignoring the pool of blood on the floor as she pulled her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans to dial 911 to get an ambulance on the way.

*I shouldn’t have freaked out like that. He injured himself even more to keep me from falling.*

After hanging up the phone and stuffing it back in her pocket, she dashed to the kitchen and opened drawers until she found a clean kitchen towel. She used it to hold pressure on the large gash to his forehead.

As he began to stir, she tried to keep him still. “Don’t move. I’m not sure if you hurt your back or your neck,” she told him sternly. “An ambulance is coming.”

He blinked as he opened his gorgeous blue eyes, and his gaze landed directly on her face almost immediately. “Don’t run,” he requested groggily.

“I’m not going anywhere right now. You almost killed yourself. What were you thinking?” She held the towel steady as she looked down at him, her heart melting as she thought

about how confidently he'd put himself at risk to keep her from tumbling down the stairs.

"It was going to be me or you," he answered as he shot her a crooked grin.

"You could have just let me go. Maybe I could have caught my balance."

"Or maybe you wouldn't," he argued. "Better me than you. My head is harder." He started to try to get up.

She pushed him back down gently. "Just for once, can you listen to me? Don't try to get up right now."

"You're so beautiful when you're cranky." His expression was amused. "I'll be fine."

Again, she pushed him down. "Try to move again and I'll clobber you so you stay still," she threatened.

She scowled at him, and he did the last thing she expected.

He started to laugh.

# CHAPTER 12



Kristin ended up staying for the weekend to watch over Julian, which didn't exactly make him unhappy. If he had to take a knock on the head to see Kristin in his house, he'd gladly throw himself down the stairs again just to get her to stay longer.

Problem was, he really didn't want her on those terms.

He wanted her here because there was nowhere else on Earth that she wanted to be, because that's how he felt.

He wanted it all.

Call him selfish, but he wanted her to *want* to be with him.

She'd been prickly and professional while she watched him for any signs of concussion, even though his X-rays had been okay. Really, he was feeling better. His bruised ribs were healing, and other than some sutures in his hard head from his tumble down the stairs, and the frustration he was feeling from being an inactive couch potato for two days, he was fine.

"You should be okay," Kristin informed him coolly. "I have to get going."

She had her coat on like she was ready to head out the door. "We need to talk," he told her honestly.

"After you're totally recovered."

"I am recovered. Sit," he demanded, gratified when she flopped into one of the chairs in the family room, but not without a stubborn, mulish expression on her face.

Julian had become familiar with *that look*, and it generally didn't bode well for reasonable conversation, but he was damn sick of putting off their discussion.

"We need to bargain."

She lifted a brow. “Why? We have to get rid of this problem before everybody knows. It was a mistake.”

*Ouch! Christ! She knows how to bruise a guy’s ego.*

Luckily, since he was usually pretty hardheaded, he didn’t take it personally. “You want a divorce. I don’t. How do we resolve that? There are a million ways I could slow down the process.”

“So now you’re going to bully me and throw your money around?” Kristin asked, sounding more sad than angry.

*Shit!* He hated *that*. Having her be disappointed in him was worse than her being pissed off. In fact, he’d prefer she argue with him. “If necessary,” he answered, hating himself for being the tormenter she’d accused him of being. But he was desperate, and he knew she wasn’t about to give in.

“What do you want, Julian?”

*I want to pull the ponytail out of your hair and watch it fall everywhere until that beautiful mass of red curls is free. I want you naked, hot, and fucking touching me. I want everything you have to give, and then I’ll want more.*

“I want you to stay,” he finally admitted. “Give us a three-month trial. If you still don’t want to live together, then I’ll make sure to get the divorce pushed through quickly.”

“Why? This makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. There’s something about us that works. You can deny it all you want, but you feel it just like I do, Scarlet. I’m sitting here thinking about having you on your knees, naked and at my mercy, and I know you’re thinking the same damn thing.”

She rolled her eyes, but her expression was slightly guilty. “So it’s all about sex?”

*Yes. No. Maybe.*

He lost his patience. “Fine. Yeah. Maybe we can fuck each other out of our systems. Maybe we’ll both get bored and want to go. All I know right now is if we don’t find out, we’ll probably both regret it. I know I will.”

Hell, he'd known that he wanted Kristin for a long time, and he'd been disturbed about it for longer than he'd admit.

"One of us could get hurt," she murmured, her expressive green eyes telling him that it might be her who ended up injured.

"It's possible," he admitted, knowing damn well he'd never hurt her. He wasn't capable of it. "That's always a risk you take. But wouldn't you rather hang out with the asshole you already know than one you don't, to explore the possibilities?"

She was biting her lip to keep from laughing, and Julian couldn't help but grin back at her.

Finally, she snorted and started to laugh. "You *are* crazy," she accused when she finally took a breath.

He shrugged. It wouldn't be the first time he doubted his own sanity when it came to Kristin. "Just say you will. Then we can start the more pleasant part of the bargain."

"I'm not even going to ask what that part might be. You're still recovering from a head injury, not to mention the bruises and injuries you had from before you came here, from making your last movie. I'm not certain you're even totally in your right mind at the moment."

"Baby, I know exactly what I'm saying." His body might've been a little banged up, but he was completely coherent.

She crossed her arms. "I could end up hating you for blackmailing me like this."

"You won't," he promised. He'd treat her so good that she'd forget all about it after a few weeks. He hoped!

"I'll do everything I can to make you miserable," she warned.

"And I'll do everything I can to pleasure you," he stated bluntly. "We'll see which one wins."

"You'll be begging me to leave by tomorrow," she predicted, frowning at him menacingly.

“You’ll be begging me to fuck you by tonight,” he retorted with a smug smile on his face. She could say whatever she wanted, but he knew she was attracted to him.

She huffed and stood up, took off her jacket, and hung it in a nearby closet. “Fine. Have it your way.”

*I just did get my way.*

He’d challenged her, and she couldn’t walk away.

She sat back in the chair and glared at him. “So what happens when you have to leave? Or didn’t you think about that?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he revealed. “I’ll have to make a few trips to California for a few days, but otherwise, I’m home.”

He was amused by the incredulous look on her face. “You can’t stay here in Amesport indefinitely.”

“Of course I can. It’s my house. I live here.” Yeah, he knew it drove her crazy when he acted like a dumbass, but he said it anyway.

“What about your career?”

“I’ve changed,” he confessed earnestly. “Fame isn’t my thing, and I like writing screenplays a hell of a lot better than doing entertaining movies. I’ll leave that for other guys who don’t like to write. I’d rather create the stories than act them out.” He took a deep breath and exhaled before he continued. “Xander is coming back here after rehab, and it’s time for me to pay Micah back for being the adult in the family. My parents are gone. My brothers and cousins are all I have left.”

“You want to be closer to them?” she asked, her expression softening.

“Yeah. Nothing like losing my parents and nearly my youngest brother to make me realize how important family really is. Amesport feels like home. Don’t ask me why. Maybe it’s because my family is here, or maybe it’s that damn stone that Beatrice gave me to clear my pathways, but this is where I want to be. If I’m not here, I miss being here.”

He was fairly certain his emotions had something to do with the fact that one hot, redheaded menace lived here, too. But he didn't mention that.

"You still have your crystal?" she asked curiously.

He pulled it out of his pocket and held it up. "You don't?"

"I do," she admitted with a flushed expression. "It's in my jacket. Why did we keep them? They're just rocks."

"Apache tears," he corrected. "It worked for me. I think it helped me to see exactly what I wanted. I wouldn't be here now if I didn't."

She nodded. "To help your family, and be closer to them."

*And to be closer to you.* "Why is it so hard to believe that I just want to spend time with you?"

She looked up at him, her expression startled. "Because I don't understand it. All we've ever done is argue."

"Not always," he answered in a low, raw voice.

"Okay. We had *one* good weekend. But other than that, we have nothing in common. I grew up in a world where every penny counted. I've never been attractive. In fact, I was bullied in school because I was a nerd—a *chubby, redheaded, freckled* nerd. Mara was one of my only friends back then."

Okay. Maybe it happened years ago, but Julian still had to clench his fists to keep from punching something. "What happened?"

"My dad was a boxer in his earlier days. I finally got to the point where I could beat the crap out of anybody who gave me any shit," she told him proudly.

"That's why you hate the nickname *Red*?"

She nodded. "It was never exactly used in a fond way."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

She shrugged him off. "It was a long time ago."

Julian knew it was an experience that had shaped her perception of herself. "But you know the way you see yourself

is messed up, right?”

“I’m realistic,” she argued.

“No, you’re not. That cute redheaded, freckled girl grew into a bombshell redhead who is hot enough to make almost any guy have wet dreams about fucking you.”

“You’re the only person who says that,” she answered, sounding flustered.

“Maybe no guy says it, but they’re thinking about it. Believe me. I’ve seen you in a little black dress that’s a cock teaser.”

“Was it you who went through my underwear?”

“Baby, if I was in your panties, you’d know it.” He gave her a smartass answer.

She scowled and released an exasperated sound. “You know what I mean. Did you buy the dress? The underwear? Everything?”

“One of my assistants in California helped me pick it out. She said it would look great on a redhead. She was right.”

“Where did you get my key?”

*Oh, hell, she talked to Mara. She knows Mara wasn’t an accomplice.*

“Liam owns the apartment buildings. The rent you pay goes to one of his property corporations.” He saw the outraged look on her face, so he quickly added, “Don’t blame him. I told him we were in a hurry to get out of town and to Vegas. He let me in before he left.”

“That’s still a sneaky damn thing to do. And he lied to me. He told me that you probably got the key from my parents. What if you weren’t being honest? What if somebody else wanted to get into my apartment?”

“He thinks you asked me to get your stuff. He had no reason to doubt me. He isn’t the type to just let anybody into your home. I lied to him, and he was trying to cover for me. He probably didn’t know what the hell to say when he realized



you didn't send me for your stuff. He was pretty damn sure I wasn't after any money or credit cards, so I'm sure he wants to confront me and get the truth before he fesses up to the fact that he let me in."

"I don't want men pawing through my underwear." She shot him an annoyed look.

Honestly, Julian didn't want any guy feeling up her underwear but him. "I didn't paw. I just took some and threw them in the suitcase," he rumbled.

"And my parents? Who made the deal with them? You or Liam?"

"I sought them out first. I like them both a lot. I wanted to help them."

He saw her body tense protectively. "You met my mom and dad. And they actually *like* you."

"I can be charming," he protested. "Of course they like me."

"I haven't talked to them about this yet," she confided. "I guess I was hurt because they never told me they were taking on a partner . . . or partners. Maybe I don't own the bar, but I've busted my ass to keep it afloat."

"I asked them not to say anything until I told you myself." God, Julian hated himself for not coming clean earlier. He could see that disappointed look on her face again. "It's not their fault. I know how much work you put into the bar. I shouldn't have asked them to wait for me to tell you. They wanted to consult you first, I think."

"I doubt that," she retorted. "They have too much other stuff going on."

Julian felt a pain in his chest, an ache that wouldn't go away. "It must have been difficult growing up with your mom sick."

"You know she has multiple sclerosis?" she asked inquisitively.

"Yeah. I know. Has she gotten worse?"

She didn't answer and Julian didn't know what to say to make her feel better. Her mother was incapacitated, using a walker and sometimes a wheelchair to get around now. The moment he'd met Dale and Cindy Moore, he'd immediately known why Kristin worked so damn hard.

He lost it when he saw the tears start to pour from Kristin's eyes. "Come here," he demanded, holding out his arms. "Either come to me or I'll come get you."

In an instant, she was throwing herself into his arms.

# CHAPTER 13



Once the tears started, Kristin couldn't stop. It was like water bursting through a dam that had been stressed for a very long time. Once it was broken, everything had to flow out of her.

"Shhh . . . sweetheart. Tell me about it," Julian said in a low, comforting voice next to her ear.

He was reclined back on the sofa, and holding her body against him. The respite she was getting while she was there felt like heaven. Julian's strength was a welcome haven. Angrily, she swiped the tears from her cheeks with her fingers. "I was eight when she was diagnosed. Mom was forty-five, and she had the progressive type of MS. Every patient is different, experiences the disease in various ways, so it was hard to tell what would happen from day to day. One of the reasons I didn't have all that many friends wasn't just because I was bullied. I could handle the jerks in school. It was because I was home a lot. I always wanted to get there to make sure she was doing okay."

"So you felt responsible for her when you were a kid?"

Kristin had never really thought about it, but she guessed she *had* feared that her mom might get sicker if she wasn't there. "I suppose I did," she answered, making herself comfortable between Julian's legs and letting her back rest against his chest. "Back then, I didn't really understand much except that she didn't feel good most of the time. She had some occasional good days, but she struggled. She could walk, but she always had balance issues."

His arms wrapped around her waist. "Then what happened?"

"As I grew up, things got worse and worse. The financial strain of Mom having a chronic illness was always difficult. I pretty much went to school and rushed home afterward. Dad

had to get to Shamrock's. We couldn't afford much staff at the bar."

Those years had been hard. No extracurricular activities, and no real involvement in anything outside of home and the classroom. Not that Kristin regretted spending those years with her mother. She loved her. But she *had* experienced moments over the years where she wished she wasn't an only child, that she had a sibling or two to talk to about her fears. Her dad had always been so fearful and anxious that she'd never wanted to be anything but positive with him.

"So you were socially isolated?" he asked in a concerned tone.

"Yes. No. Maybe a little, but I probably didn't have to be." Kristin's anxiety was her own. Her mom had been fatigued, and she had been having problems walking. But never did her mother tell her to stay home. Kristin made those decisions on her own.

"You decided you needed to take care of her," Julian concluded. "Why am I not surprised?"

"She needed help," Kristin defended.

"Maybe she did, sweetheart. But you didn't need to take on that role when you were still a kid."

"There wasn't anyone else. And it doesn't matter. I'm not a child anymore. I went to school to get a technical license and went to work."

"In health care, of course," Julian drawled.

"I actually happen to like taking care of people," she replied indignantly.

"I'm not arguing that you have a kind heart, Scarlet. I'm just saying you haven't had much of a life. I admire the fact that you've always been there for your parents. I wish I could say the same."

"Your parents weren't ill," Kristin retorted.

"Still wish I would have thought about the fact that they weren't going to be around forever," he grumbled. "I was

selfish. I thought everything was on hold while I was trying to get to the top of my field. My parents were my biggest supporters. I never knew they wouldn't live to see my success."

There was remorse in Julian's voice, a true sadness that made Kristin's chest ache. "I'm sorry. But there was no way you could have predicted what happened, Julian." Her mom might use a walker now, and she might not always feel well, but at least her father had never once thought about walking away, and Kristin still had both of her parents. MS itself wasn't fatal. It was her mother's quality of life rather than longevity that was affected.

"Maybe not. But I'll always regret how seldom I went to see my parents in the decade before they were murdered. One thing I've learned is to never take anything for granted anymore." He heaved a masculine sigh, then changed the subject. "So you grew up fast? You were never quite allowed to be a kid? No wonder you feel guilty about having fun."

"I don't . . ." Her voice trailed off as she really thought about what Julian had said. There might be just a little truth to his statement. "Fun wasn't really an option," she admitted sadly. "I mean, it wasn't horrible. It's not like my parents were abusive or neglectful. It wasn't their fault."

"I didn't say they were or that it was directly their doing that you feel that way, but you *do* feel like your life isn't supposed to involve time to play," he mused.

"Maybe I'm just boring," she snapped, irritated by how close he was to the truth.

"Nope," he muttered in a low baritone that vibrated against Kristin's ear. "I'd say you're always much too worried about everyone else except yourself. Your entire life is dedicated to other people's welfare. But then, who takes care of you?"

She snorted. "I can take care of myself."

"I have news for you, Scarlet, you're not doing a very good job. I can tell you're exhausted and stressed out. I'm

willing to bet the only time you've drunk to excess was in Vegas." He toyed with one of her curls playfully. "Why then? Why only when you were in Vegas?"

"Because it's the only opportunity I've ever had," she answered with a squeak.

"My sweet little liar," he rumbled. "You did it for the same reason I did. I'm not a hard drinker, but I got more than a little plastered that night."

"Then you tell me why we did it, Dr. Freud," she answered sarcastically, knowing Julian had a theory.

"Because trying not to touch you is like trying not to fucking breathe," he answered forcefully.

The heat in his tone made Kristin bite back a groan. Being here, being with him *was* both torture and bliss. "Being drunk made everything explainable," she admitted painfully.

Julian moved so fast that Kristin could barely track his motion, and he had her pinned beneath him on the couch before she could even protest.

His chest was heaving, his eyes stormy and tumultuous as he answered, "We aren't drunk anymore." He grasped her wrists and pinned her hands to the sofa. "And I still feel it, Kristin. So do you."

Her first instinct was to deny that she still felt some inexplicable pull toward Julian, but his raw honesty wouldn't let her. "I'm afraid," she finally said breathlessly.

His expression softened. "And you think I'm not? You think I like having my balls tied in a knot by a gorgeous redhead who makes me fucking insane?"

The "gorgeous redhead" part got to her, as did the thought of a superstar like Julian being confused about her. "I'm just a regular woman, Hotshot. Nothing special about me." Not even remotely.

"You can never tell me that, because I won't believe it," Julian denied. "Do any damn thing you want to piss me off, but I'll still want you, Kristin."

Feeling raw and vulnerable, she told him tearfully, “I don’t understand what you want from me.”

“Everything and nothing,” he shot back. “I want you to give us a chance. I want you to admit that we have to explore this thing or go crazy. Give us three months together to actually have fun. Give somebody a chance to actually take care of you. I’ll take care of your parents forever. Your mom will never need something she can’t afford. I promise.”

*Jesus! He’s the only man who could say something like that and make it sexy!*

Kristin didn’t want somebody to take care of her.

Did she?

The more Julian asked, the better it sounded. For once, she wanted something greedily, selfishly. She wanted . . . him. Not because he offered to leave her wealthy, but because she wanted to, for once, feel like *she* was a priority.

“That isn’t the way my life works. It never has,” she panted out.

“Then change it,” Julian growled. “Nobody needs you right now but me, and maybe I’ll ask for everything, but I sure as hell will give it back.”

He would. Kristin knew he would. For whatever reason, Julian Sinclair was focused on winning her over. But what would happen after he did?

“Stop overthinking everything, Kristin. Just decide if you want to take a chance, do something just for yourself.” He loosened his grip on her wrists, but still held her in place with his body.

It was a challenge, and she knew it. But she couldn’t stop herself from responding. “Fine. I’ll do it. We’re already married. Three months. And then you end this,” she told him wildly, for once not thinking about the consequences.

Julian made her just *that* irritated, mad enough to take up any gauntlet that he threw down.

“Yeah. Then I will,” he agreed gutturally, as if he didn’t want to think about later.

Now that the bargain was struck, Kristin felt a moment of panic. “Let. Me. Up.”

He grinned down at her. “Scared?”

Hell yes, she was terrified. She’d made a deal with the most wicked male she knew, and one who posed the biggest threat to her sanity.

Julian backed off, allowing her to sit up.

She snorted. “Of course not. Three months will pass quickly.”

He just continued to smile, which made Kristin want to punch him.

“I love your optimism,” he answered, amused.

“I told you I’d make your life miserable. I will,” she threatened as she stood, needing some distance between her and the incredibly intoxicating, masculine scent of the hottest man in the universe. Even *she* couldn’t resist his ability to get under her skin, which in turn made her want to get him naked.

Did she have some kind of fetish for angry sex?

*Foreplay.*

She turned back once she was a safe distance from the couch. “I’m going to bed. I have to work tomorrow.” Maybe she’d do a few laps in his Olympic-sized bathtub to blow off steam.

“No you don’t. In fact, you need to pack,” he mentioned casually before she could walk away. “We’re taking a vacation. Sarah got a temp to cover you, and your dad just hired your mom a companion and assistant so he can spend some time with her without being her caregiver.”

Kristin was starting to see red . . . again. “What? I don’t think I heard you right.”

“You heard me just fine. We’re going to go away for a while. Someplace warm.”



Since they'd had their first major snow recently, she shivered at the thought of a warm tropical breeze and some downtime. What would that be like? "I can't go anywhere. I have responsibilities here."

"Not anymore," he informed her. "And it's not like we're leaving for months. It's a vacation."

"Where?" Not that she was really going to go. But she was curious about what he had planned.

"Maui," he informed her. "I have a place there. Call it business if you want. I should probably see how it's going."

Hawaii? Was he serious? "I can't just leave," she told him hotly, chewing her lip to keep from getting excited at the prospect of going somewhere she'd always wanted to go.

"We won't. We'll stop at your parents' place in the morning to say good-bye."

He was missing the point completely—which Kristin knew was intentional. She tried not to think about warm ocean water and tropical cocktails. "I can't."

"Start packing," he shot back, completely ignoring her statement. "I'd like to get an early start. Your parents are thrilled that we're actually going away on a honeymoon."

*Oh. God.* "You told them?" she asked, her voice coming out as a surprised squeak.

He rose and moved to stand in front of her. "Of course. I talk to your dad almost every day. We have a business together. Certainly you didn't want me to lie to them?"

"He never told me," she answered, upset now that her dad hadn't even mentioned that he talked to Julian.

"I asked him not to. If it helps, I just told him the day I was flying back to Amesport. I told him we got married in Vegas. That I finally realized that I wanted to see you every day for the rest of my life. Then I told him about Maui, but I told him I wanted to surprise you."

"It doesn't help," she snapped. "And he didn't ask why I hadn't told him we were married?"

“Of course he did. But I told him we wanted to tell him and your mom when we were together,” he said with a serious expression on his face.

“No wonder you won an Oscar,” she retorted angrily. “They fell for that?”

“Completely. I can be very convincing.”

“I don’t doubt that,” she mumbled unhappily. “You’re leaving me no choice but to play along. You realize they’ll be sad to realize they aren’t having grandchildren in the near future.”

“Why? I can arrange that.” He raised a brow at her suggestively. “I do know how the process works.”

Kristin wanted to hurt him. If he didn’t have a huge gash on his forehead from saving her ass on the stairway, she probably would have. “Fine. I’ll go. But I want to go sightseeing. A lot.” If there was one thing Julian probably hated, it was being out in public.

“Me too. We can island hop if you want,” he answered with an agreeable smirk.

“And I want lots of cocktails with the little umbrellas. Oh, and snorkeling with the giant turtles. I want to do that, too.” If he thought she was going to just hang out on a beautiful beach with him and love it, he was mistaken. “I hate sunbathing.”

She’d be sunburned within minutes. With her fair complexion and red hair, she didn’t tan. She burned until she looked like a lobster.

“Me too,” he agreed. “Very boring unless you’re doing something fun.”

He was being so accommodating that it was nauseating. Funny, but she’d assumed a superstar like Julian would be happy lying on a beach somewhere. How hard was it going to be to truly think up things that he’d find tedious and annoying?

“Pearl Harbor memorial?” she tried desperately.

“Done. We’d have to hop to Oahu, but that’s not a problem.”

Was there anything she could say where he'd disagree?

She gave up. She'd have to think on how to make his life so miserable he'd divorce her. "Good night," she said tightly.

He finally balked. "Wait. I'll come up with you." He grasped her hand to keep her from escaping.

Kristin looked up at him, noticing that his other hand was rubbing his forehead. "Are you okay? I'll get you your meds." He looked like his head was hurting.

"I took them upstairs. I'll be fine. The only thing I really want is my wife," he answered in a fatigued tone so genuine that Kristin couldn't bring herself to argue.

Without saying another word, she led him to the elevator so she could get him upstairs without making his pain any worse, still annoyed with herself that Julian was so damn easy to forgive.

# CHAPTER 14



“I can’t believe my baby is married. Let me see your ring.”

Kristin cringed as she and Julian entered her parents’ house. Her mom was standing right beside her dad, upright with her hands on her walker.

Julian nodded at her father. “Hello, Dale. Good to see you again.” The two men shook hands before Julian swooped in and kissed Kristin’s mother on the cheek. “Cindy, you’re looking as beautiful as ever. I still say I know where Kristin got her looks.”

As they all made their way into the living room, Kristin felt nausea rising up to greet her. She loved her parents, and she’d never lied to them, because there had never been a reason for her to make up falsehoods. She’d spent her youth with her mom, and she’d never gotten into trouble.

She listened as Julian smoothly told her mother that he had wanted to wait and let Kristin pick out the ring of her dreams.

She’d spent a tense night in Julian’s guest room, the same one she’d used to watch him over the weekend. Surprisingly, he’d kissed her tenderly and let her go to bed, but she’d slept very little.

Taking her place next to her mom on the sofa, Kristin put an arm around Cindy’s fragile shoulders, noticing that she wasn’t trembling quite as badly today, and she seemed fairly steady with her walker. “I feel guilty for leaving,” she told her mom earnestly while Julian and her father spoke boisterously across the room.

Her mother squinted up at her in surprise. “Whatever for? I’m not dying. I just can’t walk straight.”

“I’ve never left you and Dad for very long—”

“No, and it’s past time you did, baby girl,” Cindy Moore told her daughter firmly. “You’ve given up enough of your life for us. Now that you’ve found Julian, he should be your priority.”

“He’s aggravating sometimes,” Kristin blurted out without thinking.

Her mom chuckled softly. “They all are, honey. Some are just worse than others. Your father fusses over me like I’m a child. He forgets my brain is still working. I just can’t always express myself right.”

Occasionally, her mother’s speech was slurred, especially when she was tired. Eyeing her parent carefully, Kristin could see the twinkle in the woman’s eyes. “Because he loves you,” she answered softly.

“I know he does,” Cindy replied. “I love him right back. But it doesn’t mean we don’t argue.”

Kristin swallowed hard as she looked over at her father, a big redheaded man who’d stood by his wife all of these years. Her father could be stubborn and proud, but he looked far less stressed out now that he had competent people running Shamrock’s. “He looks good.”

“Thanks to that young man of yours,” Cindy crowed. “You chose well, sweetie. He’s a keeper. I’m glad you saw that and married him right away. The way that he’s helped your dad is almost a miracle for us.”

Tears sprang to Kristin’s eyes. After all she’d done, it had never been enough to save her mom and dad from living a difficult life. But Julian had swept in and saved the day with an infusion of money and talent that had made Shamrock’s the hottest place in town. “I wish I could have done more myself,” Kristin murmured regretfully.

“Honey, you did. You kept the business running. Do you think your dad and I don’t know what you sacrificed for us? And what you’ve always given up for me,” Cindy said tearfully. “That’s why we’re so happy that you found Julian.”

Kristin wanted to weep, but she kept her sorrow buried as she spoke. “I gave up those things willingly, Mom. I love you. You and Dad are my entire life.”

Her heart ached. Obviously both of her parents had felt guilty for squashing her childhood and her adult life. That’s not what Kristin wanted, but it felt nice for them to acknowledge that she’d loved them enough to give up whatever was needed for her family.

“You’re a good girl. You always were. You’re special, honey.” She nodded jerkily toward Julian. “Now it’s your turn. With a man like that, I think you need a little alone time.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii,” Kristin answered, trying to sound excited.

“I know. I think your dad put in his opinion about where you should honeymoon.”

“So this wasn’t a coincidence,” Kristin said carefully.

“I doubt that,” Cindy said with a happy smile.

*Julian planned this trip? He wanted to please me by picking a destination I wanted?*

No. It had to be a coincidence. “He has a place there,” Kristin informed her parent.

For the first time in a long time, her mom chuckled. “He has a place in a lot of locations, from what I understand. He has investments all over the world.”

Not knowing what to say to that, she answered, “Well then, I’m glad he picked Maui.”

“Go and have a wonderful time. I want lots of pictures. I’m glad you’re happy now, but I just wish I hadn’t missed the wedding,” Cindy commented wistfully.

“We can have a big reception when we come back, Cindy,” Julian suggested as he moved across the room with her father.

Kristin watched as her mother beamed at Julian happily. “A wonderful idea. It doesn’t sound like your brothers and

your cousins got to attend the wedding, either.”

“They didn’t,” Julian confirmed.

“Then a reception is definitely in order,” Dale stated robustly.

“It’s settled, then. Right, darling?” Julian sat on the arm of the sofa and put his hand on Kristin’s shoulder as he made the affectionate remark.

“Of course, my love,” she answered through a clenched jaw.

Dale Moore slapped Julian on the back. “We can get the ball rolling on that. Cindy and I are retired together now. It will give us something to plan.”

“Thanks, Dale,” Julian said, sounding grateful.

“I so wish you’d call us Mom and Dad like Kristin does,” Cindy told Julian sincerely.

Kristin watched a myriad of emotions pass over her husband’s expression. Her mom’s comment had been innocent enough, but maybe he wasn’t ready to use those titles, out of respect for his murdered parents.

Before she could speak up, Julian did. “I’d be honored. I lost both of my parents a few years ago now.”

“Oh, Julian. I’m so sorry. What happened?” Cindy’s stunned expression was proof that Kristin’s parents didn’t know about Julian’s tragedy.

“They were both murdered in a home invasion,” he said flatly.

Kristin could see the horrified expression on her mom’s face as she spoke. “I’m so sorry. We can’t be your parents, but we’d like to be a second pair of parent figures to you.”

His lips formed a slow smile. “Thank you. You’ve raised a smart, beautiful, giving, and loving daughter. For that alone, I’d be proud to call you my honorary mom and dad.”

It was an awkward but deeply touching moment for Kristin. She had a feeling it was an action that was pivotal for

Julian, and she was gratified that he handled it with grace, for her parents' sake.

Hugging her mom tightly, she whispered in her ear, "I love you. But I'll call while I'm gone."

Her mother blew her off. "Don't bother. I think Julian will keep you busy. If anything comes up, we'll call you."

It seemed strange to finally see her parents looking healthier, stronger. Stress had taken its toll on both of them, but they looked better.

She stood and hugged her dad as she whispered, "Are you going to be okay?"

"Fine, fine. Go on and have a good time. You're a married woman now, and you don't need to keep putting off living your life because of us anymore," he boomed loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear.

"I don't regret it." She didn't try to deny that she'd been living a half life. Maybe things hadn't exactly worked out as planned, but she'd take a vacation to Hawaii as a new start.

Her parents didn't need her anymore.

Somehow, that felt strangely bittersweet.

She and Julian finished their good-byes and left her happy mother and father behind them.

He held open the door of his brand-new black Mercedes SUV. Not the flashy car she'd imagined that Julian would drive, but practical for Maine winters.

"You like them," she accused as she fastened her seat belt.

"Never said I didn't. As a matter of fact, I already said as much."

She was silent as he closed the door and situated himself in the driver's seat.

Opening the console between them, he took out a bottle, shook it, and handed her two pills. "Take them," he directed as he also handed her a mini bottled water.



She looked down at her palm as he dropped them. “What is this?”

“For motion sickness. I brought them along. You’ll have a nice high-protein meal ready for you when you get on the jet.”

Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked at the pills, touched that he actually *was* looking out for her. Something about the way he did little things, remembered details, was dangerous to her psyche, and disarming.

She popped the tablets into her mouth, opened the water, and swallowed them down without saying another word as he drove them to the airport.

# CHAPTER 15



When Julian had said that he had “a place” in Maui, Kristin had never imagined that he meant an *entire resort*.

He and his brothers each owned a piece of the luxury hotel that left Kristin at a loss for words. She’d seen several swimming pools, a spa, and expensive shops on the way to their room, which had ended up being bigger than most people’s homes.

She took a deep breath as she stood on the balcony of the gorgeous suite, taking in the beautiful waves as they crashed to the shore. They were so close to the water that she’d be lulled to sleep by the ocean.

Not that she was really tired. She’d slept for the majority of the long flight, waking up only after they were already well on their way across the Pacific Ocean. Julian had kept her fed, then had more pills ready the moment she woke up. She hadn’t experienced a single moment of motion sickness, even though the trip was long.

Julian entered the balcony through the open door of the living room, carrying a tray.

Kristin turned, and couldn’t help but laugh when she saw what he had in his hand.

He was gripping a tray that had several multicolored cocktails topped with tiny umbrellas. On second glance, she noticed they were also garnished with swords of fruit. “You didn’t!” She covered her mouth to try to hide her laughter, but she couldn’t hold it back.

“You asked for cocktails with little umbrellas. Sit,” he ordered as he set the burden on the table between two loungers.

He didn’t say a word as he handed her the tallest glass while she took a place in one of the comfortable chairs.

“What is this one?” She looked curiously at the pretty blue color of the adult beverage.

“You’re the bartender. You tell me.” He lifted one of the drinks for himself.

Cautiously, she took a sip. “Mmm . . . rum? Pineapple? Coconut? I never was good with complicated drinks,” she admitted as she took another sip. It was delicious, but she didn’t have a clue what ingredients it had.

“It’s a Blue Hawaii. I don’t know exactly what’s in it, either. All I asked for was to make sure they all had colorful little umbrellas. But I’m pretty sure it will knock you on your ass if you drink too many.”

Taking a little bit more of the tasty cocktail, Kristin sipped slowly and watched the sunset. “It’s beautiful here. Almost like another world. Do you come here often? Do Micah and Xander?”

“Nope,” Julian answered. “It was strictly an investment. We acquired the place right before Mom and Dad died. I’m the first one to visit. I like it,” he decided.

Again, she chuckled. “You should. You own it. Nice little place you have here,” she teased.

“I never said it was *small*,” he answered in protest.

“Well, it’s not. Little . . . I mean. It’s big.” She was pretty sure they weren’t discussing the hotel anymore.

He turned his head and shot her a wicked grin. “It is big.”

“I know,” she muttered. “I remember that part.”

“Good.” He leaned his head against the back of his lounge and closed his eyes.

God, he looked good. His messy blond hair was being ruffled by the light breeze, and he looked relaxed. The short-sleeved button-down shirt he’d donned in the morning under his jacket was now open to reveal his ripped chest and abs. His feet were bare below the hem of a well-used pair of jeans that hugged his lower body lovingly.

Kristin relaxed, letting the beautiful sunset and the roar of the waves soothe her soul. She savored her drink slowly, enjoying the peace that had settled over her like a comforting blanket.

Maybe she'd never realized how uptight she was, or how rarely she stopped to actually watch the sun slowly descend until it disappeared. Even simple pleasures took too long for her to stop for a few moments to enjoy.

By the time she'd finished her cocktail, Julian was sleeping. She got up and stretched, then went back into the suite, passing through the living room to get to the bedroom, trying not to worry about the fact that there was only one very big bed.

*Does he expect me to sleep with him?*

Feeling mellow and lighthearted for the first time in as long as she could remember, she wasn't going to dwell on the sleeping arrangements.

Looking around, she finally realized somebody had unpacked their things. Finding a silky nightgown in her drawer, she grabbed a pair of undies and went into the bathroom, dumping her nightclothes on the large double vanity so she could fill the massive tub. Picking out one of the bath bombs that promised serenity, she dropped it into the rising water and watched with satisfaction as it fizzled.

*He knows just how to get to me.*

The bath was more like a giant Jacuzzi, with marbled steps and lined with gleaming porcelain.

Stripping off her clothes, she was in the water with her hair secured on the top of her head within moments.

Her head connected with the bath pillow and she let out a blissful sigh before turning off the water, inhaling the tangy scent of essential oils as she closed her eyes.

She should feel guilty for doing nothing.

She should feel guilty because she wasn't doing anything productive.

She should feel guilty because she was here with Julian.

But she couldn't. In so many ways, Julian was probably right. Just once, she *could* put herself first. She'd probably known for a while that she was suffering from burnout, the pace she'd been keeping up for years catching up to her.

"Nothing could feel better than this," she whispered to herself as she let the warm water wash away any remaining stress she'd been feeling.

"I can think of a few things that might," Julian's smooth-as-fine-silk voice remarked next to the tub. "Smells good in here."

Startled, she sank down into the tub. Not that it did any good. The water was clear, with no bubbles in sight. The bomb left the water scented and treated, but it did nothing to the transparent color. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I missed you," he said huskily, his body naked from the waist up. He flipped the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper before he dropped everything to the floor, including his briefs. "I woke up and you were gone."

Kristin gaped at him, trying not to stare at his engorged cock as he kicked the pants and underwear away from his feet.

"Are you showering? I can get out," she squeaked.

His brows drew together as though he were concentrating. "I thought about that. But then when I saw you in the tub, I was pretty sure I needed to wash your back." He vaulted up the few steps, pushed her forward, and lowered himself in behind her. "Amazing," he rumbled, his chest vibrating against her back.

She felt his cock pressing against her, his body enveloping her in his heat. Nervous, she put her hands on the side of the tub to get out. "Julian, I—"

"Relax," he told her calmly, putting his arms around her waist and pulling her back against him. "We are married, you know."

She wasn't the least bit crowded. The bath had room enough for at least a few more people if she wanted bathing to be a social activity. But she didn't. "Technically, we could be married in name only. Neither one of us really vividly remembers what happened after the wedding," she reminded him.

"Well, Mrs. Sinclair, I can fix that quite easily," he said in a hoarse whisper into her ear as he took the clip from her hair and let her locks tumble over her shoulders. He buried his face into her curls, his voice muffled as he rasped, "Jesus, you're beautiful."

Those words stopped her desire to get away, and he'd stopped her in her tracks by calling her Mrs. Sinclair. A longing she couldn't explain speared her heart. "Julian," she protested, but it sounded more like encouragement to her.

"Let me touch you, Kristin. Let me do what I never did the first time we were together."

Flashbacks of the pleasure he'd given her in Vegas flooded her brain, making her so needy that she had to bite back a moan.

His mouth went to the vulnerable skin at the side of her neck, and his big, powerful hands moved up to palm her breasts. As he used the slickened water to tease her nipples, she slumped back against him, feeling his touch sizzle through her entire body. "Yes," she encouraged, lifting her hands up to grasp his muscular biceps just to have something to keep her grounded.

"These," he confided, "are fucking sexy as hell." He gently pinched the hard tips of her breasts, then soothed them with warm water.

Her back arched from the sensation of having his mouth and hands all over her body. "I ache," she panted.

Julian grasped her leg and turned her until she was straddling him. "I'll never let you hurt, Kristin. Not for long."

His mouth descended on a vulnerable nipple while his fingers continued to tease the other. The carnal sensuality of

the way he seemed to be enjoying the exploration of her body was making Kristin's core clamp down hard enough to be painful, begging for Julian to satisfy her.

"Please." She used his powerful thighs to take away a tiny bit of her frustration, rolling her pussy against the hard surface of his skin.

"Take what you want, Kristin," he encouraged huskily.

What she wanted was *him* inside *her*. Now.

She thrust her hands into his hair and jerked, forcing his head up so she could lean down and match their mouths, calming a little of her frenzied need that was now raging out of control.

She started the kiss; Julian took it over. He moved his hands up her back and grasped her hair, his mouth gaining stronger contact, his tongue spearing between her lips demandingly.

A sob escaped her mouth as Julian pulled back, a greedy desire to have Julian's cock inside her nearly making her come unglued.

"Please," she begged as she humped his thigh harder, but it wasn't enough. What she needed was far more than what she was getting.

"What? Tell me, Kristin."

"Fuck me," she demanded. "Now. Please."

He shot her a small grin, and she knew he'd won this round. He'd told her she'd be begging him to fuck her, and she had. It might have taken him an extra day, but it didn't seem to bother him.

As she looked at him with a soul-deep desperation, his eyes glowed with identical need, the same intensity of carnality as she was experiencing. She didn't know how she knew, but she could *feel* him, see that mirror image in his eyes.

"Ride me until we both come so hard that we can't get out of this tub," he growled as he palmed his cock and brought her down on top of him. "Oh, fuck! Yeah."

The water washed away some of her juices, but she was still so slick that she was able to lower herself until her sheath was full of Julian buried to his balls.

“Ahhh . . . ,” she panted. “I needed this. I need *you*.” Her head fell back in ecstasy as he took ahold of her hips and bucked up.

“Take what you want, baby,” he encouraged demandingly. “Ride me hard.”

She slapped her hands beside his head for leverage, then claimed exactly what she desired, lifting her hips and then slamming them back down again, shivering with every thrust of his cock entering her all over again.

“Fuck!” Julian cursed with frustration, surging up and lifting her with him as he stood. “Not enough,” he grumbled. “I’ve waited so fucking long for this that nothing but hard and deep is going to satisfy either one of us.”

She gasped at the sudden loss of Julian’s presence inside her body, whimpering with irritation. “No. Fuck me. Now.” She punched him in one of his upper arms.

“Getting impatient?” he asked wickedly.

“Yes,” she answered angrily.

He set her feet down on the plush rug and roughly placed her hands on the marble vanity so she was bent over. As he moved behind her and toyed between her slick folds, he answered, “Then welcome to my goddamn world since the moment we met.” He surged forward, burying himself deeply inside her again, and then grasped her hips hard.

Kristin let out a high howl of pleasure that ended when she was startled to see their reflection in the big mirror in front of her.

Julian looked huge and powerful, his face tight with unsated lust as he met her gaze in the mirror.

“*This*. Is. Us,” he told her in a low, vibrating voice that he made no effort to control, as though he didn’t care if she saw him raw and unwound. “*This* never goes away.” He pulled



back and slammed into her again. “*This* is something neither one of us can control, so why in the fuck do we even try?”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t. Lost in his voice and movements, her heart was hammering as something she’d never experienced before touched places she didn’t know existed. Letting her eyes talk for her, she didn’t take her gaze from his, and they were pleading with him to satiate her ache.

Their heated stare stayed connected while Julian’s pace became a punishing, brutal conquering of her body, something she needed more than she’d ever yearned for anything before, and probably never would again.

“Harder,” she pleaded as she wildly moved back as he came forward.

Water was dripping from their bodies, and as Julian’s eyes finally slipped from hers, Kristin looked at herself and her wild-eyed face, not even recognizing herself. Strangely, she didn’t care. She was too far gone to find the image of Julian fucking her from behind as anything but hot and erotic.

“You’re mine, Kristin. You got it? Mine!” Julian commanded in an animalistic voice.

His bold pronouncement brought a feral response from her body, her fingers gripping the counter harder. “Then you’re mine, too,” she moaned.

“Never would argue with that,” he said, his voice strained and his chest heaving.

“I have to come, Julian. Please.” She gave up all pretense of being tough. Her climax was building to the point of insanity.

“Then come with me,” he insisted, his voice rough as sandpaper.

The knot in her belly unfurled as Julian moved his hand between her thighs and began to grind his fingers against her clit as he continued to hammer into her from behind.

“Yes,” she hissed loudly. “Oh, God . . . yes!”

Her orgasm slammed into her body in a rush, and her channel clenched down hard as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. She was helpless to do anything except scream, “Julian!”

“That’s right. Say my name, Kristin. Never forget who is making you come like this.” He groaned, his head falling back as Kristin milked him of his scorching-hot release.

His pleasure was hers as she watched him come, her climax loosening its hold as pure satisfaction followed while she watched a totally aroused Julian reach his own peak.

He was all male, all powerful flexing muscles and enormous grunts of gratification as he ground his pelvis against her ass in a glorious alpha-male display of power.

Kristin was gasping for breath, her heart rate thundering as he finally locked eyes with her as if to say *I told you so*, but not in a teasing sort of way. He looked exhausted and at peace with what was happening, but his tumultuous gaze was demanding she accept something that was inevitable.

Opening her mouth to tell him how she felt, she closed it again when she was unable to speak.

Julian slowly disengaged himself from her, then lifted her bodily in his arms and carried her limp form to the enormous bed. Sliding in beside her, he wrapped his arms around her and held her, stroking a hand lazily over her back. “*That* is us,” he muttered simply into her ear.

“I know,” she sighed, her heart rate beginning to slow down. She didn’t question what he meant by that statement anymore. She knew. And it was actually as frightening as it was beautiful.

She wanted to talk, to tell him how scary it was to lose so much of her control when she was with him.

She didn’t.

Moments later, the comforting motion of his hand running up and down her back, and the sounds of the ocean, forced her to sleep.

# CHAPTER 16



Their first few days in Maui left Kristin and Julian pleasantly exhausted.

Not that they'd done much of anything but play on the beach and explore some of the local restaurants. Julian acted like he couldn't get enough of her once he'd had another carnal bite of her body, and she didn't exactly try to fend him off.

"There's one. Right there!" Julian squeezed Kristin's hand and she looked toward where he was pointing. She'd been so caught up in feeling the wind on her face as they cruised out to sea that she'd almost forgotten they were whale watching.

Fascinated, she leaned across him as the boat slowed to watch the majestic humpback whales play. She'd heard they were gentle giants, but somehow she hadn't imagined just how large they'd be.

One surged out of the water, and she gasped as the large mass lifted itself from the water and then submerged again.

"Oh, my God. They're huge." The excitement in her voice was real, the hand Julian was holding trembling with the experience of seeing the massive mammals in their own habitat.

"I've seen them before, but it's always just as fascinating as the first time," Julian answered as he shot her a grin. "Are you doing okay?"

The concern in his voice made her smile back at him. "I'm fine. I can see where we're going, and the pills seem to be working. I won't puke on you. I promise."

"I don't care if you do. I just don't want you to feel sick," he grumbled, then turned their attention back to the whales.

The way he cared about her made her heart melt. He might be a smartass, but she'd come to learn that Julian had a heart. A big one. But Kristin had a feeling that he rarely showed it to anyone.

They watched the enormous animals rise and fall from the water, some of them coming so close that she felt the spray of their incredible splash on her face. "I can't believe I live on the coast and I've never seen a whale," she muttered as she continued to watch the antics that were playing out in front of her.

Julian had bought out the entire trip, so, other than the crew, they had the whole boat to themselves.

"Different season in Maine for whale watching," Julian told her.

She shrugged. "It was mostly about money. We couldn't afford it." They couldn't afford to take the time away, either. And she and her father weren't about to leave for the day with her mom at home alone.

"I can get a boat," Julian suggested earnestly.

She chuckled. "Can you captain it?"

"Of course. I can teach you to scuba dive, too. I lived in Southern California. I didn't have a boat, but some of my buddies did."

"Surfer guy?" she joked.

"That, too," he admitted. "But I dive better than I surf."

"I've snorkeled off the beach, but that's about as far under the water as I've ever gotten." It was pretty pathetic that she'd lived her whole life on the coast, yet had experienced very few water sports. She swam well, but that was about her only water talent.

He paused before asking, "Interested in learning, if I get a boat?"

Hell yeah, she was *interested*. It would be fantastic to be able to dive, see more of what might be deeper in the ocean. "We'll see," she murmured, trying to remember that her and

Julian's marriage was a farce. It wasn't like he'd be around to teach her to scuba dive or surf.

Once the boat turned around and headed back to shore, Julian handed her another dose of pills and a water to swallow them.

"Thanks." She was starting to get used to him remembering everything, and being considerate. However, it wasn't something she was totally accustomed to yet.

Once they arrived back to their hotel, Julian stepped away to pick up a package that had arrived for him. When he took her hand to lead her back to their suite so they could change to go find some dinner, he didn't have anything in his hands.

*Maybe it was just a letter or papers.*

She blew it off until they arrived back in the suite and he pulled a tiny box out of his pocket. "I promised your mom you'd come back with your ring," he explained.

*No! No. No. No.*

There was *not* a ring in the box he was holding.

"But I planned on putting her off," Kristin explained hastily. "Please don't tell me that you *really* bought a ring."

"Okay," he agreed amiably. "I won't tell you."

She watched as he took a small velvet box from the cardboard and then popped it open. "I'll just put it on your finger."

She gasped as he turned the container around, the ring nearly blinding her because of the center and surrounding diamonds. "Oh. My. God." She recognized the maker on the box: Mia Hamilton. She was a custom-jewelry maker, and every piece she made was superb but incredibly expensive.

"Mia did a great job." Julian took the ring from the box and tossed it aside.

"I can't wear that," Kristin squeaked.

"Why? It's pretty," Julian answered, looking confused.

“I recognize the maker. Those pieces are outrageous.”

He ignored her, taking her hand and sliding the flashing band on her left ring finger. “I’m rich, Kristin. Filthy rich,” he added. “One ring is not going to break me.”

He was right. He could well afford a Mia Hamilton ring. But it shouldn’t be on *her* finger. It was a special piece of jewelry. Every wedding ring was incredibly unique.

She looked down at her hand, marveling at the craftsmanship of the ring. The diamonds were obviously high quality and very clear, creating a flash every time she moved her hand. The center stone was enormous, a heart-shaped diamond surrounded by a delicate circle of small baguettes. “It won’t break you financially,” she admitted. “But it’s way too dear for me to be wearing. This marriage isn’t real.”

Julian looked at her finger and smirked. “Looks pretty real to me. Your mother will love it.”

Kristin was sure she would. Hell, she already loved the ring herself. But she couldn’t keep it. “Will they take it back?”

“Nope. Custom pieces can’t be returned unless there’s some kind of problem that involves the maker or the gems.”

“It’s perfect,” she said unhappily.

“Just wear it,” Julian cajoled. “What is it going to hurt? I have so much money I don’t know what to do with it anymore. And if we separate, you can keep it. The ring was made for *you*. It would never be worn by anyone else.”

“You can’t just give away a gift like this,” she balked.

“I just did,” he answered as he winked at her.

“What if it gets lost?” she said in a panic.

He shrugged. “Then I’ll get you a replacement.”

Rolling her eyes, she walked through the living room and out onto the balcony for a breath of air, realizing she was so uptight she could barely suck air in and out of her lungs.

The ring caught the light as she gripped the balcony rail, as though it was mocking her.

Strong hands landed on her shoulders. “What’s wrong?” Julian asked calmly.

“This is too much, Julian. I’ll walk around terrified that someone will mug me.”

“Doubtful in Amesport,” he answered, sounding amused. “It’s not a big deal, sweetheart. It really isn’t.”

“Maybe not to you, but it is to me,” she answered, a tear starting to track down her cheek. “Did you decide on the design?”

“Yeah. If you look really close, underneath you’ll see some very tiny chips of black obsidian. I took them off the rock Beatrice gave me. It’s been lucky for me so far.”

She pulled off the engagement ring carefully and peered at the inside, now able to see the small black chips in between each prong. “How did she do that?”

“I had a jeweler knock off a few pieces to send to her.”

It was sentimental and thoughtful. So much so that Kristin wanted to cry in earnest. “Thank you,” she said softly, so touched by his kindness that it was hard to be angry. “I’ll do my best not to lose it.” Arguing was futile if she couldn’t return it, so she placed it back on her finger carefully.

“How did you know it would fit?” she asked curiously.

“You told me your ring size in Vegas. I remembered it.”

Kristin cringed, wondering why they were having *that* conversation in Las Vegas. Unfortunately, she’d been too drunk to recall. “I don’t remember it.”

“I’m not surprised.” He leaned forward and kissed her gently on the forehead. “You were completely hammered.”

She closed her eyes and swallowed, hoping the lump in her throat would disappear. Whether it had been good or bad, she hated the fact that she couldn’t remember her own wedding.



Later that night, Julian would have killed to join his wife for her shower before they went out for dinner.

But he called his brother instead.

“Hey. What’s up? You called?” Julian asked Micah as he flopped down on the living-room couch.

Micah had phoned earlier when he and Kristin were out watching the whales. He’d felt his phone vibrate, but he’d ignored the call.

“Yeah. Xander is coming back to Amesport. He says he’s ready to leave the rehab facility soon,” Micah informed Julian unhappily.

*Shit!* Julian had hoped he’d stay a little longer. “It’s too soon,” he told Micah adamantly.

“He says he’s clean, and if he stays there any longer, it’s going to make him want to start drinking again,” Micah said irritably. “I don’t like it, either. But it’s the furthest he’s ever gone in a program.”

“I’ll be home soon. I’ll be there to help.”

“Julian, you have a career to worry about,” Micah replied.

“Not anymore. I’ve made my last movie, bro. I’m not happy with doing the latest action films. I’m writing. All of this time working my way to the top and I discover I’m in the wrong area of my field,” he told his brother honestly.

“Are you doing this because of Xander?” Micah asked suspiciously.

“No. I’m doing it for me.”

“Okay. Then I guess I can use the help. And I’ll be damn glad to have you here.” Micah hesitated before he asked, “Are you really married to Kristin?”

“How did you know?” Julian had hoped to break the news to his brother himself, but he should have known it would get around.

“Since you sort of made a scene when Kristin was on a blind date, word spread pretty quickly. Do you know what



you're doing right now? Marriage is no joke. I mean, the honeymoon might be fun and all, but it's a serious commitment, Julian."

"You think I don't know that?" Julian retorted irritably.

"Do you?"

Letting his grip relax on the phone, he told his older brother more calmly, "Yeah. I do, actually. I think she's had me tied up in knots since she flung her first insult at me," he confessed. "I've known exactly how I've felt for a long time. Convincing Kristin is a little more difficult."

Micah chuckled. "If anybody can do it, you can. You're the most persistent guy I know."

"Working on it," Julian confirmed. He hesitated before adding, "Maybe we were both drunk when we got married in Vegas, but I wasn't drunk enough not to know exactly what I was doing." He wanted Micah to understand that in no way did he take his marriage lightly. "Speaking of marriage, how is Tessa doing?"

"She's good. A little nervous about the possibility of surgery again, but she's pretty damn strong."

Julian thought about that for a minute before he answered. "Has she gotten any word on whether or not she'll be eligible for cochlear implants?"

"Not yet. But the doctor in New York thought she would be. We'll be seeing her next month after the holidays are over."

Christmas was coming. Julian had almost forgotten. "It's hard to think about winter when you're in Maui," he said jokingly.

"Lucky bastard," Micah grumbled. "I'm taking Tessa there after we get past this surgical possibility."

"You should. She'd love it. We did a good deal for this place."

"Dare I ask how you think things are going to end up with your marriage? You did the deed in Vegas while you were both

intoxicated. You could get out of it fairly easily.” Obviously Micah wasn’t satisfied enough to drop the subject.

“I don’t know.” Julian ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Was it worth it?” Julian blurted out. “All the pain, the work and frustration. You and Tessa had some issues. Was it worth it to hang in there?”

“Every minute of it,” Micah answered genuinely. “I’d go through hell and back for her.” He paused before asking, “Are you really thinking about staying together permanently?”

“I’m thinking about it. I’m not sure she is,” Julian stated flatly.

“It’s worth hanging in there to find out,” Micah mused. “From what I understand, Kristin had to grow up fast, and she’s hyper-responsible. Maybe the load was too much for her.”

“It’s too much for anybody. Hell, she’s barely had a life.”

“Sounds like somebody else I know,” Micah remarked sarcastically. “Hell, I don’t think you ever really took a vacation during all those years you were working.”

“Yeah. And I regretted it,” he admitted. “But I’m making up for it. Besides, you have no room to talk.” Micah had been a workaholic before he’d met Tessa.

“Maybe not. But take it from somebody who knows. Get her to talk. Women aren’t always feeling the same way we are.”

“You mean they aren’t always thinking about sex?” Julian said in mock horror.

Micah laughed. “Not always.”

“Well, damn. Then I guess seduction is no good.”

“It’s good,” Micah confessed. “But it’s not enough.”

“I’m slowly discovering that,” Julian answered in a disgruntled tone.

He chatted with his brother for a couple more minutes before they hung up, and Julian wasn’t any closer to finding a solution to his dilemma than he had been before.

*I need to step things up.*

Problem was, he didn’t have much time.

# CHAPTER 17



“What are you doing?” Kristin asked nervously as she walked out of the bathroom after dressing for bed in a silky emerald-green nightgown that hugged every curve she had.

Julian had no body issues. He’d just stripped down naked and was currently sprawled out on the bed with his engorged cock in his hand, stroking over the length of it absently.

“Thinking about you,” he answered with a wicked grin.

Her heart stuttered as she looked at his incredibly ripped body and casual position. One arm was stretched behind his head, the other was, um . . . busy. He looked like sin and temptation, the mischievous expression on his face dangerous.

How he could be so amusing—yet so intense—was a mystery to her.

And Julian was one big enigma wrapped up in a delicious package. He was unpredictable, and he could easily catch her off guard.

Just like he was doing right this moment.

Her eyes ate him up, lovingly caressing his muscular chest and six-pack abs.

She waited where she had stopped, at least ten feet from where she wanted to be, on the bed right now. Julian would make his move. He always did.

Chewing on her lips, she waited.

And waited.

Then, she started tapping her foot in impatience as she watched him turn his head, still stroking a firm hand over his cock.

“Well?” he said with a devilish expression on his face. “Do you want some of this or not, baby?”

Kristin nearly groaned, pressing her thighs together to stop herself from sprinting over to the bed and crawling up his gloriously nude body, begging for him to touch her. Julian always came and got her, taking her where he found her, or to bed to do all kinds of wicked things to her body that left her pleading for release.

Never, not once, had she ever needed to wait for him to jump all over what he wanted.

Licking her lips as she stared, mesmerized by the distracted motion of his hand, she answered huskily, “Yes. Yes, I think I do.”

He crooked his finger at her to summon her closer. “If you want it, come and get it,” he answered bossily.

It was a challenge. Kristin knew it. Julian wanted to see if she’d be the real aggressor. There was teasing behind his actions, but his purpose was very clear.

*Am I willing to go to him? Am I willing to initiate the intimacy?*

There was no question of whether or not she *wanted* him. Every time she so much as thought about Julian, her body reacted. But she’d be damned if his victory would be that easy.

She put a fingertip to her chin. “I’ll have to think about it,” she told him with a sultry smile. “There are a few things I’d like to do, but I’m not sure you’ll like it.”

Sucking on the tip of her finger, she met his gaze boldly.

“What?” he asked, his voice suddenly urgent.

“I want my mouth all over your body right now, and I’d really like to move your hand aside and take over that job.” She nodded her head toward his cock.

“Then fucking do it,” he rasped, his hand moving a little harder and faster.

Sauntering over to the bed, she smiled down at him, her heart ready to leap out of her chest with longing. His body called to her, and it was screaming loudly right now.

“I’m not sure I should,” she considered as she slid one leg onto the bed. “I mean, it *is* rather bold.”

“Then *be* bold,” he demanded.

Kristin had lost track of how many times he’d brazenly pleased her with his mouth between her legs. Never once had she returned the favor. Not that she didn’t want to. Honestly, she wasn’t that confident with her skills in that department, but she was fairly certain she could find a way to please him.

The way Julian was constantly lusting after her like she was a supermodel had given her a sense of sexual power that she had never experienced in her entire life. He made her want to break out of herself and be the temptress he accused her of being.

Knowing she affected him in the most carnal of ways was as heady as it was crazy.

She moved over to him and pushed his hand away, threading her fingers with his as she leaned closer and commanded, “Kiss me.”

His warm breath was already wafting over her face as she lowered her mouth and their lips met in the most sensual kiss she’d ever experienced.

His arm shot out from under his head and he threaded his fingers through her curls. He didn’t rush as he thoroughly explored her mouth, his hands caressing her scalp. The embrace was hot, erotic, and completely captivating.

Kristin was struggling with control as she finally brushed her lips against his and then trailed her mouth down his neck and across his chest. “You have an incredibly hot body, Julian. But I’m sure you already know that.”

He groaned as she licked her way down his abs, finally slipping her entwined fingers from his as she faced the most daunting cock she’d ever encountered. Recklessly, she flicked out her tongue and laved over the sensitive head, savoring the bead of moisture that was already hovering there.

His encouraging hands speared into her hair as a low, animalistic sound came from his throat. "Take it," he instructed roughly.

She stroked her hand up and down the shaft as she commented, "I'll have you begging for it." Fair was fair. Kristin figured she had begged and pleaded with Julian often enough. It was his turn. She replaced her hand with her tongue and licked up the side of the shaft.

"Kristin," he exploded in a warning voice.

"Want something?" She sucked the head gently.

"Oh, fuck. Okay. Please," he shouted in a tone that said he didn't give a shit about his pride.

She responded immediately, taking him into her mouth as deeply as possible and sucking as she pulled back.

"Oh, Jesus. I'm dying here," Julian barked gutturally as he tightened his grip on her head.

She had him exactly where she wanted him, the same place he had her almost all the time: hot, needy, and so desperate to come that he didn't care what he said.

His groans of pleasure spurred her on, and she teased his balls gently as she sped up her pace, letting him guide her on giving him exactly what he needed.

She squealed as she suddenly felt her body turning, her panties jerked from her body in one powerful yank.

"I'm not coming alone," he grumbled into her slick pussy right before his tongue pierced between the folds, her nightgown now rolled up around her waist.

The pleasure of feeling his hungry mouth devour her shocked adrenaline into her system as she bent down and took him back into her mouth. She could barely keep her rhythm steady as Julian's grip on her thighs grew tighter, his mouth more urgent and demanding.

Their bodies both damp with perspiration, they climbed together toward climax in a tumble of arms and legs, and with a frenzied kind of madness that sent Kristin over the edge as

Julian groaned, the vibration sending her body into a violent orgasm. His hot release came at about the same time, and Kristin savored the taste of him as she trembled above him, lost in her own pleasure.

She collapsed in a heap next to him, her hand stroking his thigh. “Oh, God,” she whispered, knowing what had started as a challenge had ended in something cataclysmic that neither one of them had been able to control.

That’s what happened when Julian touched her. Every. Single. Time.

He sat up and pulled her up beside him, holding her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. But she wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. She needed that closeness and reassurance right now. She wanted him to hold her just like this, like he’d never let go.

“Kristin,” he whispered hoarsely, stroking a soothing hand up her back and then into her hair.

They lay like that for a long time, neither one saying another word.



Eventually, the two of them roused to take a shower. Kristin felt like she’d been completely destroyed, her body limp and lifeless.

“Coming?” Julian asked as he rolled out of bed.

“I already did,” she answered bluntly as she slid across the bed to follow him.

He laughed, a deep rumbling sound of amusement that had Kristin smirking at him.

Making her lift her arms, he slipped her silky nightgown over her head. “I owe you a new pair of panties,” he said, quirked a wicked brow at her.

Julian had already provided her an entire wardrobe. Everything she had packed for Maui had come from the supply of clothing he’d bought her and stocked in his house. “You bought me plenty of underwear,” she replied, wondering



if his assistant had picked out her sundresses, jeans, shirts, shoes, and all of the intimate apparel she'd found in the closet.

"I'll get you more," he promised as he adjusted the temperature on the shower.

"Who bought the stuff at your house for me?" She asked the question before she could stop herself.

He looked at her, his eyes caressing her face as though he was looking for something. "I did."

She rolled her eyes. "I know you paid for them. But I know you didn't shop for them."

The lingerie was elegantly sexy, but not blatantly trashy, and the clothing was the same.

"My assistant helped. I'm not very good at picking clothing for a woman," he admitted, sounding like he didn't want to admit there was anything he didn't do well. "I'd be happy if you were always naked."

"She's willing to do your shopping?" she questioned, ignoring his provocative comment.

He shrugged as he took her hand and tugged her into the shower. "Of course. She's my assistant."

The pulsating jets of hot water soothed the muscles in Kristin's body that she hadn't known existed until she'd started doing sexual calisthenics with Julian.

He picked up her sponge and body wash, turning her so he could wash her. Kristin tried to keep her mind out of the gutter as he glided the slick sponge all over her body. "Maybe she doesn't like doing your shopping for a new wife."

The poor woman had to have a thing for Julian. Kristin couldn't imagine that any female could work for him and not have some kind of crush on him.

"She didn't mind."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she told me," he answered sensibly.

“Any woman is going to say that to her boss.”

Julian turned her around, taking his time cleaning the front of her body as he answered, “Why do you say that?”

“I’m saying maybe she has a thing for you. Sometimes, when a woman works that closely with a guy, feelings get involved.”

“Are you jealous, Scarlet?” he asked curiously.

“Of course not,” she replied defensively. “It’s just natural that something like that could happen.”

“Look at me,” he beckoned, handing her the sponge when he was finished.

She made a motion for him to turn around, but he didn’t move.

“Kristin, look at me,” he cajoled again.

Lifting her head, she finally met his gaze with a challenging stare. “What?”

“You don’t need to be jealous of my assistant, or anyone else for that matter. She happens to be happily married with several great-grandchildren. I’ve asked her many times if she wanted to retire, but she swears she enjoys having me for a boss. I pay generously, and my employees are loyal. She loved picking out things for my new wife because she keeps up on the current fashions.”

Her face flushed as she made another impatient gesture for him to turn as she looked down at his chest. He spun around, but not before he’d thoroughly surveyed her expression.

She felt somewhat foolish, being envious of a woman who probably looked at Julian as a son. “Well, can you thank her for me? She has great taste,” she finally answered as she scrubbed his back with more force than was probably necessary.

“I know she’ll like hearing that,” Julian answered evenly. He let her work for a minute before he confessed, “I was

jealous, too. When I saw you out on a date with somebody else, it nearly killed me.”

“I wasn’t jealous,” she protested instinctively.

“You were, and I kind of like that. Jesus, I feel so fucking possessive of you that it scares me sometimes. It’s a relief to know that sometimes you feel a little bit the same way as I do,” Julian rumbled.

“I didn’t know we were married when I agreed to go out on a blind date. I wasn’t sure I’d even see you again anytime soon,” she told him breathlessly, her heart racing from his admission that he had hated seeing her with another guy.

“Doesn’t matter. All I could think about was if he had touched you, I’d take his head off.”

“He didn’t. It was a date that Mara set up. He was nice enough, but he wasn’t . . .” She stopped herself, almost realizing too late what she was going to say.

“He wasn’t what?”

“Never mind. It’s not important.”

Julian turned and took her shoulders. “It *is* important,” he insisted. “That guy you were with . . . He wasn’t . . . what?”

Silently, she washed the front of his body quickly, finally finishing her statement. “He wasn’t you. He wasn’t a pain in my ass from the moment I met him. He didn’t come up with nicknames or challenge me to be more all the time. He didn’t make my body sing when I looked at him, and he sure as hell didn’t make me as angry as you do.”

*Foreplay.*

The word drifted through her mind in Julian’s husky voice, just like it so often did when she was annoyed with him.

“Good,” Julian said in a satisfied voice. “Then I guess I’ll let him keep breathing.”

The territorial statement satisfied something feral inside her while she kept telling herself neither one of them should be

jealous. They weren't in some kind of committed relationship. Yeah, he was technically her husband, but not for long.

She kept reminding herself that Julian Sinclair was her temporary husband as they stepped out of the shower and got dried off. But for all of her self-talk, it didn't help at all as she snuggled up against him in bed, more content and happy than she'd ever been in her entire life.

# CHAPTER 18



“You look happy, honey. I think your trip was good for you,” Cindy Moore told her daughter as Kristin held out her hand to show her mother her ring.

Strangely, she *was* happy. Their entire time in Hawaii had been like a surreal dream, and Julian hadn’t changed in the few days they’d been back in Amesport. He was still lusting after her, still spoiling her to death. “I am,” she admitted reluctantly.

Her mother examined her diamond, stroking a thin finger over the center stone. “Expensive. But he has good taste. It’s beautiful, honey.”

“Thanks. He had it custom made by Mia Hamilton.”

Her mom nodded. “Then it’s definitely expensive. But you deserve it.”

Kristin put her arm around her mom as she sat down next to her on the couch. “How are things going? How’s the bar?”

“Are you worried it can’t run without you?” her father teased from his chair across from them.

Julian was at his house, and Kristin had stopped by to see her parents after work. It felt strange to be heading out of town instead of to the bar. “No, Dad. I’m honestly not worried the bar won’t be just fine. I think I was getting tired.”

Just how burnt out she had actually been was distinctly noticeable now that she’d had some time away from work and an opportunity to relax. Before, she didn’t know what it was like to feel normal because she never really had.

It felt . . . pretty damn good.

“I know you were tired, sweetie,” her dad answered as he shook his head. “You never should have had to work so hard.”

“You’re my family,” Kristin protested, regretting the fact that she’d told him how she felt. Her father had to be exhausted, too. He loved her mom, and Kristin knew that if he could have handled everything himself in the last few decades, he would have done it.

Her mom put a hand on her arm to stop her from speaking. “Don’t ever think we’ve never felt guilty about how much you missed. I know you never felt comfortable asking your friends to come around, or going out without worrying about me. And you’ve worked yourself half to death between your own job and Shamrock’s. But honey, it’s time for you to live your own life now. Your dad and I are just fine.”

*Thanks to Julian.*

Kristin was starting to resent her temporary husband’s involvement in her dad’s livelihood less and less. Shamrock’s wouldn’t be supporting her parents as well as it was right now if he hadn’t taken over and changed everything.

Partnering with Liam had been even more insightful. With Liam checking in frequently, the pub would never go downhill again.

Dale Moore scratched his head. “I wondered why that boy wanted to be involved with a little place like Shamrock’s. I guess now I know. He had ulterior motives. He wanted to marry my daughter. Not that I think that’s a bad thing, mind you. He’s a good man. Liam, too. I couldn’t ask for better partners.” He grinned at his daughter.

Kristin felt her stomach drop. Her parents were both so happy right now. How would they feel when they found out she and Julian weren’t going to stay married? “You like him?” she asked quietly, wondering how Julian would feel about being called a *boy*.

“We love him,” her mother said emphatically. “Anybody smart enough to marry my daughter and treat her like the wonderful woman she’s become is on my Christmas list.”

“We’re happy for you, Krissy,” her dad added sincerely.

She swallowed hard as she heard her father use the affectionate childhood name for her. He hadn't done that in a long time. "Thanks, Dad," she managed to answer.

"Are you happy with the plans we made for your reception?" Her mom sounded excited and happy.

The last thing Kristin had expected was for her parents to plan a party so *soon*. The two of them had been busy while she'd been in Hawaii. Since Julian had already agreed, she had no choice but to answer, "Yeah. It's great."

"Since it's off-season, we didn't have a big problem getting the Youth Center booked after the holidays. I think everybody will come. Who would want to miss it?"

It was almost Christmas, which meant the party would happen in only a few weeks. Apparently, her mother had brought all of the Sinclairs over to her parents' home to discuss the celebration. Now, all of the Sinclairs were involved. When one got a group of Sinclairs together, things happened quickly.

"I have no doubt the Center will be packed," Kristin answered, trying to plaster a fake smile on her face, still wanting to kill Julian for telling her parents that the timing was good and that he was looking forward to the reception.

There was no way she could cancel it now. Not unless she wanted to dump Julian way earlier than they agreed. He'd make her life miserable if she did, and honestly, she greedily wanted that time now.

Somehow, living with Julian, being with him, took away every bit of the loneliness and isolation she'd felt for so many years. Even though she already knew how it was going to end, she didn't want to miss the beginning and middle—the good parts. Even though he *did*, more often than not, make her crazy.

She rose, feeling awkward for lying to her parents. "I'd better run." She bent down and kissed her mom's cheek, then moved to her father to do the same. "Julian might cook if I'm not home, and that's more than a little terrifying."

They both chuckled as she waved, leaving the living room exhausted from trying to smile so damn much. Letting herself out, she dashed to Julian's SUV, pushing the button to open the door as she ran. Freezing rain was coming down, and Kristin was grateful when she got inside the comfortable vehicle. She put her foot on the brake pedal and pushed the button to start up the automobile. If she had thought about it earlier, she could have started the SUV from the house so it would be warm. But her car was older, and didn't have the fancy features that this one did.

The moment they'd returned from Hawaii, Julian had lectured her about needing a new car. She'd put her foot down, arguing that her car might be old, but it ran just fine. He'd finally given up, grumbling about her refusal to let him replace a perfectly reliable vehicle, but she'd lost the battle of what car she was going to drive. He'd heard they were in for some bad weather, so he'd finagled her into driving his SUV today because he was staying in to work on his screenplay.

When she'd lived in town, having a compact vehicle hadn't been an issue. But once she got going on the country highway, Kristin was grateful to have a heavier vehicle beneath her.

Slowing her speed, she drove home thinking about what to make for dinner, wondering how much work Julian had managed to get done on his writing.

Kristin was fairly certain that his career change wouldn't last. At some point, he was going to want to do more movies. He'd never be happy in a small town like Amesport after living in California for so long. Granted, townspeople rarely bothered him. Everybody was accustomed to the Sinclairs living in the area, and nobody cared that the place was crawling with billionaires. Most of them were grateful for the changes Grady, his brothers, and finally his cousins had brought about for the citizens. The Sinclairs cared about the town they lived in, and it showed with every improvement they helped to make happen.

It took her longer to get home because of the icy roads, but Kristin finally pulled into the garage with a sigh.



Julian met her at the garage door with a frown. “I was getting worried. You didn’t answer your text.”

“I was driving,” Kristin retorted. “The roads are slick. I think it will turn to snow shortly.”

He took her coat and hung it up. “I’m glad I didn’t know. I was just wondering if you got delayed.”

“I stopped at my parents’ house. I’ve been driving in winter weather here for years, Julian,” she reminded him, but her heart melted over the fact that he’d been waiting for her.

“Doesn’t matter,” he grumbled. “Shit still happens.”

His comment made her wonder if he was thinking about Xander and his parents. The thought choked her up a little, knowing that Julian still wasn’t completely over his sudden loss. Hell, if she’d lost her parents that traumatically, she’d be the same way: always wondering if and when it could happen again.

She wasn’t about to tell him that she was glad she’d driven his vehicle. He’d just gloat about the fact that he was right, or he’d say something that would touch her heart. Kristin was never sure which response to expect from Julian. “Let me go shower and then I’ll cook something.”

Still in her scrubs, the first thing she wanted when she hit the door was to get cleaned up. Even though she used a lab coat at work, she still wanted to get out of her office attire.

“Kiss me first,” Julian insisted, catching her around the waist as she tried to escape.

“I’m all germy,” she protested with a laugh.

“Then we’ll share germs. Not like we haven’t before,” he said huskily as he swooped down to steal a kiss.

Her body reacted immediately, and she hated the fact that he smelled so damn good.

“Enough,” she told him as she came away panting. “I’ll be back.” She danced out of his reach and took the stairs, smiling as she heard him muttering about her leaving him hard up as he turned back toward the kitchen.



“People cook stuff all the time. What in the hell did I do wrong?” Julian mumbled to himself as he looked at the watery potatoes and the burned pot roast.

Shit! He was hopeless in the kitchen. He couldn’t even feed his own wife.

He’d watched his mother cook as a child. Now he wished he had paid more attention. Lifting the spoon, he noticed that the mashed potatoes were actually more like soup, and they were readily dripping from the spoon.

“What are you doing?” Kristin asked curiously as she entered the room, dressed in a pair of black yoga pants and a sweater.

Her hair was still damp and starting to curl, and Julian couldn’t stop himself from staring. Every time she entered a room, he felt like somebody was slugging him in the chest. “Trying to make dinner,” he answered flatly. “I fucked it up.”

Kristin moved next to him and stirred the potatoes and glanced at the pot roast, which now looked like a shriveled black mass of something completely inedible. “My mom used to make this incredible roast with dumplings. I found her cookbook when I was going through some stuff I had in storage. It didn’t turn out the same.”

“That?” She pointed at the pathetic piece of meat. “That used to be a roast?”

Julian could tell she was trying not to laugh as she covered her mouth with her hand.

“It was,” he answered sadly.

“Oh, Julian,” she said kindly as she burst out laughing. “Cooking takes patience and practice. I already knew you couldn’t cook. You didn’t have to even try. I like to cook.”

“You worked all day,” he protested.

“And you didn’t?” she retorted, standing on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

“I did. But I was home and not on my feet all day. Being married to me isn’t supposed to make you work harder.” He’d actually wanted to make her life easier. Fuck it. He was a billionaire. He could hire somebody to make them meals.

“I’ve always cooked for myself, even when I had to go to Shamrock’s. I always made something for myself before I started work. I don’t mind.”

Julian was alarmed as he saw a tear trickle down her cheek. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She sniffled and wiped away the wayward tear, and then another as she looked at him with a sweet smile he’d never seen before.

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because I think this is the nicest thing anyone has ever tried to do for me. Thank you.”

He didn’t have a clue why she was thanking him for screwing up their dinner. But he didn’t mind the affectionate look she was giving him. “I’ll hire somebody.”

“No, you will not,” she told him adamantly. “My kitchen. I cook.”

Julian held his breath, wondering if she knew she’d just taken ownership of his home as her own. He released the air slowly, realizing she didn’t even notice as she started moving things around, tossing the bad food and cleaning up so she could start fresh.

He helped her by loading the dishwasher. “I can learn,” he offered. “Or I could just use the damn microwave.”

She stopped what she was doing, moved up to him, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Just the fact that you were willing to try makes me happy,” she told him with a contented sigh.

Julian slipped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her hair. “Why?”

“Because nobody has ever cared enough to try to please me like that.”

“I can think of better ways to make you happy,” he admitted eagerly. He might not be able to cook, but he had other . . . skills.

“Trying to make dinner is enough for now,” she said in a hushed voice as she laid her head on his shoulder.

Inhaling deeply, Julian savored her sweet, violet scent and the feel of her soft body in his arms. “I’ll figure it out eventually,” he promised. He wasn’t going to leave his wife with all the hard work.

She leaned back to look at him. “I’d love to look at your mom’s cookbook. I love collecting new recipes, and some of the old ones are the best.”

“It’s yours,” he agreed immediately.

“Do you have pictures of your mom and dad?”

“I do. Micah has more than I do, but my parents were both picture nuts. They loved taking family pictures just about anywhere we went.” He hadn’t pulled the photos out since his parents had died.

“Can I see them, or does it still hurt too much?” she asked softly as she put a palm to his cheek in a comforting gesture.

It *would* hurt, but for Kristin, he’d pull them out of their hiding place. It was time. “I’ll find them.”

She stroked his jaw. “No hurry. I’d just like to see them someday when you’re ready.”

He nodded. “I’m ready,” he affirmed.

“Let me get us something to eat and we’ll look.” She backed up and started moving through the kitchen, looking completely at home in her environment.

Julian played assistant, helping her put together an edible dinner before he pulled out the pictures of his family.

They spent the rest of the evening talking about his childhood, reliving happy memories of his parents and brothers while they were all still living at home.

Strangely, once Julian had started talking, he couldn't stop.

# CHAPTER 19



Xander came home a day before Kristin and Julian's big reception. Micah had brought his younger brother home, and Julian had planned to spend the day with Xander before attending the reception.

Kristin made it home from work before her husband got back from his brother's house, hoping that the two would have a happy reunion. Since Julian wasn't home yet, she'd seen it as a good sign.

However, judging by the look on Julian's face when he did arrive home, it was fairly obvious that things hadn't gone all that well on his visit to Xander's house.

Julian didn't say much as he walked into the kitchen from the garage. Kristin watched as he hung up his leather jacket and then tossed the keys on the counter.

"Everything go okay?" she asked curiously.

"He hates it here. He hates his house. He hates the snow. He basically fucking hates *life* right at the moment. He's clean, but it won't take him long to go right back to where he was before, because of his shitty attitude."

As Julian turned to face her, Kristin couldn't help but notice how defeated he looked. She reached for a beer in the refrigerator, screwed off the top, and handed it to Julian. He looked like he could use it. "I'm sorry. I know you were hoping he'd be better once he was dried out. But he still needs counseling."

Julian nodded as he took a slug of the beer straight from the bottle. "I know. Micah and I will just have to keep an eye on him for now and see what happens. He doesn't want to continue his counseling here."

Kristin looked at his worried face, and her heart broke. If Xander wasn't willing to continue to fight his battle with drugs

and alcohol, *nobody* could help him. He had to at least want to stay clean. “Do you want to skip the reception?”

“Oh, hell no,” Julian answered with a grin. “I’m not missing my own party. Your parents put a lot of planning into this celebration. I still have plenty to be happy about,” he declared as he set his beer down on the counter. “Xander was invited. If he wants to show up, he will.”

“Are you angry with him?” Kristin asked, wondering how Julian really felt. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned a hip against the cupboard. “Angry? Yeah, I guess I am. But probably more pissed off at myself than him. Before this happened, we drifted apart. Now I can’t get through to him. I don’t know what he’s thinking. Christ! I don’t know how he feels or what he’s not telling me. We used to be close when we were younger. Now he’s like a damn stranger to me, and he’s my fucking brother.”

The anguish in his voice ripped Kristin’s heart out. “You can’t understand him if he won’t reach out,” she told him sternly, hating Xander at that moment for putting his brothers through so much pain. “It’s his move. If he wants to get to know you again, if he wants your support, he needs to reach out after he’s pushed you and Micah out of his life. It sounds like he pushed anybody who loves him away.”

“There’s something wrong. Hell, I know he’s hurting, but I don’t understand why. He still has his talent, but he won’t touch an instrument. Anything he connected to the time before the murders happened, he doesn’t seem to want to remember. There’s more than just losing our parents. I wish to hell I knew what really happened that night.”

Kristin frowned. “What do you mean? Didn’t he tell you?”

“The basics. It was a home invasion. Mom and Dad died. They were both shot multiple times. But for some reason, Xander was not only shot, but he was stabbed and sliced all to hell. I’ve tried to ask him more, but he won’t talk about it, and I’ve never wanted to push him. It had to be a nightmare for

him to be there when our parents died. The perp was shot and killed. The case was closed. But I think there was something else that fucked him up.”

Kristin couldn't imagine anything worse than watching her parents die. But Julian was right. There was something weird about the fact that Xander had been sliced up. Robbers, even evil ones, went in to get what they wanted and leave as quickly as they could. “It is weird,” she contemplated aloud. “Maybe the robber ran out of bullets?”

Julian shrugged. “I suppose it's possible. Maybe he was trying to make sure Xander was going to die so there were no witnesses.”

Really, there was only one person who knew everything that happened the night that Julian's parents had died. After looking through all of Julian's family photos and listening to stories, she knew that all of the brothers had loved their parents.

“Let's go get dressed,” he insisted, holding out his hand.

Kristin grasped his extended palm and squeezed, wanting to somehow let Julian know that she understood his frustration and pain.

He squeezed her fingers in acknowledgment, his eyes flashing with unspoken gratitude before he turned and led her upstairs.



Kristin swore everyone in Amesport had gathered at the Youth Center for their reception. Although logically she knew the whole town wasn't there, the place was so packed that it seemed as though every resident was in attendance.

“Dinner? Helloooo!” Mara Sinclair waved her hand in front of Kristin's face to get her attention. “Kristin!” she finally shouted.

Pulling out of her own thoughts, Kristin finally looked at Mara. “I'm sorry. I didn't hear what you said.” She was busy looking at a figure dressed completely in black sitting in the corner of the ballroom of the Center by himself.



*Xander?*

Mara sighed and snagged another glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “I asked if you and Julian wanted to come over to our place for dinner next week. We haven’t done anything since you got back from Hawaii.”

“Let me know what day and I’ll check with Julian. I know he needs to fly to California for a couple of days to do a promotion for his movie,” Kristin answered distractedly. “Mara, do you know if that’s Xander sitting over there in the corner?”

Mara glanced over to where Kristin’s eyes were focused. “Yeah. That’s Xander. Jared just went over to talk to him a while ago. He said he didn’t have much to say.”

“He showed up,” Kristin answered with hope in her voice. “It’s a step in the right direction.”

“Yeah. I think everybody is a little confused about why,” Mara responded before she took a sip of her champagne.

“Julian is his brother. I’m not sure if he even knows our marriage is all a sham.”

“Is it?” Mara raised her brows as she stared at Kristin.

“Of course. I told you the truth,” Kristin said defensively. Since Mara was her best friend, there was very little that she didn’t share with her.

“You two were looking pretty much like the happy couple on the dance floor. And Julian does look amazing in a tuxedo,” Mara answered suspiciously.

“Almost any man looks good in a tux.” All of the Sinclairs had dressed up for the occasion, every male in formal dress, and the women were wearing cocktail dresses.

Mara looked stunning in a red dress that ended right above her knees, something Kristin’s friend would have never worn before she met Jared. Mara had blossomed into an attractive young businesswoman, but she was still the same person inside. Money hadn’t changed her one bit.

“Admit it. Being married to Julian is one of the best things that has ever happened to you. You look happy. You look relaxed and rested. And you look incredible. Love that dress, by the way,” Mara said, giving Kristin her don’t-bullshit-me tone.

It was yet another item that had magically shown up in Kristin’s closet, a gorgeous emerald-green dress that Julian swore matched her eyes. Yes, she’d gone through the trouble of carefully doing her makeup and hair, and even though the heels she was wearing were already killing her feet, she’d worn them because Julian thought she looked beautiful.

“The dress was all Julian. Probably something his assistant picked out.” She didn’t know how to answer Mara’s assessment, so she simply said, “You know this isn’t going to last, Mara. He’s been good for me, and what he’s done for my parents is something I can never repay. But the marriage is only temporary.”

“We’ll see,” Mara answered mysteriously.

Exasperated, Kristin looked over toward the group of Sinclair men and Jason Sutherland standing around together talking. Julian had gone to join them for a few minutes so he could talk to Micah, but they looked like they were all trying to bust each other’s balls right at the moment. She saw Grady say something and all of the men started to laugh. There was a lot of back-slapping and laughing going on in that circle of handsome men.

The wives were right behind her and Mara, all of them chatting at once and trying to catch up on what was happening in their lives.

She and Mara had stepped away for a moment of private conversation.

Kristin leaned in a little so she wasn’t overheard. “It’s temporary. Do you really think Julian is going to be happy here in Amesport? He’s lived most of his adult life in California.”

“I don’t see why not. He told Jared that he loves it here. Your parents certainly love him. The question is, do *you* love him?” Mara asked her quietly.

“Julian makes me crazy,” Kristin shared. “One minute I want to throttle him, and the next he’ll do something so outrageously sweet that I want to throw myself in his arms and beg him to kiss me or have sex with me right that moment, wherever we are. He’s a terrible cook, but he does everything else so well that I don’t give a damn. He’s obnoxious, but underneath all of his crap, he’s a really decent, considerate man. He’s probably the most complicated and confusing guy I’ve ever known. He never forgets the little things, and he always tells me I’m beautiful and special even though I’m . . . not.” By the time she was done explaining, Kristin was breathless, her heart racing as she considered Mara’s question.

“You *are* beautiful and special. *You* just don’t see it. You didn’t happen to mention whether you’re in love with him,” Mara prodded.

Kristin shook her head. “Probably because I don’t want to say it out loud. If I do, I’m screwed. But yeah, I think I might be falling in love with him. That’s a disaster, Mara. You know it is.” Tears welled up in her eyes, and Kristin had to blink them back. Her wedding reception wasn’t the place to be bawling her face off.

Mara put her arm around her lightly. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. It’s pretty damn obvious that Julian feels the same way. Even when he’s all the way across the room, he’s checking to see that you’re okay, that you’re still safe. He reminds me of Jared. Sinclair men are protective as hell when it comes to the women they care about, but they also encourage us in everything we do. Well, almost everything.”

As Mara stepped back so Kristin could accept the drink a waiter handed her, Kristin asked her curiously, “What *doesn’t* Jared support?” Jared Sinclair would literally walk through fire for his wife. Kristin had seen it time and time again in their relationship.

Mara grinned. “Since Micah joined the family here, all of the Sinclair women want to learn to skydive. Tessa has done it. She’s tandem jumped with Micah, and now she wants to qualify to go solo. Eventually, we all want to go. Micah already said he’d take us. We’ve gotten some kickback on that. None of our husbands are thrilled about the idea of us jumping out of an airplane, even if Micah is in control. But Tessa swears it’s one of the most incredible things she’s ever experienced. Now we all want to try it.”

“Oh man, that would be awesome,” Kristin agreed readily.

“Yep. But try convincing Julian you’d be safe. He’d freak.”

“He does some pretty crazy things. And he doesn’t control my life.”

Mara chuckled. “Neither does Jared. But when I see that terrified look on his face, I have a hard time pushing the issue.”

“Why?”

“Because I love him,” Mara readily replied. “Because I have the same fears. I hurt when he hurts, and just like him, I’d be totally destroyed if anything happened to cause him to get injured . . . or worse.”

Kristin saw her friend shudder, and she knew the “or worse” really meant getting dead. “Then when you come to an impasse, who has to give?”

Mara shrugged. “We work it out. Our love is stronger than fear.”

Kristin had to admit, she was envious of the relationship her best friend had with her husband. She’d never seen two people more in love. In fact, all of the Sinclairs had the same types of relationships with their spouses. Different personalities, but so much in love that nothing ever stood between them anymore. It seemed like the longer they were together, the stronger they were as couples.

“Julian is all wrong for me,” Kristin told Mara desperately as she stirred her mixed drink with a straw. “We’re completely

different.”

“You’re rationalizing,” Mara cautioned. “Besides, I don’t think you’re that different where it really counts. And the superficial things don’t mean anything. So he’s rich and you’re not. So he likes chocolate ice cream and you happen to like vanilla—”

“We both like exactly the same flavor,” Kristin interrupted. “But you’re forgetting that he’s a famous superstar, and I’m a medical assistant.”

“Those things are just your professions, Kristin. Does it really matter? Julian is making a career change because he’s not completely happy with what he’s doing. Jared did the same thing. He wasn’t movie-star famous, but he gave up control of a very high-powered real-estate business to go back to doing what he loved: restoring historic homes. Luckily, he was wealthy enough to do what he wanted after so many years of trying to prove himself. Circumstances change. People change. What might have been important to Julian years ago might not matter to him now.”

Julian had basically said as much, but Kristin found it hard to believe he could walk away from megastardom that easily. Then again, she’d seen the hunted look on his face when he was being stalked by fans. And he seemed perfectly content, even happy, to be writing and creating a movie screenplay.

“We’ll see,” Kristin answered vaguely. “We still have a little time in the trial period before the divorce.”

“End the trial now,” Mara said urgently. “This is no good for either one of you. If it’s still there, it’s going to drive a wedge between you. You’re already doubting your marriage is for real.”

Kristin did feel that rift, the enormous fear that the temporary happiness she had with Julian would never be . . . real. “We made an agreement to wait.”

“You’re scared,” Mara accused.

No, she was freaking terrified. “Maybe I am.”

“Then cut the crap and get the temporary marriage off the table. Make it real.”

*Make it real?*

For Kristin, she was rather afraid things with Julian had always been far from artificial and fake.

Her thoughts were halted as she saw her mom and dad rolling out the wedding cake. It was enormous, and the cart they were wheeling looked like it was going to give with the strain of carrying several tiers of the decadent dessert.

People cheered and whistled, but what Kristin noticed was the reaction of the man in the corner all alone, his eyes glued on the enormous, gleaming knife in her father’s hand that brushed along Xander’s leather jacket as they moved past him to the center of the room with the wedding cake.

First, he looked panicked.

Then, he looked angry.

Finally, he got up and strode out of the room, a look of anguish on his face that Kristin couldn’t ignore.

“I’ll be back,” she told Mara hastily as she spoke into her friend’s ear so she could hear her, and then set her cocktail on a nearby table.

Kristin raced as fast as she could on her high heels, pushing on the door that Xander had just used to exit, seeing a flash of black as he turned into one of the teaching rooms.

She knew she hadn’t imagined his reaction, or the sense of terror he’d just experienced.

*A knife. A big blade in a public gathering.*

She stopped short at the doorway of the classroom, noticing that Xander had opened the window, even though it was below freezing outside. His shoulders were rising and falling, and she could hear his breath sawing in and out of his lungs as he stood braced against the window frame.

Moving slowly, she walked to his side and touched his back lightly. “Xander?”

“Don’t fucking touch me.” He whirled around as the guttural growl left his mouth.

Kristin felt her cheek explode with pain and her body immediately moved backward until she hit the wall on the other side of the room. The violent movement had been so intense that she slid down the wall in shock.

“Kristin?” Julian’s voice suddenly interrupted the silence. “Baby? Are you okay?”

Suddenly, Julian was there at her side, lifting her onto his lap. “What happened? Talk to me.”

“I-I’m okay,” she whispered, putting a hand to her face.

Julian looked up and saw his brother standing over them. “Did you fucking hurt her? Did you hit her?” he rasped to Xander.

“I did it,” Xander said flatly.

“I’ll fucking kill you. I don’t care if you’re my brother,” Julian bellowed, reaching up to grasp Xander’s ankle and yanking his feet out from under him. The quick action worked, and his younger brother toppled to the ground.

Kristin suddenly got her bearings and grabbed Julian’s arm. “Don’t. Please. It wasn’t his fault.”

She held tight to Julian, desperate not to see him do something he could never take back.

Xander looked at her, their eyes locking for a moment before he got up and strode out the door. In that short, unspoken exchange, Kristin knew she’d connected with Julian’s younger brother, if only briefly.

“What in the hell do you mean that it wasn’t his fault?” He was still cradling her body on the floor.

“I’m fine. Help me up.” It was going to be difficult to get out of his hold and into a standing position in heels and a dress.

He stood, still holding her tightly, then lowered her feet slowly to the floor. “Are you dizzy? You’re going to end up

with a hell of a shiner tomorrow. Bastard! I still want to kill him.”

“Don’t, Julian,” Kristin begged. “You don’t understand.”

“Then fucking enlighten me before I go beat the living hell out of my brother.” He pulled out his phone and quickly called Dante, asking him if Sarah could come and meet them in the classroom to look at Kristin.

“Tell me,” he insisted once he’d hung up the phone, holding her hand while he seated her in one of the chairs.

Sarah and Dante arrived before she could say anything more, and her explanation had to wait.



# CHAPTER 20



They ended up leaving the reception once Sarah had verified that Kristin didn't have any injuries other than a very big black eye, and a warning to Julian to call her if Kristin experienced any other symptoms of a head injury.

"I'm fine," Kristin told Julian for what seemed like the millionth time during the drive home and even after they'd arrived at his house. She'd gotten an ice pack for her eye, and Julian had helped her into a pair of pajamas after he gave her some ibuprofen for the pain and swelling.

Sitting cross-legged on the sofa, she held the cold pack to her cheek and eye while Julian, newly dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, seated himself next to her.

"You're *not* fine. My younger brother somehow assaulted you, and I want to know how and why it happened before I lose it," he answered in a graveled voice.

"It really wasn't his fault," Kristin said softly.

"You were hurt and he was there. It's obvious you got punched."

"I startled him," Kristin explained with a sigh. "I saw his reaction to the huge knife Dad had to cut the cake. It got close enough to touch him. I think it was a trigger for him, and he started reliving his experience all over again. I came up behind him and he didn't know I was there. I think he was in the middle of a nightmare while he was awake. He turned instinctively, and for a moment, I think he thought I was his attacker. He didn't punch me on purpose. His elbow hit me in the eye. He turned around so fast that he couldn't keep from hitting me."

"Jesus! He didn't really look uptight when I saw him. He looked like he was just . . . dead inside."

“He’s not, Julian. I think the drugs and alcohol are part of a bigger problem. He’s obviously having symptoms of PTSD. Did they ever mention it in the rehab?”

“Not that I know of,” Julian answered, sounding a little calmer.

“His fear was very real. And the big knife and being in a crowd with people he didn’t know was a trigger for him. He didn’t have a clue what he was doing when he swung around and accidentally hit me. He was in another reality, and I was the enemy,” Kristin told him remorsefully. “I shouldn’t have approached him that way.”

“Don’t make this your fault,” Julian warned her. “You were obviously trying to help him.”

“I was. I saw how he reacted, and I wanted to see if he was okay. But I should have made my presence known instead of moving up on him.”

“So you think he drinks because he can’t deal with his PTSD?”

“Sometimes it happens. When you can’t escape reality, you use whatever is necessary to dull the pain. Pain medications are highly addictive. Honestly, considering what Xander had to watch happen, I can’t say I’m surprised that he relives it over and over again.”

“So what happens now? He goes back to drinking? He keeps hurting other people?” Julian asked urgently. “I don’t know what to do to help him, but if he ever touches you again, regardless of the reason, I’m not making any promises that I won’t hurt him.”

“He didn’t know he was hitting *me*. He was trying to defend himself,” she argued. “I’d be the last woman in the world to make excuses for any guy hitting anyone. But this really was an exception and an accident on his part. Don’t hold it against him. Please.”

The last thing Kristin wanted was to cause an even bigger rift between the brothers.

“So this means he really needs counseling?” Julian questioned.

Kristin nodded. “He has dual issues: PTSD and addiction. He needs to get to the root of his problems to try to resolve both of them.”

Julian slowly nodded. “I’ll talk to Micah and my cousins. There has to be a way to put pressure on Xander to cooperate.”

“I’m not a psychologist. I don’t know how you can help him when he doesn’t want to help himself. But maybe you can talk to some experts.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him and figure it out. In the meantime, I can’t stop blaming him for your bruised-up face,” Julian said remorsefully.

“My bruises will fade. Xander’s scars may never go away.” Her heart ached for the youngest Sinclair. Julian hadn’t seen Xander’s moment of panic and terror. She had, and she doubted she’d ever forget it.

“I can’t stand to see you hurt,” Julian admitted huskily. “It kills me.”

Since he’d been willing to fight his own brother for bruising her face, Kristin didn’t doubt his sincerity.

The tormented guilt on his face nearly broke her. She tossed the cold pack onto the table and quickly straddled him. “You could very easily take my mind off my eye,” she told him suggestively. Really, the injury didn’t hurt anymore unless she actually touched it, and her body was hungry for Julian.

“I can’t fuck you when you’re hurting,” he grumbled.

She ground her pelvis down on him, able to feel his rigid cock through the thick cotton material of his sweatpants. “I need you. And it doesn’t hurt anymore,” she whispered right before she nipped his ear, then laved it with her tongue. “It hurts more here.” She ground her core against him again, letting him know exactly where she was aching.

“Christ, Scarlet! How do you expect me to ignore how much I want you when you’re this damn close to me?”

“I don’t,” she informed him cheekily. “I expect you to make the pain go away.”

He gently laid her down on the couch and stripped, coming back to her beautifully naked. He put a throw pillow beneath her head to cushion it, then gripped the pajama top she was wearing and popped every button with one quick and powerful tug. “I’m going to fucking hate myself for taking advantage when what you really need is rest. But I can’t keep from doing it. There’s never going to be a day when I won’t take whatever you offer me willingly.”

His expression was savage and hungry, and Kristin shuddered as their eyes met and held, both of them desperate for the same thing. “I’m more than willing,” she told him boldly. “I want you, Hotshot. Show me what you’ve got.”

Her pajama bottoms and panties left her body in one rough movement as she lifted her bottom to help him take them off.

“Come,” she beckoned, holding her arms out to him.

“You will come,” he answered coarsely, deliberately being obtuse as he knelt beside her and lowered his mouth to her breasts, his mouth and tongue playing over both of her rigid nipples one after the other.

She was panting loudly by the time he finally lifted his head, her core flooding with heat as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Kiss me,” she instructed.

His raw intensity almost burning her alive, he answered, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She pulled his head down. “You won’t.”

The kiss was sweet and tender, but still demanding. She savored the beauty of the moment. Usually their sex was desperate and so hot that she felt like she was spontaneously combusting.

This time . . . it was different.

It was just as satisfying, but there was a gentleness to the way that Julian touched her. A sense that he was showing her

that she was the most precious person in his life.

Kristin's heart skipped a beat as he raised his head and looked at her and swung his body on top of hers, keeping most of his weight from crushing her with his arms and hands. "You have no idea how I felt when I saw you on the floor, knowing somebody had hurt you. Nobody lays a hand on you. Not now. Not ever."

The vow touched her clear to her soul. "Touch me in a good way, then."

"Only me," Julian insisted.

"Only you," she agreed with a sigh, drowning in the ocean blue of his eyes.

He entered her slowly, inch by inch, giving her only a tiny bit of what she wanted at one time.

"Fuck me," she demanded, raising her hips up to meet his.

But he pulled back.

"Patience, Scarlet. No need to rush to the finish line right now."

She could tell that he'd like to, but he refused to do anything fast.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she strained upward, wanting him deeper, needing their connection to be more intense.

She closed her eyes in frustration, her head thrashing back and forth.

"Don't," he commanded. "Look at me. Stay with me."

Julian dropped to his elbows and clasped her hands, entwining their fingers as he finally buried his cock balls-deep inside her.

Her eyes flew open and locked with his, unable to look away.

His expression of deep yearning captivated her, mesmerized her as he slowly withdrew and planted himself

back into her sheath.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes.”

She gripped his fingers tightly, her gaze staying with him as he pumped in slow strokes, keeping her hypnotized with the rhythm and a willing captive as their bodies stayed skin to skin.

Kristin felt like she was flying, and Julian was right beside her. He didn't rush as he thoroughly made sure she got all of him with every thrust of his hips.

Her emotions were raw as he never let up on the intensity of his gaze, keeping her with him in both mind and body. “You're feeling so damn good that I never want this to be over,” Julian grunted as he began pounding inside her over and over again.

*I love you. I love you so much!*

The words were right there on the tip of her tongue, begging to get out. She bit her lip as he fucked her deeply, and so thoroughly that he was playing havoc with her heart.

“This. Is. Us.” Three words, and Julian made sure every one of them counted. “This is you and me, Scarlet.”

“I know,” she answered breathlessly, knowing what he meant. It had never been like this for her, and she somehow knew it never would be with anyone else. Her connection to Julian was elemental, spontaneous.

It was like she'd just been waiting for him all of her adult years, and now that they were finally together, the result was almost surreal.

She moaned as he ground his hips with every thrust, making her impending climax grow more intense.

“I'm going to come,” she warned him, finally closing her eyes because the oncoming climax was so intense.

“Then come for me, baby,” he said with an answering groan.

His pace quickened, and she could feel their perspiring bodies start to slide against each other every time Julian moved. “Yes. You feel so good.”

She squeezed his fingers, their hands still entwined, and his hot, heavy breath leaving hot bursts of air on her face and the side of her neck as it became uneven and urgent.

Her climax finally ripped into her, and she arched her back, tightened her legs around Julian, and held on for the ride.

“You look so damn beautiful when you come,” Julian told her raggedly. “It’s probably the most incredible thing I’ve seen in my entire life.”

Her channel clamped down on his cock, and Kristin rode the waves of intense pleasure as she milked Julian, his groan of utter ecstasy making her orgasm much more satisfying by knowing he was experiencing much the same thing she was right now.

As she spiraled down slowly, Julian’s mouth covered hers as though he wanted to capture her moans of complete release and keep them for himself.

While she caught her breath, she managed to say, “I feel so much better.”

Julian chuckled as he rolled off her and sat on the floor right beside her head, keeping the hand nearest her joined intimately with hers.

She was so limp, it was hard to lift her other hand, but she did, stroking his jaw, which was covered with sexy stubble.

He lifted their entwined fingers and kissed the back of her hand in a gesture so tender it nearly made Kristin want to weep.

“You okay?” Julian asked, sounding concerned.

“Never better,” she said reassuringly.

“Good.” He stood and scooped her up. “Bedtime with ice pack.” He leaned down so she could grab it.

She picked it up obligingly, marveling, not for the first time, about how strong Julian was. She was no lightweight, but he handled her body with ease.

“You can put me down,” she urged.

“Nope. I’m making sure you get into bed.”

“I can walk there,” she told him with a laugh.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not letting you go.”

Kristin gave up and wrapped her arms around his neck. *Stubborn man!* If only he wasn’t making promises he could never, ever keep.



# CHAPTER 21



Julian had no desire to leave Amesport. As a matter of fact, he wished he could get out of going to California to attend a large promotion for his upcoming film. He was making progress on his screenplay, and just the thought of leaving Kristin alone made him balk.

Nevertheless, he *was* going. It was a commitment he'd already made, and he needed to be there. It was only a few days, but he knew it would feel like forever.

*I'm addicted to her. How fucking pathetic is that?*

No more had the thought crossed his mind than the object of his obsession walked through the door of Shamrock's, obviously looking for him. He rose up from the booth and raised an arm, his chest starting to ache as he saw her smile and wave at him from across the crowded bar.

He'd had no problem spotting her the moment she'd walked into the place. Julian swore he'd know she was there even if he couldn't spot her gorgeous red curls or see her infectious smile. He sensed her like he was a fucking radar scanning for trouble.

And Kristin *was* the ultimate threat to his sanity.

"Hi," she said breathlessly as she slid into the seat across from him. "Sorry I'm late. Work was crazy."

"I ordered for both of us," he answered, already knowing she'd like the special today: New England clam chowder, and a crispy fish sandwich with onion rings.

"I love the clam chowder the cooks are making now," she answered, still smiling.

"I know. I already ordered it for you," he answered, shooting her a smug grin. There was very little he didn't notice about Kristin. The way she felt about her favorite foods was

just one of the little things he liked about her. She either liked something or she didn't. She wasn't an I-could-take-it-or-leave-it kind of woman. No looking at the menu fifty times to decide what she wanted. Usually, she knew what she'd have before she even got to a restaurant.

"Are you excited about the big prerelease party?" she asked as she shrugged off her jacket.

"Not really," he answered honestly. "I'd rather be home. I'd like it a whole lot better if you were coming with me."

"Planning on kidnapping me?" she teased.

"I never thought about that," he said contemplatively. It was actually not a bad idea.

"Don't," Kristin warned him with a frown. "I have a job that I like. I don't want to lose it."

"Your husband is a billionaire," he reminded her.

"He won't be my husband forever," she said lightly. "What happens when our three-month marriage is over? I have to make a living."

Luckily, they were interrupted by the waiter bringing their soup. After he was gone, Julian had calmed down a little.

"I'll be back by Friday. Given a choice, I wouldn't go. But the appearance is in my contract," Julian told her glumly.

"Then you have to go," she replied serenely.

Hell, she seemed almost content that he was leaving. And he hated hearing the shit about their short marriage plans. "You know you'll miss me," he told her in a cocky voice as he picked up his soup spoon.

"I definitely won't miss your expertise in the kitchen," she joked.

"Hey, I'm doing fine with the microwave." He did feed himself during the day, but he'd been restricted to microwave use only. Mostly, he grabbed a sandwich or whatever was convenient.

Kristin dug into her chowder like she hadn't eaten all day, which she probably hadn't. He knew she usually ate on the run during her busy days at the office, or she just skipped lunch completely.

He was so occupied with watching her that he dribbled some of his soup. "Damn!" He looked down, happy most of it had dropped back into the bowl.

"Oh, no. Your beautiful sweater," Kristin fretted, dipping a napkin into her water glass and stretching across the table to swipe the wet paper carefully across his chest. "It's just a tiny drop. I think it will be fine," she assured him.

He wasn't worried about the damn sweater. Julian was more concerned about his dick and the way it reacted to her scent as she stretched to get close to him.

"What's this?" she asked curiously, tugging on a thick gold chain around his neck until the contents that he'd stuffed inside the sweater were revealed.

He lifted a hand to stop her, but it was too late. She'd felt the objects through his sweater and revealed the items he'd tucked away to take with him before he could prevent it.

Julian yanked the rope of gold over his head and tossed it on the table.

It was telling, but he was tired of the bullshit anyway. For him, it was now or never that he came completely clean.

He was either going to get what he'd always wanted, or he was going to get destroyed.

He looked across the table at Kristin, not liking his odds when he saw the look on her face.



Kristin couldn't take her gaze away from the two gold wedding bands lying on the table, the two kept together by a heavy chain of gold.

"What are they?" she asked in a heavy voice.

“Wedding bands. The ones we bought for our ceremony in Vegas.”

The waiter brought their sandwiches and left, but Kristin didn't even spare him a glance. She was too focused on the gold lying on the table.

Finally, she picked them up and examined them closely, still trying to figure out what they meant. “Why do you have them?”

There was a pang in her chest as she fingered both of the wedding rings, a vague sense of familiarity hitting her. But other than a feeling, she didn't recognize them.

“I took them with me the morning I left Vegas, along with the paperwork confirming we got married,” he answered flatly.

Her head jerked up to look at him. “You knew? You didn't slowly remember? You were aware of exactly what happened that night?” she accused, feeling hurt that he'd always been aware of the details of her forgotten day.

“I remembered everything, even before I saw the rings. I knew the minute I woke up and my sheets smelled like us and hot sex that we'd gotten married.”

Her heart aching, she asked, “Why did you lie? If you knew what happened, why didn't you wake me up so we could take care of this problem right away?”

“Because it wasn't a fucking *problem* for me,” he rasped. “I took the rings because I had to go, and I was pretty sure you wouldn't remember us getting married. But I do. I remember every damn moment, and it was everything I'd ever wanted . . . you were everything I'd wanted since the moment we met. I wanted to see you in person after I fulfilled my obligations. I *wanted* to make it real.”

Her heart started to beat faster, and it was at that moment that she began to hope like she never had before. “So you weren't drunk?”

“Oh, I was drunk, but I wasn't so drunk that I would have married just any woman. I wanted *you*. It's always been *you*. I haven't been with another woman since the day we met.” He

paused before adding, “It didn’t happen the way I wanted it to, and if I had been totally in my right mind, I wouldn’t have married you in Vegas. But I would have been here eventually, hounding you until you agreed to date me, and then I would have asked you to marry me. Failure wasn’t an option. It never has been for me. Not when it came to you.”

“So the temporary marriage—”

“All bullshit so you’d stay with me. I thought once you felt the same way I do, you’d let go of the idea of us only being married for a few months and agree to be my partner forever. I didn’t realize you were still counting the days until we could get divorced,” he said in a guttural tone.

She gave up any pretense of eating, just as Julian had, and gripped the cool metal in her palm. “I’m not—”

“It ends now,” Julian demanded, his eyes a volatile blue as he glared at her. “I’ve been in love with you almost since the day we met. The marriage was bullshit. Us needing time was bullshit. The excuse of having to explore what was between us was bullshit, too. I knew what was there for me. I just didn’t know how to make you feel it, too.”

“Why are you just telling me this now?” Kristin had gone beyond hope and was starting to feel disbelief blossom in her chest.

“Because I was a coward. I knew if you rejected the whole idea of us, I’d be destroyed. But I had to try. I have too many fucking regrets in my life, and you’d be the biggest of the bunch.” He released a masculine sigh as he slumped back against the bench of the booth.

“What do you regret?” she pushed, wondering what a man like Julian would have done differently.

“I’ve had to live with the fact that I had the opportunities to go see my mom and dad before they died, but like a selfish prick, I didn’t. My career was everything, and I didn’t see them in over six fucking years. Xander went to visit. Micah went to visit. But not me. I was a dick who was only concerned about being someone to make them proud. Xander

and I fought right before my parents were murdered. He tried to get me to see how self-involved I was being. I didn't listen. I should have been there the day my parents died. It was their anniversary. Micah had to go see them the week before because he had to be out of the country, but I could have gone. Maybe if I did, my parents might have survived. Maybe between me and Xander, we could have disarmed the robber."

Kristin's heart broke for Julian, and the look of anguish on his face. But she was relieved he hadn't been there. He might very well have ended up dead. "You can't fight a crazy man with a gun," she said quietly. "More than likely, you would have died, too."

"I've dealt with the fact that I'll never know because that's not what happened. But my life changed the day my parents died. I swore I'd never have any more regrets, that I'd go after what I wanted from that day forward, and that the people I care about would always come first. When we met, I knew the way we understood each other underneath all the bullshit was special. I wanted you like I'd never wanted another woman. Those feelings never changed. Hell, I had obligations to fulfill, but I'm not stupid enough to wait around for very long. I'd already planned to see if I could sway your opinion of me when I saw you at Micah's wedding. When I heard you weren't coming, there was no way I was going to let you stay away."

Kristin was almost blinded by the tears that were flowing down her face. If they hadn't been in a public place, she would have flung herself into his arms.

"So you married me instead?" she questioned.

"Like I said, it didn't happen the way I wanted, but sometimes you gotta take what life throws you. As long as it threw you toward me, I was good with that."

Kristin wanted to laugh at his explanation. Men like Julian Sinclair didn't generally take whatever they got. They took it all. But the fact that he was waiting for her, and so damn certain of his feelings, made her feel wretched for not ending this farce herself a long time ago. Had she known that Julian

was hurting this badly, she would gladly have given him everything. Probably because she already knew she loved him, too.

“Why are you wearing the rings?”

“I’m getting to the point where I need to stay hopeful,” he answered bluntly. “You can have them. I should have told you the truth from the beginning. My only defense was that I was getting desperate. I guess they were a reminder to not give up. A symbol that there was always a chance that you’d someday be Kristin Sinclair, and you’d change your name and really be my wife.”

“Julian, I can’t—”

“I gotta go,” he interrupted. “I think we’re at a tipping point. We either go all the way, or we let each other go. I can’t accept anything less. I want you to be happy, Kristin. I can’t be a selfish asshole anymore. That’s how much I fucking love you. I want you to be happy. If you want to stay with me, you’ll still be living in our home when I get back. If not, then your apartment is still ready for you. Take whatever you want from the house, and I swear I’ll make a generous settlement with you when I initiate the divorce. I never want to see you working just to survive.”

He snatched up his coat and Julian was gone before Kristin could say another word. Belatedly, she rose and ran after him, only to see his limo already heading toward the airport.

Her entire body was trembling as she walked back to their table in a daze and sat down. “He loves me,” she whispered to herself with awe.

If he would have let her get in a word or two, she was ready to tell him that she wanted to be his forever. Unfortunately, she’d never gotten that chance.

She picked up the rings and carefully removed hers from the chain, smiling as she slipped it onto her finger.

It fit perfectly, and she nudged it up against her engagement ring.

Maybe she didn't remember how all of this had begun, but she knew how it was going to end.

"See ya in a few days, Hotshot," she whispered, leaving the ring on her finger as she slipped the chain with Julian's ring carefully into her purse.

She snatched up her jacket with a radiant smile and rushed out of Shamrock's so she could get home. Unfortunately, after she'd had a moment to think, she had a moment of hesitation about exactly where *home* was going to be.



# CHAPTER 22



By the time Julian got to his home in Malibu, he knew he'd pretty much blown his chance to have everything he'd always wanted in his life.

Maybe at one time, he'd been so driven that he'd never stopped long enough to realize what he really needed.

Xander had tried to tell him.

Julian hadn't been willing to listen.

What he'd told Kristin was completely true. On the day he'd lost his parents, he'd changed. Maybe that's how different experiences affected people's lives, but he wasn't the same guy he'd been several years ago. He'd grown up and looked around. And he hadn't much liked what he saw.

He flopped on the couch and turned on the television just to hear some noise, realizing he really didn't like having sole control of the remote. He'd rather be arguing with Kristin over what to watch.

*Jesus! I'm getting completely maudlin.*

He had the big prerelease party the next evening, and then he was going home. Funny how Amesport had become the place he most wanted to be in the world.

He flipped through the channels with a beer in his hand, already having changed into a pair of sweatpants and T-shirt.

He settled on a sports channel and picked up his cell phone for about the hundredth time since he'd gotten to California a few hours ago.

*Nobody called. No text messages.*

Forcing himself not to give in to the urge to slam the damn device against the wall, he dropped it back on the end

table beside the sofa, pissed at himself for looking to see if Kristin had somehow tried to contact him.

*Maybe I shouldn't have given her the ultimatum. What if it was too soon?*

No. He couldn't regret it. It was time for him to cut the shit and find out if Kristin was going to be his wife, or if she wanted out. Not knowing was too damn painful, and if she wanted him the way he needed her, she'd sure as hell know by now.

He'd known for a long time exactly what he wanted. Like he'd told Kristin, he'd been in love with her almost from the beginning. Maybe it wasn't supposed to happen that way. Maybe he hadn't been able to put an actual name to his emotions back then, but he had known what he wanted. And he wasn't about to let that kind of feeling go easily.

His gut ached from wondering what she was thinking right now.

Would she go?

Would she stay?

She'd looked like she'd been taken aback by his confession. He didn't know why. Surely she could have guessed how he felt.

Taking the rings and their marriage information had been done out of just plain fear. He'd been worried she'd try to end everything immediately, and he'd already been committed to his last film. Yeah, he'd been a selfish prick. But he'd been a *terrified* selfish prick. Did that make a difference?

He heard his text ping go off near his head, and he quickly reached back and grabbed his phone.

Kristin: I hope you got to California safely.

Okay, it wasn't a profession of undying love, but it was *something*. He typed a message back.

Julian: I'm good. I'm at my house here in Malibu. Nothing good on TV.

He waited for her to respond. She did.

Kristin: I know. I'm about to hit the bed.

Julian immediately wondered *which* bed and *whose* home, but he said he'd give her until he got back. He wasn't going to pressure her. There was a three-hour time difference between California and Maine, so it was late for Kristin since he knew she had to work the next day.

Julian: Are you pissed because I was honest with you?

He had to know, even though part of him didn't want her to tell him.

Kristin: No. I'm glad. I think we need to work this out quickly for both of our sakes.

And that answer told him absolutely fucking nothing.

Julian: I should have told you from the very beginning.

It was the only thing he regretted about his relationship with Kristin.

Kristin: I know now. We can finally resolve this. There are things I could have said, too, but I didn't.

Damn! Things were starting to sound less and less promising for him.

Julian: Night, Scarlet. Sleep well. See you Friday.

It was a casual statement, but he really meant he hoped to hell she hadn't moved back to her own apartment and he *would* see her when he got home.

Kristin: Don't let your head get too big while you're being adored in Hollywood. Good night, Hotshot.

He dropped the phone back on the end table, pissed because he hadn't been able to get anything more from her except a polite conversation.

He knew Kristin.

He knew she was feeling something.

Nobody cared like she did, but she obviously didn't want to share anything with him until he returned.

Frustrated, he knew two days was going to seem like a hell of a long wait.



The next night, Kristin was glued to the television along with Mara, Tessa, Emily, Sarah, Randi, and Hope. They'd decided it was ladies' night, and Mara had kicked Jared out of the house to spend some time with his brothers and Micah so she could have the whole gang of females over to watch Julian's interview on TV.

The interview was live, mostly to talk about his upcoming movie for publicity.

"I still can't believe I'm actually related to him," Hope confessed from her position on one of the living-room chairs.

"I'm only related by marriage, but I'll claim that connection," Mara said excitedly.

"Me too."

"And me."

"Ditto."

"Yep."

All of the women agreed that being related in *any* way to Julian Sinclair was pretty extraordinary. Kristin wanted to be related by marriage, too. But her desires were slightly different. She wanted to stay married to him, but realistically, she wasn't sure that was possible.

She had to admit that Julian *did* look pretty hot, and totally comfortable in a pair of jeans and a button-down blue shirt that matched his eyes. His demeanor was calm as he answered the male interviewer's questions about his upcoming movie. And he was a master at politely evading anything that involved his personal life.

Funny how other people looked at Julian as the superstar actor he was when all she could see was the guy who had

made her happier than she'd ever been in her life. She didn't see the same persona as most people did when they watched him on TV.

She saw . . . Julian Sinclair, the funny, sometimes obnoxious, highly intelligent man who just happened to—bonus!—be sinfully attractive as well.

“I don't think I'd want Grady to be that famous,” Emily declared as the TV interview ended. “I'd have to fight off women with a baseball bat.”

Mara snorted. “Like our husbands aren't already well known? There aren't many people who don't know the Sinclair family.”

“Sometimes I forget that Dante is a billionaire Sinclair,” Sarah said quietly.

“Evan never lets me forget,” Randi grumbled good-naturedly. “I'm pretty sure he buys me something outrageous almost every day.”

Tessa spoke up. “But we all know the men underneath all that money.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Kristin confessed. “I know Julian is plenty of women's idea of the perfect guy. But those women have never had to deal with his stubbornness or seen him try to cook.” Glumly, she acknowledged that he had his quirks, but those things aside, he was pretty damn perfect.

All of the women laughed, and Mara went to refill glasses with a nice white wine as she flipped off the television.

“Is he that bad in real life?” Emily asked Kristin. “You two always look so happy.”

Mara shot Kristin an encouraging look as she filled her glass.

Kristin nodded. Nobody really knew the truth about her relationship with Julian, unless the man himself had decided to share with his brothers or cousins. “Our relationship is kind of . . . crazy. We sort of got married by accident when we were in

Vegas for Tessa's wedding. We were both drunk. When we found out, we decided to give our marriage a trial run."

"Nobody gets married by accident," Emily replied suspiciously. "Even if you were drunk, I don't think you'd do it unless it was what you truly wanted."

Kristin thought about Julian's confession that he basically remembered them getting married. He'd been aware enough to know he wouldn't have married anyone except her. "That's what Julian said. I can't remember."

Kristin filled in all the details that the women asked as Mara reseated herself in a living-room chair. Once everyone had asked their questions, the room was silent for a moment.

Finally, Mara spoke. "So what are you going to do?"

"I love him," Kristin confided. "He gave me the choice of whether or not I wanted to make this marriage real without any restrictions. He even offered to make sure I was financially set up for life. But I don't want his money. I want *him*. But I have to be realistic. Sooner or later, he's probably going to miss his life in California. I'm not sure what to do right now." She let out an audible sigh.

The women all gave her a sympathetic look as they talked about her options. Even with everything laid out on the table and her choices clear, Kristin wanted Julian to be happy with her choice. She couldn't move permanently, because her parents would still need her. She was their only child. What would happen if Julian woke up one day and figured out that he missed his old life, that he wanted his adoring fans and movie contracts? Kristin would be nothing except the one person who was keeping him in Amesport. She never wanted him to resent her that way, and she didn't want to hold him back from a career he'd busted his ass to establish.

The women were silent for a few moments after they discussed her choices, until one of them, thankfully, changed the subject.

"Beatrice was right again," Emily said in a solemn voice. "That's five out of five on the Sinclairs. Hope doesn't count

because Beatrice never had a chance to make her match.”

Hope chuckled. “I think I did a pretty good job on my own. Jason was meant for me long before either one of us knew it.”

“I heard she gave Xander a chain with an Apache tear,” Tessa shared. “Micah told me. She drove out to his house. I’m surprised he answered the door.”

“Who has the other stone? Who is he going to love?” Kristin asked cautiously.

Tessa shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

Kristin found it hard to imagine any woman would want to take Xander on like he was now. It was going to have to be somebody pretty damn special. Although she did hurt for Julian’s little brother; he was a train wreck.

After catching up on other news in town, Kristin finally stood. “I’d better go. I have to work tomorrow and my boss is a slave driver,” she teased.

Sarah, her boss, looked over at her and smirked. “You notice I’m still here. I might just be late myself.”

Kristin’s lips formed a genuine smile. Sarah was the smartest, most organized physician she’d ever worked with. If her boss was one minute late, she’d be worried. “I’ll cover for you,” Kristin said with a laugh as she put on her coat, knowing Sarah would be in front of her first patient by nine o’clock sharp.

Shivering as she started up the SUV, she knew she could very easily spend the night at her apartment here in town and save herself the drive out to Julian’s house tonight and again in the morning when she went to work. But for some reason, her heart balked at the idea of not going home, even though she hadn’t yet decided *where* she’d be when Julian returned.

*Home.*

It was the house where she’d learned how incredibly happy she could be with a husband she loved. It was a place where she could see her things combined with Julian’s, and his

bed was a location where she could fall asleep faintly inhaling his scent.

*What if he changes his mind? What if he's had time to think about us and he wants to be free?*

She shook her head, muttering to herself, "That's all bullshit, Scarlet, and you know it."

The comment sounded so much like Julian's that she smiled and then headed for the highway toward his house.

Julian had laid his heart on the line. The ball was in her court.

She just wished she knew exactly which way to run to retrieve it.

There was only one thing she knew for certain: by this time tomorrow, they were going to resolve this situation once and for all.



# CHAPTER 23



“What if she’s not there? What if she decided she wants to leave?” Julian asked Micah, after he’d spilled the whole story about what had happened with Kristin before he’d left for California, when Micah came to pick him up at the small Amesport airport.

He knew he could have gotten a car, but he’d called Micah to come take him home instead. The thought of a ride with a silent driver hadn’t been very appealing.

“I still can’t believe you married her when you were both drunk off your asses,” Micah replied. “That sounds like something I would have done.”

“I knew what I was doing. I *wanted* to marry her,” Julian grumbled.

“Then why are you worried? She’ll be there. It’s pretty obvious to me that you’re crazy about each other.”

Julian was crazy about Kristin. He just wasn’t sure it went both ways.

“I hope so,” he answered distractedly as Micah maneuvered onto the two-lane highway.

“Although I do think you should have told her that you got married. Why did you go so far to hide it?”

“I didn’t want her to know. I was afraid she’d insist on going to the courthouse that morning to fix it. I needed time, so I bought it by taking everything away, hoping she wouldn’t remember. Or that she’d think it was something that wasn’t true because she’d been so plastered.”

“She might be pissed,” Micah warned.

“Angry I can handle,” Julian answered with a smile. “This is Kristin we’re talking about. I think she’s been pissed off at me since the moment we met.”

*Foreplay.*

Julian had recognized their friction for exactly what it was almost immediately, some mysterious chemistry that drew them together, but that neither one of them was going to instantly accept.

“You love her.” Micah said it as a statement and not a question.

“Always have. I don’t think it took me long to realize she was the only woman for me. I knew I needed to go after her hard, but I still had obligations to fulfill.”

“How did you know? Even with Tessa, I was hardheaded enough that it took me a while. I thought we were just physically attracted at first. I thought we could screw it out of our systems.”

Julian shrugged. “Because fighting with Kristin was better than having sex with any other woman had ever been.”

“Okay. Then I’m not asking about the sex,” Micah said hastily.

He wouldn’t have told his brother about his sex life with his wife anyway, but Julian laughed before he said more seriously, “Since Mom and Dad died and Xander got so fucked up, I’ve realized just how important it is to seize the moment. Or in this case, seize my woman, I guess. Sometimes there are no second chances.”

Micah was quiet for a moment before he answered, “You know Mom and Dad loved you. They loved all of us.”

“I was a prick, Micah. I pretty much missed the last six years of their life because I never pulled my head out of my ass enough to realize that they didn’t care if I was successful or still struggling. They just wanted to see their son. I can’t get that time back, and I’d do just about anything to see them again just to tell them I loved them. I don’t want to have that kind of regret again.”

“You really want to give up your acting career? You sacrificed a lot to get where you are.”

“It will make my screenplays that much more in demand,” Julian replied. “I always wanted to create, but I just had the task all wrong. I’ve never been happier. Now I can tell the story instead of acting it out.”

“You’re talented at both,” Micah said. “Mom and Dad would have been proud of you. I wish that they’d lived to see your success, but you’re right. They loved you because you were their son. They understood you were busy, Julian. Don’t ever beat yourself up about that.”

“You and Xander both made time to see them,” Julian said remorsefully.

“We both had money and a private jet. That makes going anywhere a hell of a lot easier. We weren’t trying to live off what we made just to prove we could make it on our own. We used our connections to our advantage. You took your own path to success.”

“Xander basically called me a selfish prick,” Julian muttered.

“Yeah. Now it’s Xander’s turn to be a selfish prick,” Micah answered drily.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there, Micah. When you needed help with Xander, I should have known.”

“You didn’t and it’s over. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to know. Maybe you had the right, but you had worked so damn hard for your success that I thought you deserved your time.”

Julian’s chest ached at the responsibility Micah had willingly taken on to save him the worry during the pinnacle of his career. “Well, I’m here now. We’ll deal with Xander together.”

“I’m good with that,” Micah agreed as he pulled into the driveway of Julian’s mansion.

The house was dark, but the yard light was on. If Kristin was going to be here, it was long past time for her to be home. “I’m not sure she’s here.”

“You want me to come in with you?” Micah offered.

“No,” he told his brother. “I’m good. Whatever happens, this is where I want to be.”

“Don’t let go,” Micah advised. “Even if she isn’t here, keep trying to make it work if you know she’s the one.”

Julian was fairly certain he wouldn’t be trying anything else. He’d given her the choice, and she’d made a decision.

He nodded anyway as he opened the car door and the vehicle flooded with light, not trusting himself to say anything else at the moment.

Pulling the keys out of his pocket, he watched as Micah drove away, not sure he wanted to enter the house at all.

“I need to just fucking get it over with,” he grumbled, heading for the front door.

It was locked and he put the key in and shoved the door open, listening for any sounds of movement in the house.

Flipping on the lights, he forced himself not to call out for Kristin like the desperate man he knew he was.

He headed straight for the garage, flipping on lights as he went. He took a deep breath as he strode by the kitchen, everything clean and perfectly in place. When he yanked open the door to the garage, it illuminated automatically, and his heart sank.

Her car was gone, and his SUV sat exactly where it belonged.

“Fucking hell!” he cursed, slamming the garage door closed and pulling off his jacket. He tossed it on the counter, not giving a shit about whether he hung it up.

It wasn’t like Kristin was going to be on his ass about being tidier. In fact, she wasn’t going to get on his case about anything ever again.

Bypassing the refrigerator, he went straight to the bar in the family room and poured himself a glass of Scotch—minus the water or the ice. He downed it in a couple of gulps,

slamming the glass down when he was finished and refilling the glass.

“She’s gone. She fucking left,” he growled. “I was the idiot who gave her the choice. What did I expect?”

What he wanted, what he really *needed*, was for her to pick *him*. Not because they’d accidentally gotten married and were trying each other out. But because she chose to stay with him because that’s what she wanted.

“She didn’t pick me,” he said huskily, taking another gulp of his whiskey before setting it down on the coffee table and wandering back into the kitchen.

Before he knew what was happening, his sorrow turned into anger and he punched the French doors that led out to the patio, venting his frustration on the glass and small trims of white wood. It felt so good that he did it again.

And again.

And again.

His knuckles were bleeding and throbbing before he finally stopped because he’d shattered most of the small, separated plates of glass, and beating up the door wasn’t helping his rage much. And it sure as hell wasn’t mending the huge gaping hole in his heart.

He went back to the family room and picked up his drink painfully and took the last gulp of his Scotch, setting it down again to flex his bloody hands. Glancing at the damage to the door from a distance, he rasped, “Fucking idiot!”

His outburst of fury wasn’t really with Kristin. He’d *asked* her to make a choice, and she had. She just hadn’t picked him. He couldn’t blame her. He’d pretty much lied to her, and he hadn’t exactly picked the best ways to show her how much he cared. From the very beginning, he hadn’t handled his intense attraction to her very well. Neither of them had. But he’d known what was happening. She probably hadn’t.

His gut was aching as he went and got another drink, uncertain what to do with himself.

The house was too quiet.

He'd gotten way too accustomed to spending his evenings with Kristin, arguing, laughing . . . or both.

Either way, it always ended the same: with his cock inside her and both of them finding the kind of ecstasy that they never knew existed.

Now, there was only silence and the knowledge that the joy that he'd found in this house was never going to be present here again.

He flopped on the couch and tried not to think of all the things he could have done differently, but it came down to just one thing.

*She didn't choose me.*

Julian's only consolation was that Kristin had made a decision that would obviously make her happy.

It was like déjà vu of another relationship in his life. Why was it that women wanted to fuck him, but they didn't want to be with him? Except, his other relationship hadn't hurt nearly as much as this did. In so many ways, he'd made a lucky escape from the female who had rejected him so long ago. But Kristin was different. The only thing he felt was totally annihilated.

Knowing that at least one of them would be happy was the sole reprieve for a guy who'd just had his heart and soul completely destroyed.

He downed his drink, wondering if he should just get the damn bottle as he put the tumbler on the table.

Running a hand through his hair in despair, he realized that he was probably streaking his face with blood. He wiped his throbbing hands on his jeans, then let them rest on the top of his thighs, allowing his head to drop back to rest on the sofa and closing his eyes.

He might be slightly buzzed, but nothing could take away the relentless pain of knowing he'd never hold the woman that he loved again.

Maybe tomorrow he'd change his mind and hound her until she relented.

But right now, and probably tomorrow, too, he just wanted her to be happy.

Yeah, her decision made him miserable. But wasn't real love more than selfishness? Wasn't it more than bullying someone into something they didn't want just because he wanted it?

Yeah. For him, love was so much more, and he knew he'd never want to make her stay if she didn't want to. Not anymore.

He knew he had to find the will to move and go clean himself up.

But he sat unmoving on the couch for quite some time.

# CHAPTER 24



The lights were all on when Kristin pulled into the driveway.

*Julian's home!*

Her heart started to race and her breath hitched as she thought about confronting him after his insistence that she make a choice.

It wasn't that she wasn't ready, but there was probably a small part of her that was still afraid he'd someday realize that she wasn't what he wanted. Logically, she knew that was her own insecurities, and she wasn't about to let them rule her life. Not now. Not anymore. Not when happiness was so close that all she needed to do was reach out and grab it.

The aching sense of loneliness she'd felt since Julian had left started to lift since she knew he was home, ready to hear her decision.

She pulled her car into the garage, having driven her own vehicle since it hadn't been run in a while, and it was a clear day.

Entering the kitchen, nervous when she didn't see any sign of Julian, she set down the box she was carrying on the floor and took a quick peek at the contents before taking off her jacket. She hung it up, then reached for Julian's coat, noticing it was tossed on the counter.

It wasn't until she was almost through the kitchen that she noticed the French door had been shattered, the area around the opening red, blood streaked everywhere around the jagged holes that had been solid when she'd left that morning.

Carefully, she stepped around the glass, worried now.

Had someone broken in? The door still appeared to be locked, but the squares on the top half of one of the doors were almost completely gone.



Her heart sinking, she frantically looked around, her eyes locking immediately on the bloody body sitting on the couch in the family room, evidently asleep.

“Julian!” she exclaimed, jumping onto the couch to see what in the hell had happened. “Hey. Talk to me.” She gently slapped him on the cheek, noticing most of the blood was coming from his hands.

His jeans were covered with blood, and his face was streaked red, probably from him touching it.

“Kristin?” His voice was groggy with sleep. “Oh fuck. I’m having a nightmare.”

“Open your eyes,” she demanded, not sure if she should be happy about him referring to her as a bad dream.

His lids fluttered before his eyes finally opened and Kristin found herself falling into the deepest look of despair she’d ever seen. “What happened?” she asked breathlessly. “Why are you all bloody? Why is there a bunch of shattered glass on the French doors?”

“Why are you here?” he asked hoarsely, looking like he was finally waking up.

“I live here,” she said, exasperated. “I’m your wife.”

“You didn’t choose me. You weren’t here.”

*Oh, holy shit.* “You thought I left you?”

She was late, really late because she made some stops on the way home. But she hadn’t exactly been sure what time Julian would get home. She’d assumed it would be later in the evening.

“You did leave me.” He sat up and looked at her like he was seeing a ghost. “Didn’t you?”

“No,” she answered simply, concerned about his injuries. She didn’t ask any more questions. The answers were obvious. He’d thought she was gone, and he’d been so upset that he’d tossed back some drinks and started punching out windows.

“Your car was gone,” he accused.

From the smell of his breath, she could tell he'd had a few drinks. Maybe more than a few. "I drove my own car to work today. It has to be driven occasionally, and the weather was good. Julian, what in the hell did you do?"

She wanted to weep as she looked from his ravaged expression to his bloodied hands. Lifting one at a time, she could see some swelling, cuts, and lacerations. None of his injuries were life-threatening, yet she knew he'd done this to himself because he thought she'd left him.

"I hurt," he answered, like those two words explained everything.

"I'm sure you do. Come with me. I need to clean you up. How much did you drink?"

He shook his head. "Not enough. I nodded off, but I'm not completely drunk. I'm pretty sure I'm still dreaming."

"If you refer to me as your nightmare again, I'm going to kick your ass," Kristin warned sternly. "Can you help me get you up?"

"I can stand," he answered, his eyes still glued on her face. "Are you really here?"

"Yes," she answered, impatient to clean up his wounds.

To her surprise, he did stand up pretty easily, and she took his arm and led his unresisting form to the elevator.

She was still concerned, but she wasn't as terrified as she'd been when she'd seen his bloody body.

She took a shower in one of the guest bathrooms while Julian used the one in the master bathroom, right after she'd helped him out of his bloody clothing. It took her a while to clean and bandage up his hands, using antibiotic cream to prevent infection. The cuts were blessedly small, and none looked like they needed sutures. As she finished, she mused, "I thought you might have broken some bones. But I don't think you did."

There was some generalized swelling, but nothing to cause her to panic.

“I didn’t. The windows gave easily on the first punch. Damn cheap glass. I got the cuts from the holes in the door. They just kept breaking.”

Julian was pretty even-tempered, so the thought of him punching on a glass door until much of it was broken was something she couldn’t imagine.

“Done,” she pronounced. “Let’s get some ice packs.” She beckoned him toward the door.

He motioned for her to go first, and he followed her down in the elevator and into the kitchen.

She turned and pointed her finger at the living room. “Go sit. I’ll handle it.”

He grinned at her, then turned toward the living room, then he turned back again. “That’s weird. I could swear I heard somebody crying.”

Kristin set the readied ice pack on the counter and wandered over to the box. “I hope you won’t be upset. You said you never had time for a dog, and this one needed a home so badly. I saw the ad in the paper from the animal shelter. She was abused.”

She pulled the squirming mass of fur from the box and cradled the puppy to her chest. “She’s a Lab mix. I hope you don’t mind having a dog around the house.”

“For us?” Julian asked cautiously.

“Of course. I’ve always wanted a pet, and you said you really wanted a dog. I always thought about a cat, but when I saw the ad in the paper, I couldn’t turn away. She’s really still a puppy.”

She giggled as the female pup started to lick her face.

“She’s cute,” Julian said as he came forward and started stroking the puppy’s body. “Can I hold her?” he asked.

Kristin gently placed the dog in Julian’s arms, careful not to hurt his hands.

He froze as he was holding the animal, his gaze focused on her ring finger. “You’re wearing your band.”

She held out her hand, then pulled on the chain around her neck where his ring rested. Holding up the makeshift necklace with his ring, she said drily, “I don’t think you’re going to be wearing yours for a while.”

His hand would be too swollen to officially don his wedding band, but she didn’t mind. She’d hold on to it for as long as he needed.

Julian watched the chain swing for a moment before he said, “I’ll be wearing it just as soon as my hand heals. And I can get you a new band. Those were kind of cheap.”

“You will not. It’s the only thing I have from my wedding. We picked them out together, whether I remember doing it or not?”

He nodded.

“I’m keeping it,” she insisted.

Remembering her other stop, she went to grab her purse from the counter and brought it over as she explained, “One of the reasons I was late was because I was picking up the puppy. The other reason was this.” She held up the papers so he could see them.

He gaped at her, his eyes wide. “You filed to change your name?”

“I’m officially Kristin Sinclair now. Your wife.”

“Jesus! If I’m dreaming I hope to hell I never wake up.”

She palmed his jaw, then stretched up to kiss him tenderly. “Did that feel like a dream?”

“Maybe the very beginning of a wet dream,” he rumbled, absently stroking a bandaged hand over the puppy.

She put the papers on the counter and picked up the ice packs. “Go.”

He moved into the living room, and Kristin arranged the puppy between them and put his hands on ice. “Will she piss

on the couch?”

“I hope not. But she has to go outside often. She’s smart. I think she’ll potty train pretty fast. You really don’t mind?” She’d desperately wanted to give the puppy a home, and had fallen in love with the fur ball almost immediately.

“Nope. As long as you come with the deal, I’m going to love having a dog. I can see a few scars on her. I feel better knowing she has a safe home.”

“They never gave her a name. I’d like to name her Haven,” Kristin suggested.

“Haven for ‘a safe place’? I like it.” He grinned as the puppy scrambled up into Kristin’s lap. “You’re right. She is smart. She’s exactly where I’d like to be right now.”

She looked to see the puppy planted between her thighs. Ignoring his suggestive comment, she looked at Julian earnestly. “The name Haven is actually for me, too. You’re my haven, Julian. This home is my haven because you’re here with me. I missed you.”

His eyes grew so dark they were nearly black. “I missed you, too, baby.”

Kristin fought back her tears. The words came so easily to him, his sincerity so clear whenever he was trying to express himself.

“Let me take Haven outside. She hasn’t been out for a while.” She rose, but Julian grabbed the puppy.

“She can go off the back patio.”

Kristin savored the time she and Julian spent watching the puppy frolic in the snow before Haven finally found a spot to go potty. They praised her profusely, then brought her back into the house.

She’d swept up as much of the glass from the floor as possible, then helped Julian cover the windowpanes with cardboard. They’d have it fixed in the morning.

Placing the puppy back into her box after padding it with another fluffy towel, she let Julian take the box because he

insisted and rode with him in the elevator upstairs.

He placed the dog on his side of the bed. “Sleep with me? Stay with me?”

Her heart melted at the vulnerable look in Julian’s eyes. She discarded her robe and slid into the cool sheets. He got in beside her and gathered her up until their bodies were flush.

She sighed, her muscles finally relaxing because she was exactly where she wanted to be. As difficult as her choice had been, there was no way she could throw away what they had. If the day ever came when Julian got restless about being married and tied down, she’d deal with it. But regrets about throwing away a man she loved more than anything or anybody in the world would be even worse. “I can’t believe you thought I’d left you.”

“Your car was gone. What else could I think?”

Kristin reached up and turned off the light, plunging the room into darkness.

Wrapping her arms around him, she told him softly, “You could think the truth. The reality is that I love you, Julian. I love you so much it hurts sometimes. I can’t leave the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But I hate it that you hurt yourself.”

She started to weep, the stress of the last few days getting to her. Her fear of losing Julian, and the way he’d hurt himself when he’d thought he’d lost her. All of that and more had been keeping her on edge.

Now that she knew how much he loved her, she was relieved.

“Hey, don’t cry,” Julian pleaded.

“I can’t help it. I love you so much that it scares me. I was worried you’d come back and change your mind. And what if you didn’t want a dog? Or you didn’t want me to officially be a Sinclair?”

“You think I beat up doors every day?” Julian asked lightly.

“All this overwhelms me sometimes. I’ll be honest. I’m married to a superstar billionaire, and I’m just an ordinary woman.”

“I’m fucking in love with you, and I don’t always feel worthy of happiness or you, either. Underneath the superficial bullshit, I’m just a man, and a flawed one at that.”

“We’re all flawed,” she admitted.

“Then I guess our flaws are perfect for each other,” Julian answered with amusement in his voice.

“I love you,” she whispered into the dark.

“Dammit! I hate myself for doing this to my hands. I want to be buried inside you so damn bad right now that I can’t fucking breathe,” he said in a graveled tone.

“Just wait, Hotshot. You’ll make it up to me. Just hold me. Once your hands are better, be prepared to be worn out.”

“I’m already there,” he growled. “At least kiss me,” he demanded.

Reaching out in the darkness, she had no problem with that request.

# CHAPTER 25



Despite Julian's protests that he was fine, Kristin took him to the hospital the next day for X-rays. As she'd suspected, nothing was broken, but she had to know for her peace of mind.

Haven followed Julian everywhere he went, her plump little body struggling to keep up with him, and her tail wagging like she was a normal puppy.

Watching from the kitchen, she saw Julian pass by on his way to let Haven outside for about the fifth time, noticing that he stopped and waited when the female pup got behind.

Kristin felt her heart melt and she smiled at Julian when he came back into the house again, holding the puppy, still praising her for going potty outside.

"She's a good girl," Julian pronounced with a grin.

"Then I guess we're keeping her?" she teased.

"I'd keep her even if she wasn't good," Julian said in a serious tone. "She didn't have a very good start in life. She would have turned around."

Kristin put the casserole she'd prepared into the oven and washed her hands. "How do you know that?"

He shrugged. "I changed. I just needed you to love me."

Kristin felt tears spring to her eyes. "You didn't change," she told him as he gently put the dog on the ground. "You've always been good."

"My priorities have been fucked up for years. But I think I have them straightened out now." He lifted a wicked brow as he added, "And I'm not always good."

No. No, he wasn't. He'd tried to seduce her at least fifty times since last night, but she was having none of it. Even



though she ached to be with him, the situation with his injured hands was enough to keep her from doing anything that would hurt him.

“You don’t need to be using those hands,” she argued, even though she’d do just about anything to feel his touch. “We can wait.”

Julian pinned her against the counter. “I can’t wait. Not another fucking minute,” he growled as his mouth lowered to hers, one of his bandaged hands gripping her hair to keep her still.

Kristin moaned at the feel of his lips and hands on her, his dominant aggression, her body responding the instant that he touched her.

Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed him back with all of the pent-up emotions she’d been hiding away for days, their tongues entwining in a duel for the title of which one of them was the most sexually frustrated.

As he lifted his mouth, she gasped. “I can’t think when you do this to me.”

“Then don’t think,” Julian rasped. “Feel.” He trailed sensual kisses to the side of her neck, driving her crazy.

“Julian,” she whined, knowing she had to somehow stop him now. “I love you.”

“Fuck! I love it when you say that,” he rumbled. “If I don’t get you naked right now and bury myself inside you, I’m going to have a damn heart attack.”

Kristin’s body, heart, and mind weren’t going to let her resist anymore. His needs were hers, and she knew he was feeling the same demanding, primal urges that she was experiencing.

Taking a quick glance to his side, she saw that Haven was out cold on the floor in the throes of a puppy nap.

“Come with me,” he demanded, grasping her hand and taking her upstairs in the elevator.

Once they hit the bedroom, Kristin started to help him undress without another word.

She unbuttoned the shirt she'd helped him close this morning, her heart accelerating with every inch of his rock-hard chest that she exposed. Finally, the shirt opened completely, and she leaned forward and put her mouth against his heart as he shrugged out of the garment.

Then, she flipped the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper, her belly clenching painfully as she felt his hard erection beneath her fingertips. Would the fact that he wanted her so desperately always affect her this way?

God, she hoped so.

She bent down and yanked at his jeans and briefs, triumphant as she liberated his cock. Julian kicked them off his feet impatiently as Kristin pulled her sweatshirt over her head and tossed it on the floor.

Licking her dry lips, she ran her fingers over the velvety surface of his engorged shaft, ready to taste him.

“Oh, no you don't,” Julian grumbled, grabbing her by the shoulders and making her stand straight. “I have to be inside you this time, Scarlet. If you wrap that beautiful mouth around me, I'll never make it.”

He made short work of her bra, then cupped her breasts with his bandaged hands, teasing her nipples with his fingertips.

“Julian.” She arched her back, his teasing almost painful to the sensitive, hard tips.

He stopped and moved his hands down, fumbling with the button of her jeans. She helped him, but once her zipper was down, he slowly lowered the denim and the lace of her panties himself. They only got to her knees before his mouth was between her thighs, his tongue darting between her slick folds.

“Oh, God.” She held on to his shoulders and kicked the garments off, none of which stopped Julian from getting what he wanted.

He grasped her hands and pulled her down to the carpet, their clothing surrounding them in small piles.

Kristin didn't even notice. All she saw was Julian as he towered above her between her parted legs, his fingertips stroking over her clit. Her body shuddered when she met his eyes, the intense need in his expression so strong that Kristin couldn't look away.

*I feel the same way.*

*I need you.*

*Now.*

He sat back, then pulled her up onto his lap to straddle him. "I'm not going to be happy unless I can feel all of you," he told her huskily, holding her until their bodies were flush.

Kristin sighed as soft skin and hard body connected, her nipples brushing against his chest as she wrapped her arms around him. "I love you so much," she whispered into his ear, rubbing her cheek against his forehead.

He lifted her and she scrambled desperately to help him as he lowered her down onto his cock. The bliss of him filling her made her shiver as they finally connected, with Julian buried to the root in her sheath.

"Christ! I love you, baby," Julian rasped as he squeezed the cheeks of her ass, and then giving them both time to absorb the feeling of finally being free to express exactly how they were feeling.

He didn't move, his arms just enfolding her and holding her body against him. Kristin panted, needing more, but also wanting this moment.

Julian was hers, and she could feel it with every beat of his stuttering heart against her breasts.

Leaning back, she kissed him, a slow, sensuous motion that seemed to go on forever once he ran his hands up her bare back and speared his fingers in her locks, holding her right where she was while he devoured her with a hunger that matched her own.

They were breathing heavily as he came up for air, and Kristin pushed him onto his back so she could control how much stress he put onto his hands. Rising slowly, his cock slid almost out of her before she went back down, impaling herself until he was buried to his balls.

“Kristin,” he groaned. “Baby. Put me out of my misery. Fuck. Me.”

His hands gripped her hips, and she rocked over him, feeling her own climax building.

Forcing her to pick up the pace by slamming up and into her over and over, Julian manipulated her movements with his hands, gripping her ass tightly.

“Come for me, love,” Julian commanded. “I’m not going to survive much longer.”

Kristin kept grinding down on him as she felt her body coming apart. She was trembling by the time her climax surged through her body, whimpering and moaning as wave after wave of pleasure assaulted her.

“You look so damn beautiful when you come,” Julian growled, thrusting up harder and harder as he found his own heated release.

She collapsed on top of his body in a messy heap, her body spent.

He wrapped his strong arms around her, holding her, leaving their bodies connected. “I love you, Kristin. I can’t believe you’re finally fucking mine.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been meant for anybody else,” she told him as she tried to catch her breath. “You’ve always gotten under my skin.”

“Foreplay,” he reminded her in a playful voice.

She kissed his shoulder, noticing the slightly salty taste of his damp body. “We’re a mess.”

Both of them were drenched in sweat, and she could smell the tantalizing scent of hot sex in the air around them.

He held her tighter. “This is us. It’s you and me together.”

She nodded against his shoulder. She understood every time he said those words. They were separate, but stronger together, different together, incredible together.

It didn’t matter what was superficially dissimilar between them. They were two people who were perfect for each other. Julian was that missing part of her that she’d always longed for and had never found.

She was the part of Julian he’d always been restlessly seeking, but never knew it.

“We need a real honeymoon,” he said earnestly. “I want to start making our memories together. We had a wedding you can’t remember. But I’d love to give you a trip you’ll never forget. Can you get off work for a few weeks?”

She smiled against his warm skin. “I don’t think that will be a problem. Sarah’s pregnant, and I can guarantee that Dante is going to be a worrywart. She’s already getting ready to cut her practice back a lot. I was going to look for something else full time.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. Working with Sarah is special. But there has never been a time in my life since I was a teenager that I didn’t work every day. I feel like I’m on vacation right now because I’m not needed at the bar.”

“I need you,” Julian replied fiercely. “Just keep working with Sarah until she has the baby, then take time off when she does. It’s not like we need the money.”

“I’d have no idea what to do with myself if I was only working part time,” she mused.

“I’ll make sure to keep you busy,” Julian answered wickedly.

Kristin rolled, finally disconnecting their bodies. She eyed Julian as he was sprawled out on the floor completely naked. She could already think of a few ideas. “We need a shower. I can decide what to do about work later.”

He stood and pulled her to her feet. “Take the time off, sweetheart. Please. You deserve to enjoy your life for a change. Spend some time with me. Micah and I are sharing the responsibility of watching out for Xander, and my cousins are helping even though we never asked them. Let’s both learn how to make things other than work our priorities.”

She knew she could never deny that delicious possibility. Since money was no longer an issue, it was entirely possible for her to work part time. “I might get bored,” she warned teasingly.

He slapped her on the ass, but with his hand bandaged, it caused very little sting. “I’ll make it my job to see that you never get tired of being together.”

Like that was a possibility? “I’ll give it a try,” she agreed.

“I can’t believe Dante is going to have a child,” Julian mused. “He’ll be nagging Sarah all the time.”

“It should be interesting because Emily is pregnant, too. So Grady and Dante can freak out together,” Kristin informed him in a mirthful voice. “They’re due only weeks apart.”

“Holy shit! Do they both know?”

“By now they probably do,” Kristin confided. “They were both going to tell their husbands over the weekend. Both of them are really happy.”

“I’m sure Dante and Grady will be happy, too. But I don’t envy them. I’d be worried, too.”

Kristin had no doubt Julian would be just as attentive and overprotective. “You don’t want kids?”

“I do,” he answered emphatically. “I just want to skip the pregnant-and-fearful stage. Holy hell, and the going-through-labor part. How does a guy stand to see the woman he loves in pain?”

The possessive, protective look he gave her allowed Kristin a taste of what was ahead for them in the future, but she knew she could handle it. “Women safely have babies every day, Julian.” An errant thought popped into her head.

“Oh, hell, I guess that’s going to put the ladies’ skydiving on hold.”

“What?” Julian looked at her suspiciously.

“We’d all like Micah to take us skydiving someday. But I think Emily and Sarah will want to wait.”

“You’ll be waiting forever,” Julian answered, his tone adamant. “There’s no way you’re jumping out of a goddamn plane.”

He pulled her into the bathroom so they could clean up, still mumbling about how he’d kill Micah if he ever mentioned taking her diving.

Kristin didn’t bother to tell him that Micah had never asked *her*, because she just might ask Julian’s older brother to take her one day. Honestly, their love was so new that she would probably feel the same way if Julian did anything to risk his safety. She’d present her argument when it was time.

Right now, all she wanted was to surround herself in the love that Julian was giving her, and wrap herself up in him until they were both sated.

After Julian had taken the bandages off his hands, and they were waiting for the water to reach the right temperature, she threw herself in his arms. “I love you,” she told him with a sigh, kissing the corner of his mouth as she hugged him tightly.

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” he said tenderly as he wrapped his arms around her tightly. “But you’re still not jumping out of a plane.”

She did the only thing she could do when the hot, naked man of her dreams was trying to give her orders.

She laughed until he hauled her into the shower and made her totally forget anything else but him.

## CHAPTER 26



The next evening, Kristin still felt like she was walking around in a very surreal dream, one where she was *still* married to a man she loved with all of her heart.

*And he loves me.*

*That* miracle still mystified her, since she and Julian were so different. She knew—no matter what Julian said—that she wasn't anything but ordinary when it came to her looks and oversized ass. But she wasn't about to mess with destiny. She was quite happy with her fate.

Julian had hauled her into downtown Amesport this morning. Every single thing they'd done during the morning and afternoon had been frivolous and fun. After spending a few hours at the arcade, Julian had insisted on hitting the movie theater to see a lighthearted comedy that she had mentioned she'd wanted to see when they were in Vegas. Kristin was surprised that he had even remembered, since she'd only mentioned it briefly, and she'd said she'd like to see it when it came out on DVD someday. She usually never had the time to actually go to a movie theater, and she hadn't been to the old arcade since she was kid.

Later in the afternoon, he'd cajoled her to a few of the shops, buying her outrageous items, like a giant teddy bear that she'd made the mistake of saying was adorable. Finally, she'd had to coerce him away from Main Street to make him stop buying her things she really didn't need.

Finally, they'd stopped at Sullivan's for lobster rolls before heading back to Micah's house on the way back home, to pick up Haven. Tessa hadn't minded watching the puppy, since she had Homer, her service dog, who had enjoyed his playtime with Julian's new pup.

Now, Kristin was sitting in front of a warm fireplace at home, surrounded by the fixings for s'mores, wondering what



was taking Julian so long to get downstairs. He'd only gone up because he said he wanted to get something on the upper level.

Haven was curled up next to the couch, sleeping peacefully.

"Did Homer wear you out today?" Kristin said aloud to the sleeping puppy with a smile.

Kristin was pleasantly tired herself, having spent one of the most incredible days of her life doing everything and nothing with Julian, the two of them acting like lovers, which they were. She sighed, thinking about how sweet he could be. He held her hand, stole kisses everywhere he could, and never let her forget that he loved her.

And she believed him. She sincerely believed that neither one of them would ever regret their choices. They were too damn happy together.

Her phone *pinged* with a text, and she pulled her cell out of her back pocket.

Julian: I love you, Scarlet.

She chuckled, wondering why he was texting her when he was in the same house.

Kristin: Love you, Hotshot. Why didn't you just come downstairs?

"I'm here," a husky voice proclaimed from the entrance to the family room. "I just wanted to text you like I would have done if we had gotten the chance to actually date. Isn't that what boyfriends and a fiancé would do?"

Every nerve end in her body was tingling and Julian's voice sent a pulse of pleasure down her spine. He looked so vulnerable, so uncertain, that Kristin wanted to leap up and throw herself into his arms. He hadn't been his usual cocky, smartass self all day, and she kind of missed it. But the attentive lover was sort of nice, too.

She held out her hand to him. "Are you okay?"

He frowned. "I'm fine. Why do you think I'm not?" He put his bandaged hand in hers and sat down next to her. "Okay.

Yeah. I'm kind of annoyed that I couldn't get you flowers. I went upstairs to call. I wanted roses. But the flower shop was closed."

She turned to face him and sat cross-legged like he was and lightly took his other hand. "Julian, I don't need anything else. I have you."

"I have you, too. But I hate the fact that you got robbed when it comes to romance. I never took you on a normal date, or did the typical things that a guy would do who is crazy about you. You deserve that and so damn much more."

The expression of discontent in his eyes melted Kristin's heart. "So that's what today was about? Trying to make our non-dating time up to me?" she questioned, flabbergasted.

He shrugged. "Yes and no. I *want* to be with you doing those things. But yeah, I think you deserved a lot more than what you got."

"Do you know how happy you make me? Don't you realize that what we have means everything to me?" she questioned softly. "Maybe our relationship was unconventional, but we spent time in Hawaii and Vegas. You've given me something special. Why would I want normal when I have extraordinary?"

He grinned at her. "I can do a whole lot better."

His devilish grin made her heart skip a beat. "Just the fact that you love me is perfect," she answered with a sigh, wondering how he could think the little things mattered when she had so much now.

"I was an asshole in the past, Kristin. I blew off my mom and dad for over six damn years because I was so consumed with my career. That's a mistake I can never take back again. I hadn't seen them for most of my adult life because I wanted everything my way and on my terms. Xander was right, back when he told me I was being a prick. I was. And I ended up regretting it. I never want to fuck up again. I never want to *not* show the people who mean something to me that I care, every

single day.” His eyes captured hers with an expression of remorse dancing in their depths.

“I know you care,” she assured him in a hushed voice.

“I more than *care*. You’re my everything,” he confessed in a low baritone that vibrated with emotion. “I knew almost immediately when we first met. I knew you were meant to be mine.”

If Kristin was honest with herself, deep down inside, she’d probably known that, too. Julian had touched a place in her heart that had never stopped aching for him. “Maybe I knew it, too. Maybe that’s why I had to do everything I could to distance myself. You and me—us—wasn’t even fathomable to me. You were Julian Sinclair. I was a small-town medical assistant and a makeshift bartender just trying to survive.”

“If I hadn’t already been committed to some projects, I would have stayed, worn down your resistance until you let me take you out,” Julian admitted. “But I had to wait. Every time I had to leave it almost killed me.”

Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked at his tormented expression, knowing he meant every word he said. “So you decided to kidnap me?”

“I was pretty damn desperate by that time. When I found out you weren’t coming to Vegas, I was determined to find a way for you to go,” he rumbled.

Kristin’s heart skittered. “You went to an awful lot of trouble.”

He shot her a heated look. “Believe me, you’re worth it.”

She sighed, still not quite feeling worthy of inspiring this much emotion in Julian. But he was slowly changing the way she felt about herself.

“Tell me about our wedding,” she asked curiously. “I keep trying to remember it, but it’s just a blank.”

“That’s another thing . . . You deserved a beautiful wedding.”

“I had a great honeymoon in Hawaii. That was much better. Tell me.”

“The ceremony was short and sweet. We picked out rings from the chapel. You told me you didn’t need a fancy ring because I was your prize, and it was just a symbol. You were wearing that sexy dress, and when you said your wedding vows, it was the happiest day of my life. I was a little too messed up to realize that things might not look all that good the next day when we were sober.” He paused before adding, “I’m sorry you didn’t get a dream wedding.”

Kristin hated seeing Julian dejected. It wasn’t his usual demeanor, and it broke her heart. “I don’t regret it. I’ve never wanted a fancy wedding. I’d rather just be married to the right guy.”

He looked at her hopefully. “And you think you got it right?”

“I know so,” she answered emphatically. “Maybe I can’t remember it, and maybe I never will. But I know I wouldn’t have married you either unless it was actually what I wanted. I guess I still don’t understand why you didn’t just tell me sooner.”

“I was drunk, but I didn’t do something I didn’t want,” he said huskily. “Somehow, I wanted to convince you that we could make it real. When I woke up, I was worried that you wouldn’t even consider staying together and giving us a try. I took the rings and the paperwork, and actually hoped you didn’t remember. It would give me a chance to wrap the movie and get to Amesport so we could talk.”

“I have a confession to make,” she told him hesitantly.

“What?”

“You didn’t really blackmail me. I didn’t want to end our marriage, either. I didn’t think it was going to work, but I wanted to steal whatever time I could to be with you.”

“I thought you wanted to make me miserable,” he reminded her teasingly.

“How could I do that when you were so hard to resist?” she asked him lightly. “You might be bossy, but you’re kind of sweet sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” he said with false indignation.

Kristin leaned forward and rested her forehead against his. “Most of the time,” she relented. “Julian, I love you just the way you are. There isn’t anything I’d change about you. And there’s nothing I’d change about us and the way things happened. If I did, I might not have learned so much about myself along the way.”

“I did lie,” he answered regretfully. “In my defense, I was a desperate man, Scarlet.”

“I forgive you . . . this time. Don’t do it again,” she admonished, trying to stay serious when all she wanted to do was wallow in the warmth of his love and her happiness. “I wasn’t that forthcoming about how I was feeling, either. I’m sorry. I was just so afraid I was going to end up heartbroken when all of this was over.”

“I don’t know how you couldn’t have known exactly how I felt,” Julian said, sounding confused as he sat back a little and kissed her on the forehead.

Kristin straightened up and looked him in the eyes. “Because nothing this good has ever happened to me. My life has never been normal. I didn’t really dream about falling in love. I just wanted to get through the day. I didn’t think about fairy-tale endings with the perfect guy. My life has never been that way. You were an unexpected gift who offered me a love like I’ve never had. I was confused, and it was scary. I lived out my fantasy in Vegas, and I thought it was over.”

“We’ll never be over, Scarlet. Your life has been too damn hard, and way too serious. It’s time for that to change,” Julian grumbled as he hauled her into his lap.

“It has been difficult sometimes, but I wouldn’t change what I did even if I could. I love my mom and dad, and they did the best they could under difficult circumstances,” Kristin shared as she wrapped her arms around his neck and inhaled

his musky, masculine scent. “What you did for my parents . . . I’m not sure how I can ever repay something like that.”

“No repayment. It was nothing,” he said gruffly. “Unless you want to pay me in sexual favors. I’d take that.”

She giggled. “I’d give you anything you want because I love you.”

“Be careful what you promise,” he answered hoarsely. “I can think of some pretty kinky fantasies, sweetheart.”

Kristin knew he’d changed the subject because he didn’t want her to thank him. Julian took it for granted that she was his wife, and there was nothing he wouldn’t do to make her happy. For him, it was nothing life-changing. For her, the fact that he went out of his way to make her parents’ life easier meant the world to her.

No man had ever given a damn about her happiness or her emotional pain. But *he* did, and Julian being Julian, he’d just resolved her issues in the fastest way possible with minimal drama or fuss.

She let the subject go, accepting the fact that he’d always be a protective husband. Kristin planned to take care of him just like he took care of her.

“How kinky?” she asked breathlessly, thinking about just how much she wanted to explore with this man she loved so desperately.

Julian had her pinned beneath him in a heartbeat, his strong body covering hers. “There isn’t much I haven’t fantasized about when it comes to you,” he answered, his deep blue eyes piercing her soul as he pinned her arms over her head. “Most of them revolved around convincing you that you’re mine while we’re both naked.”

“Already convinced,” she panted, her gaze meeting his with a raw honesty she couldn’t and didn’t want to hide. “But if you want to keep trying, I’m up for that.”

The sensual, possessive stare he was giving her slammed her hard in the chest.

“Jesus, woman, do you know that you hold my heart and my entire life in your hands right now?” he rasped.

She did. She knew it. All it took was one look at his face to understand that he loved her just as much as she loved him. “Just like you hold mine,” she answered earnestly. “I love you, Julian Sinclair. I’ll guard your heart for the rest of my life.”

How many people had ever seen the real, beautiful man beneath the veneer of the superstar? Kristin considered how much people were missing if they didn’t see the kindness in his soul, but she was going to be greedy and keep that information close to her heart. Nobody needed to know him the way she did. She’d let the public have their gorgeous A-list superstar. They saw a Julian who was handsome, but cool and aloof. She’d much rather have the real man beneath the facade.

“I love you, baby,” he finally answered. “There will never be a day when I won’t try to make sure you know that.”

His vow made tears spring to her eyes as she answered, “I know you do.”

The death of Julian’s parents would still haunt him sometimes, but she’d do whatever she could to help him preserve his memories while lessening the pain and regret. What happened had obviously changed him profoundly, made him the man he was today. She just wished it hadn’t taken so much painful loss for him to be the man he was right now.

Kristin didn’t really know what he was like before, but it didn’t matter. All she cared about was now, and the fact that she loved and accepted everything about him, just like he did for her.

“I have you exactly where I want you right now,” Julian told her wickedly.

She smiled back at him with an impish expression of her own. “Funny. I happen to be where I want to be,” she answered seductively, deliberately encouraging him.

Julian in caveman mode was one of the hottest things she’d ever experienced.

“Prepare to be thoroughly ravished,” he warned in an actor’s booming pirate voice.

“Feel free to pillage away,” she invited with an eager smile.

Julian didn’t need any further encouragement. He swooped down and captured her mouth in a heated embrace that made them both forget all about making s’mores until several hours later.



# EPILOGUE



*A Few Weeks Later . . .*

The Youth Center had decided to make the Sinclairs' Winter Ball an annual event. It seemed to energize the town just when the snow, cold, and gloomy season became intolerable.

This year, Kristin was there with her handsome husband, and so were her parents. Her mom was getting along well, with the help of some physical therapy and new medications the neurologist that Julian had found for her in Boston had prescribed. Not that she didn't have bad days, but just like last year, her mother had felt well enough that Kristin's parents could be in attendance again this year.

As Kristin hit the dance floor with Julian, he pulled her close and put his mouth near her ear. "Cinderella finally gets to attend the ball?"

Kristin knew exactly what he was talking about. Last year, she'd worked the bar so her parents could have their outing. Her mom had been feeling okay that day, and her dad had wanted to attend the first Winter Ball with his wife.

Kristin hadn't wanted her mom to miss going out when she felt okay.

"You were right. I did want to go last year. But I wanted my parents to be there more," she confided.

"That's one of the reasons why I love you so damn much," Julian answered huskily as he began to swing her around the dance floor.

"You would have done the same thing," she accused, knowing that her husband had come to care about her parents a lot. Julian and her dad were close, not just because of the business, but due to a mutual respect and genuine friendship that had formed between them. And Lord knew that Julian

could charm her mother with a word or two and a kiss on her cheek.

He was devoted to his brothers and his cousins, visiting Xander almost every day so Micah could spend some time with his new wife. Tessa had been approved for her cochlear implants, and she knew everyone in the family was nervous, especially Micah.

Julian shrugged. “Maybe I would,” he agreed. “But I’m glad we’re all here this time.”

Kristin was happy, too. Her mom couldn’t dance, but she was socializing with her dad, both of them looking so much happier and relaxed than they had been a year ago.

“I can’t believe how much has changed since the ball last year.” Kristin had seen Julian that night, but she’d never in her wildest dreams imagined she’d someday be married to him and so deliriously happy that she often wanted to cry because he showed her how much he loved her every single day.

“Congratulations, dear. I knew you two would be happy together.”

The female voice came from her left, and Kristin was startled to see Beatrice kicking up her heels right next to her with an older gentleman who Kristin knew was a local widower. “Thank you,” she answered sincerely. She had to respect Beatrice’s accuracy when she’d predicted that she and Julian would end up together. The elderly woman had been correct on every Sinclair premonition she’d had about who their true loves would be.

Luck or foresight?

Kristin didn’t know for certain, but there had to be something to Beatrice’s matchmaking.

“Would you like your stone back?” Kristin asked with a smile.

“Oh, no. You keep them. I’ve already hooked Xander up with a charm of his own. That boy needs it,” Beatrice answered with a frown.

“Who has the other one?” Kristin asked with breathless curiosity.

“She doesn’t have hers yet. But she will,” Beatrice said mysteriously. “She’ll arrive here soon.”

“A tourist?” Kristin guessed, wondering how in the world Xander would ever be hooked up with a visitor. He rarely went to town.

“It might take a while, but you’ll see,” Beatrice answered as she was swept away by her energetic partner until Kristin couldn’t see them in the crowd of dancers anymore.

“I hope to hell she gets here pretty soon,” Julian commented as he smoothly spun Kristin around.

“I hope so, too,” Kristin murmured, knowing just how much Julian worried about his reclusive, scarred little brother.

She spied a few of the other Sinclairs on the dance floor, each of them wearing a tux with an elegant bride in his arms. Kristin was becoming one of the family pretty quickly, and she loved having Emily, Hope, Sarah, Mara, Randi, and Tessa to talk to like they were sisters. Being an only child, she appreciated being part of the boisterous Sinclair clan. Maybe they’d grown apart for some time while they were all busy with their single lives, but now that they were settling down, the brothers and cousins were forming an unbreakable bond that nobody would ever sever.

When the dance was over, she heard Micah’s voice on the microphone. “Can I have your attention, please?”

All the noise suddenly stopped.

He continued. “I know we had a reception for my brother and his wife, Kristin, but we thought it would be nice if they could repeat their wedding ceremony, since we all missed it.”

The crowd suddenly separated and Kristin was stunned as she saw a makeshift altar next to the stage, decorated in flowers, with a justice of the peace behind it.

Julian bent down to speak to her. “I’m ready for my ring now. I thought it might be good if you could actually

remember speaking your vows this time. It's a short reaffirmation ceremony, just something our family and friends could be here for this time."

Kristin couldn't stop the tears as she saw her parents and all of the Sinclairs smiling next to the JP. "You did this for me," she said tearfully, pulling the chain from around her neck to remove the ring that she'd never seen Julian wear before.

"For us," he corrected. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head and swiped a tear from her cheek. It did bother her that she didn't remember speaking her vows. There was nothing she wanted more than to say them to Julian out loud with all their friends and family present. Even more, she wanted to remember her husband saying them to her.

Kristin grasped Julian's arm as he held it out to her. "As long as there's nothing asking for obedience in this ceremony," she teased through her tears.

"Already took it out," he told her in an amused voice. "I knew that wasn't going to happen."

It didn't matter that it wasn't a real wedding. It didn't matter that the ceremony was short as the two of them spoke their vows. It didn't matter that she was in a cocktail dress rather than being dressed as a traditional bride.

What mattered was that the vows were spoken with devotion and love that Kristin could feel reverberate through her heart as she and Julian made their pledges to each other.

Loving Julian had taught Kristin that the superficial and inconsequential things *really* didn't matter.

It was *all* about the heart.

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~ Jan (J.S. Scott)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2013 Carrie Herzog*

J.S. “Jan” Scott is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling romance author. She’s an avid reader of all types of books and literature, but romance has always been her genre of choice. Writing what she loves to read, Jan pens both contemporary and paranormal romances. They are almost always steamy, they generally feature an alpha male, and they include a happily ever after because she just can’t seem to write them any other way! Jan lives in the beautiful Rocky Mountains with her husband and two very spoiled German Shepherds.

Jan loves to connect with readers.

You can visit her at:

Website: <https://www.authorjsscott.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/authorjsscott>

You can also tweet [@AuthorJSScott](https://twitter.com/AuthorJSScott)

For updates on new releases, sales, and giveaways, please sign up for Jan’s newsletter by going to: <http://eepurl.com/KhsSD>